

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Changing the Context*

*Context, n. structure, framework, environment, situation, circumstance, ambience, surrounding*

—Urdang (1992, p. 26)

Everyone would agree that the context is changing; few define reform as changing the context for the better. The leader's job is to help change context—to introduce new elements into the situation that are bound to influence behavior for the better.

How important is context? The recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2000) PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) of literacy performance of 265,000 fifteen-year-olds in 32 countries puts it dramatically:

PISA shows . . . that two students with the same family characteristics going to different schools—one with higher and one with lower socio-economic profile—could expect to be further apart in reading literacy than two students from different backgrounds going to the same school. (p. 21)

We can't easily change the socioeconomic profile of the school, but the basic point is made—change the context, and you change behavior. Context is equally—if not more—important than the

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background or personalities that people bring to the situation. This is Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) argument: "The power of context is an environmental argument. It says that behavior is a function of social context" (p. 150).

Part of Gladwell's *Tipping Point*, which is easy to miss and is incredibly encouraging for our purposes, is that it is not the heroic actions of tackling complex societal problems that count; instead, "*the power of context says that what really matters is little things* [italics added]" (p. 150). As he puts it, most of us will be "better [people] on a clean street or in a clean subway than in one littered with trash and graffiti" (p. 168). Most of us, to use another example, will pay attention to the plight of individual students if those around us are doing so.

The starting point, then, for changing context is not the external environment (although I get to that later); rather, it is our immediate situation. Change the situation and you have a chance to change people's behavior in the short run as well as beyond. If you want to change people's beliefs and behavior, says Gladwell (2000), "you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured" (p. 173). Selecting and supporting good leaders is a crucial starting point for beginning to change the context in powerful, new ways. The leader's job description, then, is to help change immediate context.

The power of context is usually seen as a forceful constraint—as a given that you cannot do much about. What Gladwell (2000) is saying is don't believe it and don't get overwhelmed by big environmental factors.

The key to change is new experiences. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) say, "people rarely change through a rational process of analyze-think-change" (p. 11). They are much more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence. In this argument, the role of the leader is to work through a process that does the following:

1. Helps people see [new possibilities and situations]
2. Seeing something new hits the emotions
3. Emotionally charged ideas change behavior or reinforce changed behavior (p. 11)

Context is social, not individual. When you look closely at the major strategies for reform these days, you discover that they have

individualistic assumptions: what students should know and be able to do and what teachers and administrators should know and be able to do. These are important, but in themselves they will not change situations and systems. You can have the goal of having a credentialed teacher in every classroom, but the effect will be blunted if you do not also focus on changing the culture and working conditions of schools. More important, if you do not focus on the latter, good teachers will not stay long—or come in the first place.

### **THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS WE NEED**

My colleagues and I are conducting a policy audit in Ontario, sponsored by the Atkinson Foundation and the Gordon Foundation (Leithwood, Fullan, & Watson, 2003). Our purpose is to examine the present state of the public school system in Ontario and to identify policy options that will significantly improve the performance of schools and the system as a whole.

You don't have to go very far into the question of the role of public schools in a democracy before discovering that moral purpose is at the heart of the matter. The best case for public education has always been that it is a common good. Everyone, ultimately, has a stake in the caliber of schools, and education is everyone's business. The quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life that people enjoy (whether as parents, employers, or citizens), with a strong public education system as the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society.

As the main institution for fostering social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society, publicly funded schools must serve all children, not simply those with the loudest or most powerful advocates. This means addressing the cognitive and social needs of all children, with an emphasis on including those who may not have been well served in the past. For instance, a focus on academic achievement, such as improving literacy and mathematics, must include a commitment to narrowing the gap between high- and low-achieving children—addressing what in England has been termed “the long tail of under-achievement.” In addition, public schools, especially in diverse multicultural societies, must include citizenship and what some people call character education. As Goodlad (2002, p. 22) observes, there is a low correlation

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between test scores and honesty, civility, and civic responsibility. He elaborates:

The trouble is that the school reform enterprise has been prescribing the wrong medicines for quite some time. It has ignored the broad purposes of schooling in a democratic society, ignored the huge body of research that would be eagerly examined if the field of interest were something other than schooling. (p. 19)

In other words, both academic achievement and personal and social development are core purposes of the public school system.

