



Thoughts from Linda:

The Six Secrets of Change
*What the Best Leaders Do to Help
Their Organizations Survive and Thrive*

Michael Fullan
2008

This is a terrific book-- filled with wisdom and written for leaders involved in transformational, system-wide change in all fields. I put it aside for a few weeks because, like most of us who read leadership books, I thought, "ok, here comes another of the 5 of this and 10 of that" kind of books. But my husband, Tony, spoke highly of it, so I knew there had to be more. He is completing a doctorate in the school of education at Baylor University, and this is one of the selections in their curricula.

I have not been disappointed. This book is most useful and interesting. It is full of practical, original, and nuanced thinking and challenges conventional thinking in a way that is both illuminating and entertaining at the same time.

Today Michael Fullan is the Global Leadership Director of New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, a global organization that works alongside teachers, parents, and educators to effect system-wide change. He also holds the title of Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, where he earned his doctorate in sociology. He has led many research teams focusing on education improvements and served as a special advisor on education to Dalton McGuinty, the Premier of Ontario, from 2004-2013.

In many ways, the book's title does it a disservice because it makes it sound relatively 'trivial,' and yet, it describes its content precisely. I think Fullan could have connected his treatment of 'theories that travel' into his title, as that topic gets exceptional treatment from him and permeates the book's messages. His treatment of theoretical bases for developing guiding frameworks and creating subsequent strategies is brilliantly simple.

As Fullan explains in the *Preface*, he authored an earlier book in 2001, in which he studied the educational literature for knowledge and insight. He discovered five powerful and interrelated themes related to organizational success: moral purpose, understanding change, relationships, use of knowledge, and coherence. Seven years later, he asked the same question and searched the prevailing literature asking the question: "What do we know about successful organization change under complex conditions?" What emerged is a synthesis of learnings from both explorations and his work in leading sizeable organizational change initiatives in both public and private initiatives worldwide.

The resulting "6 Secrets" are 'secrets' as he says, "only because they are hard to grasp concepts in their deep meaning and are extremely difficult to appreciate and act on in combination." He noted that the book's entire purpose is to make these ideas accessible. He accomplishes this goal and so much more. I appreciated how he expressed the image of the reader, leaving this work with a better understanding of change and a newfound confidence that will, as Pfeffer and Sutton say in their elegant definition of wisdom in their book, *Hard facts, dangerous half-truths and total nonsense: Profiting from evidence-based management*, equip the leader with "the ability to act with knowledge while doubting what you know."

Before getting into the 6 Secrets, Fullan takes you through the concept of 'theory' itself, using the definition: "a theory is merely a way of organizing ideas that seem to make sense of the world." I especially liked his review of theory, going back to Douglas McGregor's work on Theory X and Theory Y assumptions. In implementing his first secret, "Love your Employees," you can, as he says, "have your Theory X and eat your Theory Y too." That alone might make you want to see what he has to offer!

He deals with a topic rarely tackled in leadership literature, which has to do with the concept of using what worked with one firm/situation and transferring lessons learned automatically to other situations. This is his concept of theories that do not travel well. He reminds us of the work of Mintzberg, who helped to dismantle the abstract and often sanitized world of MBA programs in the 60s as they focused on theory absent context. Fullan agrees with this analysis and notes that "MBA programs are heavy on analysis, technique and abstract strategy. But the question of effectiveness is not about how smart you are; it is about how grounded and insightful your theorizing is." He goes on to unpack Enron under Skilling and GE under Welch. As he said of the fabled CEO of GE, "Jack Welch had a lot of good leadership qualities; what he didn't have was a theory that travels."

A theory that 'travels' is one of action, one well-grounded in applied problem areas, up for scrutiny in terms of the strategies themselves and the intended and unintended consequences of the implementation of those strategies. As Fullan notes, "good theories are succinct. Action-based ideas are best expressed in five pages, rather than in fifty." I believe some of his best counsel is this: "I recommend traveling with a good theory because theories never assume absolute certainty and are humble in the face of the future. Good leaders are thoughtful managers who use their theory of action (such as the six secrets) to govern what they do while being open to surprises or new data that direct further action."

He had five assumptions and criteria that determined the selection of his final six secrets. They are as follows. First, the theory is meant to apply to large-scale reform. The goal is to change entire organizations or whole systems. Second, the set of all secrets needs to be understood as synergistic, with each feeding on the other five. Third, the individual secrets are heavily nuanced, implying that success in applying any one requires additional thought and perception to appreciate them and use them contextually for good. Fourth, they are motivationally embedded, which means that one of the main reasons his theory works is that these component concepts will motivate the majority of people who use them and inspire commitment. Fifth, each of the six represents a 'tension of dilemma,' meaning you can err in one direction or another—as he says, "the sophisticated leader holds them in dynamic tension."

The Six Secrets are as follows:

1. Love your Employees
2. Connect Peers with Purpose
3. Capacity building Prevails
4. Learning is the Work
5. Transparency Rules
6. Systems Learn

He suggests several benefits and practical ways to use the 6 Secrets, including as a way to direct and monitor your leadership. It is also a tool to help screen and guide all of us who read leadership books/articles regarding managerial advice from different 'gurus.' Fullan offers that these 6 Secrets additionally can be used to preempt the development of bad habits, such as the seven self-destructive habits of good companies outlined by Jagdish Sheth in 2007: denial, arrogance, complacency, competency dependence, competitive myopia, volume obsession, and the territorial impulse.

The book is organized with one chapter for each secret. He takes you through a deep understanding of the concept, connects each to the other and provides some of the nuance that he notes is often difficult to grasp. The entire book is easily read quickly and is also an effective reference if read and re-read over time. In many ways I consider it a 'page turner.'

This is one of the most thoughtful leadership books I have read in some time. I hope you consider adding it to your own list! I plan on giving this one away to several colleagues.