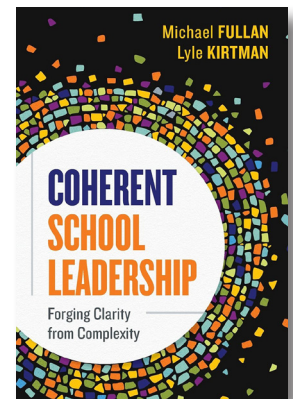


# ASCD® LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

## Coherent School Leadership

*Forging Clarity from Complexity*

by **Michael Fullan and Lyle Kirtman**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

While many leaders are often told that they must put certain structures into place in order to enhance their leadership capabilities, they may not know exactly what structures are needed, or the skills that are required for implementation.

*Coherent School Leadership* will show you how to combine the components of Michael Fullan's Coherence Framework with Lyle Kirtman's 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders to drive coherence—the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work and how it impacts the results desired for student achievement—to change the culture in schools from reactive to proactive. This summary will go beyond typical leadership books that tell you what you need to put in place to enhance leadership in schools. It will show you how to use specific competencies to drive coherence. While the “how-to” steps will provide a platform, the order and magnitude of the steps will depend on your needs and your school community or district.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to use specific competencies to drive coherence.
- Day-to-day solutions to distractions and stresses so you can stay on-course.
- How to use the competencies in relation to the included Framework.
- How to challenge existing conventions and find new paths to successful leadership in schools.



Based on *Coherent School Leadership: Forging Clarity from Complexity* by Michael Fullan and Lyle Kirtman. Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 225 Wilmington West Chester Pike, Suite 202, Chadds Ford, PA 19317 USA. • Copyright © 2019 by ASCD. All rights reserved. © 2022 by ASCD. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. • To subscribe, visit [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org) or contact ASCD, 1703 N Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311.

### Introduction

The net effect of this book will be to show how proven frameworks such as The Coherence Framework and the 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders (“The Framework” and “The Competencies”, respectively) can help you cope with even the most complex scenarios. Our work comes from practice. The fact that practice is going to become even more unpredictable and constantly disrupted means that leaders will need grounded frameworks that can help them both influence and learn from the new world that is currently unfolding. Be ready for ever-greater challenges. Learners make the best leaders—this is the causal direction you should strive for.

### Organizational Coherence and Leadership Competencies

Based on their work with school districts and state systems, covered in their 2016 book *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*, author Michael Fullan, along with Joann Quinn, conclude that coherence consists of four interactive components. The first component of The Framework—focusing direction—is about vision and goals and consists of strategies to begin the coherence process. Developing the direction in practice requires purposefully cultivating collaborative cultures that begin to develop the essential capacities, at both the individual and collective levels, that will be needed going forward (the second component). The third component—deepening learning (the pedagogy or learning and teaching skills to engage and help students learn)—is at the heart of successful change.

Traditional approaches to accountability (the fourth component), which emphasize tests and corrective action, are not effective at stimulating progress. What works instead is a focus on a few ambitious goals, collaborative work in relation to those goals, good engaging pedagogy, and intrinsically motivated accountability that is co-developed and related to external accountability requirements.

Finally, Fullan and Quinn found that coherence is not static—not something that one can achieve and it’s done—but is continuous. There are three things that make coherence continuous:

- People come and go in an organization and each personnel change represents a coherence-making challenge and opportunity;

- The environment or context constantly changes in unpredictable ways—new technologies, population shifts, the economy, the future of jobs, climate, diversity, global and regional conflict, and the like; and, hopefully,
- People in an organization get new ideas—they innovate or engage in continuous improvement.

But, how do we get and keep coherence if we don’t have it? Although one could make some progress by working directly with the four components (the components) of the Framework, that is not enough. So, rather than focus solely on the components of coherence, Fullan and Quinn considered the skills and competencies that would be required to develop and maintain coherence and decided to revisit Kirtman’s 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders and identify how to incorporate them into promoting organizational coherence and sustainable change.

### The 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders in Action

The observation of highly effective leaders in action toward identifying the skills that were associated with their success led to the development of The Competencies.

The characteristics that the observed leaders shared were the ability to: challenge the status quo, build trust through clear communications and expectations, create a commonly owned plan for success, focus on team over self, maintain a high sense of urgency regarding change and sustainable results, commit to continuous improvement of self and the organization, and build external networks/partnerships—in effect, the competencies that constitute the leadership core of the Framework.

The Competencies, as validated as they are, focused on the individual leader. There was a need for a solution that connected knowledge about individual leadership and organizational effectiveness. Hence, this book. The Competencies do not “function” in the same manner—that is, some competencies “push” change and some “pull” change.

The Competencies are valuable, even when there are numerous hierarchical forms of leadership as has been the case over the past several decades. However, they have become even more effective in the new leadership paradigm that combines the Competencies and the Framework. This new integrated model is based less on top-down vision and direct inspiration, and more on a type of leadership that requires enabling people to develop via lateral learning from others with lead-

ers enabling networking, innovative solutions, and collective assessment of impact and ongoing learning.

