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# in conversation

## Leading Change

I am delighted to introduce the first issue of *In Conversation* – a series of discussion papers for school leaders. I hope you find them stimulating, thought-provoking – even challenging – and I encourage you to use them as a springboard for discussion and reflection in your school and with your colleagues. *In Conversation* is just the beginning of a rich dialogue I hope to have with school leaders across the province. In isolation, we are inevitably limited. In conversation – and in learning together – there is nothing we cannot do.

*In Conversation* is about education leadership. Each issue will focus on a different idea or approach, interviewing “big thinkers,” discussing “big ideas” and how they apply in an education setting. This first issue focuses on leading change.

I have always believed that, among education leaders, school leaders have a unique – and profoundly important – role to play in shaping both their own school communities and the quality of the education system. We have all heard that the school leader is second only to the teacher in influencing student outcomes in the school setting. The critical question, it seems to me, is what we will do with that insight and how we will take action to realize our full potential.

The first clear answer I would offer is that we will take action together – as a community. I have often said that if you want to know where cutting-edge practices will be 10 years from now, you will find the answer somewhere in an Ontario school, right now. And so we have a moral obligation, I believe, to share our insights and engage in genuine and meaningful dialogue.

The second clear answer is that we will learn our way forward and fulfill what I believe to be an equally important moral imperative – the need for continuous professional learning. One of the concepts that particularly stands out for me in the interview that follows is the notion that the learning is the work. Professional development is not something we do off to the side but, rather, is an integral part of our day-to-day leadership practice.

In that spirit, it is my hope that this paper – based on Michael Fullan’s recent book, *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive* – will challenge you and spark enlivened professional debate with your staff, your colleagues and your professional learning network.

I would stress that genuine dialogue is not only supported by, but thrives on, disparate points of view. Over time these papers may present conflicting ideas. In this first paper, you may disagree with some of the points Michael raises. In fact, he would be the first to suggest that the six secrets are not a simple to-do list that can be applied mechanically. Rather, they are focal points for deeper thinking and analysis. And above all, they need to be tested, explored and assessed against your own daily practices and experience.

Let me conclude by offering you a challenge: use this reading to identify your own theory of action. Ask yourself – as an individual and as part of a larger professional learning community – what you consider to be the key secrets that underlie your own effectiveness and success. And then share those with me. Email them to [InConversation@ontario.ca](mailto:InConversation@ontario.ca) by October 14, 2008. We will review them and share them with the entire community on the [In Conversation page](#) of the ministry website ([www.ontario.ca/education](http://www.ontario.ca/education)).

This paper marks the beginning of what I hope will be a very exciting journey of inquiry and discovery. And I believe we are beginning this journey on very solid ground. There is a passion and commitment among Ontario principals that is second to none. As a former principal, I share your passion and commitment and I look forward to your responses.



Steve Marshall  
Deputy Minister





# An Interview with Michael Fullan

**In introducing the six secrets, you offer readers a number of caveats, in particular warning them against adopting these principles as if they were shortcuts to leadership excellence. Before we introduce the secrets, perhaps you could elaborate.**

**A.** The secrets are not secret in the sense that they are hidden from view. Rather, they are secrets because they are complex, because they are hard to grasp in their deeper meaning, and because there is some challenge involved in appreciating them and acting on them in combination.

If there were a simple shortcut to managing change, we would all be using it. That's something we don't have. What we do have is a theory of action to guide and inform leadership that travels well – that proves out, not only in education, but across the broader public sector and private industry – and that takes into account the complexity of the environment in which we work.

And so the six secrets – which embody this theory – are by their very nature complex.

But they are, at the same time, a very powerful set of methods that reveal what it takes to bring about deep and lasting change. And so they allow leaders to approach their leadership with far greater confidence.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Leading change

To learn more about how the six secrets are based in theory, grounded in practice and can be adopted by leaders who want to improve their practice, read Michael's book: *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders do to Help their Organizations Survive and Thrive* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass – 2008).