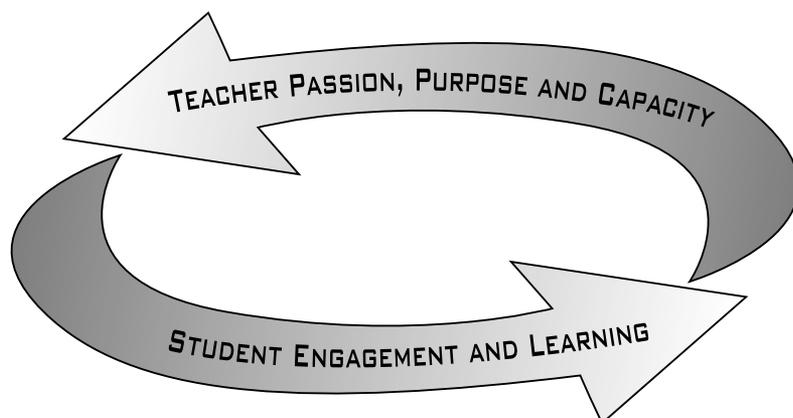
In England, Michael Barber (2001) points to the danger of a loss of trust in the public system:

The public is impatient to see substantial evidence of progress on the ground. . . . The danger is that, as the economies of developed countries grow, more and more people will see private education for their children as a rational lifestyle option. They would become correspondingly less willing to pay taxes to fund public education, which, over time, would become—in the devastating phrase of the sociologist Richard Titmuss a generation ago—a poor service for poor people. (p. 1)

Barber goes on to describe how such a flight to private schooling would erode social cohesion and lead to ever-growing inequality from one generation to another. Only if public education delivers—and is seen to deliver—real quality can such a prospect be avoided.

Similarly, in Canada, Bricker and Greenspon (2001) observe that although the public's confidence in the educational system of the 1990s was shaken they "never abandoned the principles of the public system. . . . And as the decade closed, it became evident that the public continued to view schools as critical agents of social cohesion, the common glue that binds society together" (p. 149).

In short, a high-quality public school system is essential, not only for parents who send their children to these schools but also for the public good as a whole. The key point: Improving the overall system will not happen just by endorsing the vision of a strong public school system; principals in particular must be cognizant that changing their schools and the system is a simultaneous proposition.




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SOURCE: Adapted from Fullan (2003)

## THE PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS WE NEED

In complex societies, producing and sustaining a vital public school system is a tall order. Let me state at the outset that you cannot do this without a dedicated, highly competent teaching force—teachers in numbers, working together for the continuous betterment of the schools. And you cannot get teachers working like this without leaders at all levels guiding and supporting the process. The principal's role is pivotal in this equation.

In *Change Forces With a Vengeance* (2003), I equated teacher passion, purpose, and capacity with student engagement and learning as in the following diagram:

Most people would place teacher commitment as causally prior to student engagement. In a technical sense this might be right, but emotionally the two are fused. If we don't think of producing teacher and student development simultaneously, we will miss the point.

In *Change Forces With a Vengeance* (2003), I reviewed several successful districts and the case of England, a country that significantly improved literacy and mathematics over a 4- to 5-year period. These strategies required great effort and coordination from top policymakers. I made a telling observation:

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As the strategy unfolds leaders must pay close attention to whether they are generating passion, purpose and energy— intrinsic motivation—on the part of principals and teachers. Failure to gain on this problem is a sure-fire indicator that the strategy will fail sooner than later. (Fullan, 2003, pp. 62–63)

Michael Barber (2002), one of the principal policymakers in the British government, captured the dilemma in the evolution of the teaching profession in an insightful analysis in which he cross-tabulated two axes—knowledge-poor versus knowledge-rich strategies or conditions and national (or external) prescription versus professional judgment. The ensuing labels of the four quadrants are revealing of the past 30 or so years:

- Uninformed professional judgment (knowledge-poor/professional judgment)
- Uninformed prescription (knowledge-poor/external prescription)
- Informed prescription (knowledge-rich/external prescription)
- Informed professional judgment (knowledge-rich/professional judgment)

These are fairly accurate generalizations. In the 1970s, when teachers had a great deal of autonomy (behind the classroom door) but not much disciplined deliberation (inside and outside the school) over what they were doing, the public had little idea about how well schools were performing nor was there any reason to believe that disciplined inquiry was guiding the day-to-day decisions of principals and teachers. Hargreaves (in press) prefers the term *permissive individualism* over *uninformed professional judgment*, arguing that there were many excellent teachers along with many who were not so good. The main point is the same: There was no system of collective deliberations focusing on continuous improvement.

In the 1980s, when accountability and standards were first introduced without much knowledge of how best to implement standards (knowledge-poor), leaders accomplished little other than alienating the better teachers with unhelpful intrusions. The first instances of accountability and many of the current versions are prescriptive

but are missing key ingredients, such as capacity-building strategies. They are uninformed on the strategies and conditions for success and often incomplete when it comes to the purposes and goals of education itself.

In the 1990s, when some systems (still the minority) began using better knowledge and investing in capacity-building training of principals and teachers, there were some basic improvements, for example, in literacy and mathematics. But because these strategies were tightly orchestrated from the center, principal and teacher ownership—the kind of ownership that would be necessary to go deeper on a sustained basis—did not exist.

Finally, we arrive at informed professional judgment. There are two problems with this concept: What exactly is it and how do you get there if the starting point is low capacity? I won't answer these questions in detail, but any responses are pertinent to matters of moral purpose and context change. First, informed professional judgment is collective, not individualistic. It must be driven by best knowledge, which must be pursued continually through cultures of interaction inside and outside the school. It must have a solid moral purpose as a foundation. How you create conditions of establishing and supporting informed professional judgment raises a perplexing dilemma. It takes capacity to build capacity, so providing professional autonomy to groups of teachers who don't have the commitment and wherewithal to conduct their work with disciplined knowledge inquiry and moral purpose will do no more than squander resources. It is too easy for aspirations of informed professional judgment to fall short, so we should ask the following questions: What does ongoing informedness look like and how do we ensure its continual presence?