### Putting the Coherence Framework into Practice

The Framework provides us with four areas on which to focus coherence-making in a school or district that position the work and behaviors that are needed to provide sustainability in improving student achievement: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability.

#### Framework Component One: Focusing Direction

This component involves:

- Purpose-driven mindset
- Goals that impact
- Clarity of strategy
- Change leadership

To begin to address this component of the Framework, the leader must identify where the strengths of the school exist and whether staff understand the direction of the school.

#### Competency 1—Challenges the Status Quo

The use of this competency will challenge many of the practices and behaviors of those who are comfortable in the current system. At the same time, the key skill for the leader is how to challenge the status quo while beginning to build a partnership with those in the organization. In addition, the leader will need to use subskills to enhance their use of the competency to obtain maximum results. In effect, it will be necessary to combine and integrate “push” and “pull” competencies at the outset.

To employ Competency 1, which is a “push” competency, you will need courage—courage to stay committed to effectively challenging others in line with your moral purpose—and a steadfast focus on improving the lives of your students!

#### Framework Component Two: Cultivating Collaborative Cultures

This component involves:

- Culture of growth
- Learning leadership

- Capacity-building
- Collaborative work

If this component was the area of choice for improvement in your district, three competencies tend to be employed by leaders.

#### Competency 2—Builds Trust Through Clear Communications and Expectations

Competency 2 is both a push and pull force. While the intent of this competency is to push people to a high level of performance and results, it is also effective in creating collaborative cultures—which, in turn, draws people in and supports them. Too often, leaders do not clearly communicate their expectations or provide direct feedback to staff to help them improve their practice.

#### Competency 4—Focuses On Team Over Self

If cultivating collaborative cultures was the area of choice for improvement in your district, the second competency that a leader would employ is Competency 4. This is a pull force.

Teaching is often a lonely position and, in many districts, schools operate in silos. Employing this competency entails explaining what a highly functioning team looks like. Teaching leaders about how to develop a team rather than a group of staff is core to collaboration.

Once new expectations are clear and the direction is effectively communicated, your leadership team needs to learn how to develop effective teams across your school or district. For example, a professional learning community (PLC) needs to learn how to be an effective team to be able to maximize learning for students. Effective teams frequently work across disciplines and rely on each other to obtain results. Often trust is the first area for focus. Trust issues must be surfaced honestly and discussed before a team can move toward common purpose and actions. As with all of the Competencies, building trust is a process.

#### Competency 3—Creates a Commonly Owned Plan for Success

The third competency associated with cultivating collaborative cultures is a pull force. The plan must be based on the content of the work in the school and include how the staff will work together. Remember: All plans should be “skinny plans,” simple to digest and focused on offering direction.

The Competency 3 subskills are key to collaboration in

the planning and implementation process. It is important to get input early from all constituents in your planning efforts. You will need them to support you through the action stage and their early involvement will build their ownership. Getting them to buy into the plan comes from their involvement. It is important to show some change of plans or a specific strategy that came from each group's input.

### Framework Component Three: Deepening Learning

This component involves:

- Clarity of learning goals
- Precision in pedagogy
- Shifting practices through capacity-building

### Competency 7—Builds External Networks/Partnerships

Although many, if not all, of the competencies can be used in this core work of schools, Competency 7 may be most effective. However, it is dependent on the level of instructional expertise and skill and the culture's openness to change.

The opportunity to build networks and partnerships in education is greater today than in the past. Leaders must extend their learning out to other schools in a district and to other communities. Capabilities for deepening learning can be assessed based on internal resources and the expertise of statewide, national, or international associations and networks. The expertise may include specific strategies for curriculum and potential human resources personnel to share experiences and expertise with your district.

It is wise to develop a partnership with parents to deepen learning. While in some communities it may be challenging to secure the commitment of the parents, it is essential that parents understand and be supported in their role. Leaders need to adopt the best practices to make parents partners in deepening learning—which may also involve making parents a part of the decision-making process.

The Competency 7 subskills can broaden and enhance deeper learning. The vast number of resources available on the Internet allows us to learn from districts in every area of learning. If one understands and accepts that there is someone out there who has an approach for your school on math, writing, or reading that will help your students, the options for networking are extraordinary.

### Framework Component Four: Securing Accountability

This component involves:

- Internal and external accountability.

### Competency 6 — Is Committed to Continuous Improvement of Self and the Organization

Based on the leadership principles, we need to develop an intrinsic drive in all leaders and staff to grow. Using Competency 6 is core to the switch in focus from external to internal accountability. Per Fullan and Quinn (2016), if you build the intrinsic internal drive for continuous improvement, the external accountability will improve. This competency must also be modeled by the leader. If the leader talks about their internal growth and development with their team, they make it safe for staff to acknowledge that there are areas for improvement. In a true collaborative culture, colleagues can serve as resources for one another for growth.