## INSIGHT

### Theory vs. Technique

Tiger Woods is a great example of theory and technique in combination. He has great technique, but what makes him stand out is his ability to think in relation to the environment he's in – a particular shot, a particular course. He's a thinking golfer.

That's why I wrote *The Six Secrets of Change*. I want to make the secrets accessible, provide insights that promote understanding, and make the secrets actionable and communicable.

**You also allude to this in your discussion of the difference between theory and technique.**

**A.** Yes. A technique is a tool. And a tool – which includes any kind of technology – is only as good as the mindset using it. There's a tendency to say "Show me exactly how to do it." And in my mind, that's a kind of false shortcut. It won't create high quality results. That's the purpose of theory; to identify the *thinking* that underlies the technique.

*"No situation is so clear that you simply pull a technique off the shelf and use it."*

Now when I talk about theory, I don't mean abstract or hypothetical as we might commonly use the term. A theory is a very practical way to explore a problem and deal with it.

In essence, we're saying that the school principal needs to be thoughtful. No situation is so clear that you simply pull a technique off the shelf and use it. You have to ground it in the actual problem.

You have to have insights; you have to be ready for surprises; you have to deal with the relationships involved, and all of that requires thinking.

**You also advise readers to doubt the secrets?**

**A.** Absolutely. Leadership is complex and constantly changing. I recommend travelling with a good theory because theories never assume absolute certainty. They are humble – as leaders need to be – in the face of the future.

And so good leaders are constantly questioning. They use a theory of action – like the six secrets – to inform what they do, while remaining open to change, to surprises, to new data that may alter their decisions and their actions.

“...good leaders are constantly questioning.”

Likewise, I want the reader to say “yes, this is an ‘aha’ moment,” but at the same time to say, “I don’t think this works in this particular situation.” The more of this a principal does, the more effective he or she will be.

**This is what you mean when you speak of the secrets being heavily nuanced.**

**A.** Yes. Pfeffer and Sutton published a book in 2006 titled *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths and Total Nonsense: Profiting From Evidence-Based Management*. To take their meaning, the full truth is the fully nuanced meaning. The half-truth is the secret as stated. You need to get beneath the words to the deeper meaning.

Take, for example, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are very popular throughout North America. Almost everyone claims to be doing PLCs, but when the experts look in, they often find the activity is superficial. They’re just talking, and taking surface actions. They’re

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**Pfeffer and Sutton**

Find out more about how leaders can follow medicine’s example and rely on evidence, not on half-truths in *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths and Total Nonsense: Profiting From Evidence-Based Management* by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (Boston: Harvard Business School Press – 2006).

not really converting the conversation into *insightful* action.

So my point here is that each of these secrets is, on the surface, an attractive half-truth. You really need to understand it in practice to get at the deeper meaning. By way of illustration, the first secret – love your employees – can be very glib if you don’t get at the deeper meaning. The deeper meaning is that you respect and develop all of those you are working with, but you also take tough stands against individuals who persistently undermine the work of the school.

**So let’s take a look at each of the secrets in turn, beginning with the first secret: love your employees.**

**A.** This secret really involves having respect for all your stakeholders. For the principal, that means teachers, support staff, parents, business leaders, the community and so on.

To demonstrate respect, principals should avoid extremes. One extreme is the authoritarian principal who might begrudgingly get respect, but in fact has a team of teachers who do not feel supported. The other extreme is the laissez-faire principal who says, “Teachers are professionals, and so I simply need to set high expectations and get out of their way.”

The ideal is an integration of these two extremes. You have to be proactive. You have to be there, interacting with the teachers, showing love and respect and support. And at the same time you have to maintain high expectations.

Now, this intersects very well with the second secret, connect peers with purpose. In fact, one of the ways I've begun viewing the secrets, which is not reflected in the book, is that the first two secrets have to do with people. The second pair has to do with knowledge and skills. And the third pair has to do with systems.