As we address these questions, we get a two-layered perspective on the role of leadership. The first layer reveals that the role of principals is to help create and sustain disciplined inquiry and action on the part of teachers. The second layer concerns what has to be done to help create and sustain in numbers school principals who are this good. In essence, this book is about this two-layered perspective.

We obtain further insight into the teachers and principals we need from Jim Collins's (2001) analysis of companies that go from good to great. Studying a sample of 1,435 companies that appeared in *Fortune 500* from 1965 to 1995, Collins and his research team

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Level 5 Leadership	First Who Then What	Confront the Brutal Facts	Hedgehog Concept	Culture of Discipline	Technology Accelerates
Disciplined People		Disciplined Thought		Disciplined Action	

SOURCE: Collins, 2001, p. 12

became interested in companies that had sustained financial success over a minimum of 15 years. In the final analysis, only 11 companies qualified.

Collins's research is essentially a story of passion, focus, inquiry, and action—collectively pursued. Collins identified six core factors of success that he organized into the three themes of disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action:

Many of Collins's (2001) findings are central to questions of school leadership. Before presenting his ideas, there are two major limitations to his work that should be noted (I am indebted to Tom Sergiovanni for raising these issues; personal communication, January 2003). First, Collins relies on a single measure of success—financial performance. Second, his book is not about moral purpose: The 11 great organizations set out to be the best they possibly could be at what they were doing; there was nothing about moral purpose that characterized their work (for discussions of the role of moral purpose in business see Fullan, 2001b, and Hilton & Gibbons, 2002).

Be that as it may, Collins's findings about leadership are germane to our interest in what it would take to develop great schools. Put another way, think of Collins's core concepts in the service of the moral imperative. Collins summarizes his main findings as follows:

### **Level 5 Leadership**

We were surprised, shocked really, to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good company into a great one. Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy—these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.

*First Who . . . Then What.* We expected that good-to-great leaders would begin setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they *first* got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and *then* they figured out where to drive it. The old adage “People are your most important asset” turns out to be wrong. People are *not* your most important asset. The *right* people are.

*Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith).* We learned that a former prisoner of war had more to teach us about what it takes to find a path to greatness than most books on corporate strategy. Every good-to-great company embraced what we came to call the Stockdale Paradox: You must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND *at the same time* have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

*The Hedgehog Concept (Simplicity Within the Three Circles).* To go from good to great requires transcending the curse of competence. Just because something is your core business—just because you’ve been doing it for years or perhaps even decades—does not necessarily mean you can be the best in the world at it. And if you cannot be the best in the world at your core business, then your core business absolutely cannot form the basis of a great company. It must be replaced with a simple concept that reflects deep understanding of three intersecting circles (what you are deeply passionate about; what you can be best at; what drives your economic engine).

*A Culture of Discipline.* All companies have a culture, some companies have discipline, but few companies have a *culture of discipline*. When you have disciplined people, you don’t need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don’t need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don’t need excessive controls. When you combine a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magical alchemy of great performance.

*Technology Accelerators.* Good-to-great companies *think* differently about the role of technology. They never use technology as

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the primary means of igniting a transformation. Yet, paradoxically, they are pioneers in the application of *carefully selected* technology. We learned that technology by itself is never a primary, root cause of either greatness or decline. (Collins, 2001, p. 12–14, italics in original)

Collins's five-level hierarchy is especially noteworthy:

Level 5: Executive

Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

Level 4: Effective Leader

Catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards

Level 3: Competent Manager

Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives

Level 2: Contributing Team Member

Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting

Level 1: Highly Capable Individual

Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills, and good work habits (Collins, 2001, p. 20)

We can easily see the current principalship across Levels 1 through 3 and, in a small number of cases, Level 4. Such principals can be good leaders; they are just not great. And they do not help change the system. Even Level 4, the principal who turns around the failing school and obtains substantial gains in literacy and mathematics, is not building enduring greatness. He or she improves the context but does not change it. Changing the context means that what you leave behind at the end of your tenure is not so much bottom-line results (although that too is apparent) but rather leaders, at many levels, who can carry on and perhaps do even better than you did.

The principals we need are Level 5 leaders—more like chief operating officers than managers. The teachers we need are immersed in disciplined, informed professional inquiry and action that results in raising the bar and closing the gap by engaging all students in learning. There is no greater moral imperative than revamping the principal's role as part and parcel of changing the context within which teachers and students learn.

This is an exciting proposition and represents the moral imperative in its highest form. But, alas, we have very far to go and many barriers to cross. The next chapter delves more deeply into the current principalship—not all bad news and a necessary starting point for rebuilding the principalship.