### Competency 5—Has a High Sense of Urgency for Change and Sustainable Results

While Competency 6 is important to switch from external accountability to intrinsic accountability for sustainable improvement, Competency 5 is also needed. Having a high sense of urgency for results in improving student achievement must be the focus of your internal improvement process. The method of reflection in education has been more focused on empowerment without urgency for results for students. Reflection is an internal self-growth process. We believe reflection needs to be connected to a proactive, not reactive, sense of urgency.

## Initiating the Coherence Framework

To make the work manageable, it is important that leaders consider with staff all of the components of the Framework to get an overview of where their strengths and weaknesses might lie. The organization could then choose an area of coherence on which to improve and employ the proper competencies to drive the improvement. Balance the push and pull competencies based on the culture of your school or district. Talk as a team about your change and leadership work and be a learning organization as you enhance your leadership craft.

### The Coherence Framework in Action

When you move to action, it is misleading to think of the

Framework as four different pieces. The Framework as a whole is analogous to a healthy heart: there are four chambers with blood flowing in and out of each chamber. If any chamber is weak, you become ill or die. The same applies to the Framework and systems: if any one of the components—focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, or securing accountability—fails, the organization as a whole falters. In short, leaders must take into account all of the components of the Framework as they proceed with coherence-making.

Leaders must be devoted to and skilled at coherence-making relative to the components of the Framework and be skilled in the Competencies. Skilled leaders develop highly effective teams and build the capacity of each team member through the Framework and the Competencies. In addition, there are three crucial qualities that these highly effective leaders evince:

- They constantly demonstrate tremendous courage and resolve. They don't back away from challenges. They don't give up. They inspire confidence in others.
- They participate as learners with staff in moving the district forward. They lead and learn and learn and lead.
- They are conscious from day one that one of their main tasks is to develop leadership in others.

The leader's job is to develop collaborative leadership in others for six or more years to the point where they themselves become dispensable, leaving behind a legacy and capacity for the organization to carry on. The question then is, how does one deal with leadership and management and stay focused on effective implementation of one's goals for achievement and come out on top?

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### Implementation and Execution is Key

When coherence is working and the leaders are effective, there is often a silent element at work. When leaders effectively implement and execute, we often fail to notice the talent and systems that provide the foundation for coherence-making.

We have never seen a great leader who was not also an effective manager.

Unfortunately, the lack of management skills that translates to the ability to implement goals in a timely manner to get results for student achievement is becoming a quiet but serious problem.

Our current education system was built to produce workers for the factories created by the Industrial Revolution. The workforce demanded that graduates be able to work on assembly lines and do what they were told. Everyone had a separate role and if they did their job, the corporation was successful.

In fact, the current education system was redesigned to produce average workers and to discourage genius (Rose, 2017). The focus was on standardization and compliance. Administrators were trained to adopt a top-down, hierarchical management structure of "Taylorism" to manage the schools in a command/control model. Management was critical, and leadership was not needed in a world of order and control.

Today's world of work is more focused on innovation, critical thinking, analytical skills, teamwork, creative problem solving, partnerships, and technology.

The demands for school districts are to produce a workforce that is able to take their place in this innovative global society. Schools must produce students who are able to both think and do.

Education has responded with a focus on leadership and specifically on instructional leadership. Many educational leaders believe that management was needed in the past and has no place in today's world of education. One superintendent told one of us that management isn't sexy. We must stop and realize—as Mintzberg so vividly warned us a decade and a half ago—that leadership in education today is becoming too abstract for many leaders and carries the assumption that the ability to implement effectively and bring in all stakeholders in support of desired results is obvious and not worthy of attention. This is a mistake if we want to meet our goals for students and be rigorous in coherence-making.

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### Conclusion: Leadership for the Future

As we project to the future—or we might just as well say the present because the future we are talking about is already upon us—just about every global force we can identify is in unpredictable flux:

- Climate. Whatever side you take, it looks like grim. No one should be confident that we are safe going into the future.
- Jobs. Fewer jobs, more robots, and utter pessimism about what might be available.

- **Economics.** For the past 40 years, inequity of income and school performance has occurred in almost every country and is certainly overall increasing rapidly.
- **Social cohesion.** We have more access to more people in more far-flung places in the world. We have more digital connections, but they are increasingly superficial. One thing that is not increasing is positive feelings toward each other. Trust and social cohesion are eroding on a large scale.

Coherence-makers and the competency-equipped leaders on whom we have focused in this summary are especially suited for this new work of deepening learning—the key to educational improvement for the future. The need for leadership of the kind that we have been portraying has never been greater or timelier. Coherence-making is a never-ending proposition. Leading learning and learning leadership are indeed one and the same.



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