While all of the secrets interact and have an impact on each other, this is another useful way to view the secrets – in terms of people, knowledge and systems.

**Let's explore the second secret: connect peers with purpose**

**A.** This is about building the peer culture. That is, whether you have 30 teachers or 100 teachers, how do you get people working together?

One way is for the principal to change his or her role, to be more evident, to be more involved. And that's what the instructionally oriented principal does.

*"...the positive outcome is that you see progress...even if the principal is not in the school, so to speak."*

The other way is to do it indirectly, through peers.

For example, let's say you have a teacher who is doing reasonably well, but whose instructional practices could be enhanced.

How would you assist? You might provide one-on-one coaching. Or, you might approach this through the peer culture.

And what is important here is not just the peer interaction. It's what peers are interacting *about*. What they should be interacting about, in my view, is two

things. First, they should be interacting on the data and how well students are doing (which is secret number five). And second, they should be interacting around the instructional practices that get results.

Whatever the results may be – literacy or numeracy for example – there may be teachers in the school who are accomplishing those results. Or, strategies might be brought into the school through interaction with the outside world.

Student success teachers are a good example of this.

So what the principal wants to do is influence the culture directly, but also indirectly, through peers. And of course the positive outcome is that you see progress, you see effective action, even if the principal is not in the school, so to speak.

**This also relates to your earlier comments about effective or ineffective professional learning communities.**

**A.** Yes. When it's not working, it's superficial. So, for example, there may be a book study group. The group picks a book, reads it, meets every week to discuss it. But if there is no mechanism to take that discussion into the harder changes – the actual changes that would be needed in practice – you only have conversation on the surface. That's the dangerous half-truth I was speaking about – and what's dangerous about it is that you don't know it's a half-truth.

You're doing it on the surface, it feels like you're doing it, certainly you're not being deceptive. What's missing is that it needs to be linked to action. Actions that are specific, precise and non-negotiable. Again, these are deeper concepts.

**The six secrets are about...**

**PEOPLE**  
Love your employees  
Connect peers with purpose

**KNOWLEDGE / SKILLS**  
Capacity building prevails  
Learning is the work

**SYSTEMS**  
Transparency rules  
Systems learn

## INSIGHT

### Connect peers with purpose

Another important concept in the area of professional learning communities – and the peer culture overall – is moving successfully toward what I call a “we-we” mindset. When a professional learning community has been successful, individual teachers stop thinking about “my classroom,” and start thinking about “our school.” And they do it, not so much because of the leadership – although that’s always a factor – but because of the influence of their peers. That’s secret number two.

Returning to the book study group, they might take a concept they read in the book, apply it in their classrooms and then discuss how it worked (or how it didn’t!). That’s when true learning takes place – when you start to put theory into practice.

### Moving now to the first of the knowledge pair, would you comment on secret number three: capacity building prevails?

**A.** This secret revolves around the notion that capacity building trumps judgmentalism. And those are really two parts of the whole.

Here, the principal has to adopt the attitude, “The route to improvement lies in building the capacity of teachers – their knowledge and their skills.” That’s going to be the principal’s *raison d’être*. And, of course, peer interaction will come in here as well.

The opposite – and a big mistake – is if you convey a negative, pejorative tone. Again, by way of example on a larger scale, this has been the downfall of most strategies in England and in the U.S. They’ve gone heavily on accountability first, and capacity building second. It’s not that a given judgment is wrong, but that being judgmental early in the relationship is not motivating. It is important to identify what’s ineffective without making people feel stigmatized. This is the essence of secret three.

A third approach is to take a *laissez-faire* attitude. To hope the problems will somehow take care of themselves in due course, or simply to have professional development workshops that are not powerful enough.

One criterion you can use to gauge effectiveness here – and this in fact applies to all the secrets – is whether using the secret motivated people to put in the effort and get results. And so this secret, and all of the secrets, really needs to stand the test of motivation.

“... *all of the secrets really need to stand the test of motivation.*”

Now, I’m not suggesting that the secrets are such that you engage one of them on Monday and you produce motivation on Tuesday. But you do, in fairly short order – let’s say a year – begin to see the motivational effect. And that motivation in turn leverages all the secrets.

Now the other quality of capacity building, and this leads directly into the next secret, is that it has to be integrated into the day-to-day work.

### Secret four: learning is the work?

**A.** Yes, and it’s the second part of that knowledge pair I spoke of. You need to establish professional learning as a part of day-to-day work in the school culture. And I distinguish professional learning from professional development, which my colleague Peter Cole has referred to as “a great way to avoid change.”

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Peter Cole

To understand Cole’s viewpoint and what he believes is the most effective approach to professional learning, read *Professional Development: A Great Way to Avoid Change*, available from the Centre for Strategic Education (CSE) – 2004.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Richard Elmore

Read more about Elmore's perspective on the relationship between learning in context and continuous improvement in *School Reform From the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press – 2004).

Professional development is typically something you go off and do, disconnected from the workplace. You can get good ideas from that, but unless you have a learning culture that's actively implementing that learning day-after-day, you won't achieve breakthrough results.

As Richard Elmore puts it, you're never going to get substantial change unless you're learning in the setting where you work.

What's more, the environment is changing rapidly. New technologies are coming along, and so this is an ongoing and active proposition. The best organizations say "If we haven't created an environment that enables people to learn day-after-day, we've failed."

**And now we move into the systems arena. Please tell us about the fifth secret: transparency rules?**

**A.** Transparency is about two things: it's about the results – student data – and it's about the instructional practices that are either producing or failing to produce those results.

What you find is that most examples of accountability only look at the results.

All this tells you is whether you have been successful or not. You also need transparency of instructional practice. The Literacy and Numeracy

Secretariat has done this very successfully, for example, identifying practices that are producing the best results – which they call high-yield instructional practices.

*"... unless you have a learning culture... you won't achieve breakthrough results."*

So first you want to identify strategies that are producing better results and then you want to make them widely available. Second, you need transparency around actual teaching practices. You need to look at how teachers are using those strategies to improve teaching practices and improve results.

**This represents a major culture shift...**

**A.** Yes, and if we think about that teacher again we have to ask "Under what circumstances will instruction be improved?"

There are three ingredients necessary to improve teaching. That teacher will be assisted first, when there

is transparency – when we know about his or her teaching practice and results. Second, when we provide an empathetic, non-judgmental environment. And third, when we help him or her. Transparency, non-judgmentalism and good help make the difference.

*"... you combine the secrets... and you get the highest possible leverage."*

So you put these factors together – you combine the secrets of transparency, love your employees, peer interaction, capacity building and learning is the work – and you get the highest possible leverage to

## INSIGHT

### Transparency rules

If you walked into a school where transparency rules, you could ask the principal, "How many students are struggling in Grade 9 math?" and the principal could immediately point to the data. If you asked one of the Grade 9 math teachers, they could identify their struggling students by name. Data walls are a wonderful example of this. This is precision and transparency at its best, if it's being linked to the other secrets. Because it means that the teachers, the literacy coach, the principal all know this information cold. They know who's doing well and who's not doing well.

motivate that person to change, or in some cases retire, which is fine as well.

**I want to get back to this concept of interaction between the secrets. But before we do let's explore secret six: systems learn.**

**A.** Well, this secret really focuses on the whole-systems aspect of continuous learning, and one way of expressing it is that the learning continues even if the leader leaves.

This aspect of the secret revolves around what I would describe as coalescing leadership, in which principals are conscious of developing other leaders. In fact, they do it as a matter of course. They don't solve problems in isolation, for example, but rather remain aware that they are cultivating leadership in others. Of course, that's good in the short run. But from a systems perspective, it's also good because when a leader leaves, chances are the system will continue to work in the same direction. So one half of this secret is broad collaboration, which spawns the next generation of leaders while doing today's work.

The other aspect of this secret has to do with how leaders handle complexity. An ineffective leader may be overly certain, regardless of the facts, saying "I'm right, so don't tell me anything else, even if it proves me wrong." The other ineffective approach is the leader who is so overwhelmed by complexity that he or she is paralyzed and becomes indecisive.

*"Sometimes, leaders ... have to be more confident than the situation warrants."*

And here again, what you find is that a balance is needed. Sometimes, leaders do have to be more confident than the situation warrants. But at the same time, they need to maintain humility. So ideally

## INSIGHT

### Sustainable success

It's not that you can't succeed without these qualities. But it will eventually catch up with you. And besides, as Peter Block (author of *The Empowered Manager*) put it, why be good at a bad game? The six secrets are about sustainable success. And you can't get sustainable success unless you're motivating large numbers of people to keep going.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Jim Collins

In *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins – 2001), Jim Collins seeks to explain how companies can go from being merely good to sustainably great and the kind of leadership they need.

the leader is not so humble that he or she is afraid to act, and not so over-confident that he or she misses the learning.

As Jim Collins put it in his book *Good to Great*, "Great leaders have two characteristics: deep personal humility and intensive professional will." I also love Pfeffer and Sutton's definition of wisdom: "Using your knowledge while doubting what you know."

**The more you speak about them, the clearer it becomes that the secrets are interconnected. But we haven't explored that explicitly.**

**A.** Well, one way to look at it is from the flipside – when we fail to recognize that interconnectedness. You know, because situations are complex, because people are rushed for time, they understandably look for quick solutions.

And so what you see happening is that we will often talk in terms of one variable at a time. It's a natural tendency we have as human beings. We simplify. We talk about one or two variables at a time, and that's what gets us into trouble. And it's why systems thinking is so difficult.

The more positive dynamic is that when you work on one secret it feeds another.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Peter Block

In *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass – 1987), Peter Block shows readers how to create a strong vision of the future – one that encourages the best in themselves and in the people around them.

So love your employees and peer interaction in combination will build each other up.

Another way of putting it is that one secret's weakness is another secret's strength. Transparency, for example, is the strength of looking at hard facts. Peer interaction might be seen as a "softer" variable. When you put those two together, you have accountability – pressure – and peer interaction – support – working interactively.

If you only employ one secret at a time, you miss the synergy, the multiplier effect.

*“If you only employ one secret at a time, you miss the synergy...”*

You may also find yourself in trouble because that secret's weakness isn't balanced by another secret's strength.

**What advice would you give principals about incorporating the secrets into professional practice?**

**A.** I would stress two things. On an individual basis, I would suggest that principals take stock of themselves across the dimensions of this (or any other) theory of action. Where are their strong and weak points? What is in place now? What is not? What assumptions do they

use when they are trying to effect change? What is their own theory of action? In other words, step back and reflect. We need school leaders to develop the mindset that constantly seeks the answer to three questions: How well are we doing relative to our starting point? How well are we doing compared with other schools? And how well are we doing compared with some external standard?

Second, I'd suggest that principals make the material come alive by applying the secrets to their own setting and by exploring these secrets with other people. There is a lot to be learned from a group of people who are being open, who are committed to learning from each other. Principals at every stage of their careers can learn from each other.

Cultivating the pipeline of new leaders is an equally important aspect of moving forward. And so I think we also have to ask ourselves, how do we get the right people to want to be principals? And how do we develop them once they're in the job? As we move forward and recognize the critical role of the principal, I think we need to do everything in our power to develop and support them. We need every school to have the best possible leaders.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Roger Martin

In *The Opposable Mind* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press – 2008), Roger Martin goes beyond the question of *what* great leaders think to the more important question of *how* they think. The central hypothesis in Martin's work is the concept of integrative thinking which Fullan says describes what "Six Secret" thinkers do.

**What are the secrets to your success? Email them to [InConversation@ontario.ca](mailto:InConversation@ontario.ca) by October 14, 2008. We will review them**

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