

Book Study

Prepared by the
Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) Project

Leadership & Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action

Michael Fullan
(Corwin Press, 2005)

Book Description: *In this book, Fullan presents a definition of sustainability that goes beyond whether something “lasts.” He focuses, instead, on whether a system is built and operating in a way that embraces continuous improvement that is built upon and consistent with deep values of human purpose. The book discusses leadership at the school, district, and the system level and how an agenda for sustainability must be created and woven into every aspect of our working and thinking together. The eight elements of sustainability that serve as the framework of the discussion include:*

- 1) *Public service with a moral purpose*
- 2) *Commitment to changing context at all levels*
- 3) *Lateral capacity building through networks*
- 4) *Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships*
- 5) *Deep learning*
- 6) *Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results*
- 7) *Cyclical energizing*
- 8) *The long lever of leadership*

Chapter 1: The Starting Point

Overview

This chapter examines the contributions to successful large-scale reforms and why the progress that has been achieved is not sustainable. Examination of the strategies used contributes to our thinking and concern.

Discussion Questions

- 1) In the early discussion of the strategies employed by high-poverty districts, what elements are similar to your reform efforts?
- 2) The notion that the role of central office personnel is to guide, support, and improve instruction at the building level is one worthy of discussion. If this were in place, what does or could it look like? Would you call district office staff with different questions or requests?
- 3) What does the strategy cited by the Council of Chief School Officers (2002) of “Defining special education as the path of success in the general education program” mean to you?
- 4) What is the balance of “pressure and support” that you would like to see?
- 5) How are we doing with helping students become resilient, resourceful, reflective, and reciprocal?
- 6) What elements of MTSS hold promise in creating a culture to systematically extend and deepen quality teaching?
- 7) What are the experiences of the group in terms of working in a more centrally managed versus a decentralized system? What impact do the differences have on implementation of MTSS practices?

Chapter 2: The Intriguing Nature of Sustainability

Overview

In this chapter, Fullan discusses the strategies that help promote and further sustainability.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Of the eight elements of sustainability, which one jumps out to you given your current role and level of planning or implementation around MTSS?
- 2) One defining aspect of moral purpose is that we treat people with demanding respect – what does this look like at your district level? Building level? Regarding student and family involvement?
- 3) If “context is everything” what elements of your current structures and culture are in place to further your efforts with MTSS implementation? What would be one aspect that, if changed, could make a considerable difference?
- 4) During planning and early implementation efforts, it is common for educators to perceive that teacher assessment and judgment are minimized, while formal assessments drive decision making. In fact, it is the combination of the more formalized assessments and teacher assessment and judgment that is at the heart of more deep and informed decision making. What discussions need to take place so that the dichotomy is minimized?
- 5) What actions are in place to help create what Fullan calls a data-driven society? (Driving out fear, transparent data-gathering, and learning from experiences at all levels)

Chapter 3: Leadership to the Fore

Overview

This chapter introduces the notion that leaders at all levels are going to be necessary and that the leaders that are needed are system thinkers.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Fullan makes a point to talk about leadership at all levels. When you think about leadership and leaders who are system thinkers, provide examples (not names) of acts that you characterize as leadership.

- 2) The notion of planned continuity is mentioned as a necessary aspect of strong leadership and appears critical given the statistics on the number of retirements forecasted over the next 6 years. Imagine that your school finds out that you have some key leaders retiring in the coming year. What should you be doing now to plan for strong continuity and succession building to maintain momentum and direction?

- 3) What is the difference for you between working in a school or district that is managed effectively versus being led effectively?

- 4) Undertaking the implementation of MTSS practices is a huge task. It touches and asks for the examination and actions on every aspect of our system. What (not who) would you identify as the energy creators, neutrals, and consumers that are, or may, impact MTSS efforts?

- 5) Fullan makes a point to emphasize the importance of connecting and networking with others – within and outside your organization. What current structures exist that help toward this end?

Chapter 4: The New Work of Leaders

Overview

This chapter probes more deeply into the eight elements of sustainability introduced in Chapter 2.

Discussion Questions

- 1) The distinction between technical and adaptive solutions is intriguing. Generate examples of problems your building or district has addressed that fall in to these categories.
- 2) Fullan cites the work of Kegan and Lahey (2001) and the shift in our language. If you were to take one of the 7 shifts in language and make a table of two columns, what would be examples of the “from” and “to.” Select one that has the most meaning to you at the moment. Compare with other individuals in the group.
- 3) The complex nature of developmental leadership is one we can do and see in small increments. Discuss what this looks like in the planning and implementation of MTSS practices.
- 4) What changes would be helpful at the district level to promote and nurture new leaders at the building level?

Chapter 5: Leadership at the School Level

Overview

This chapter addresses how leaders in a school relate to teachers, students, parents, the community and other schools within and beyond the district.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Fullan sets the stage for direct examination of relations with families. Within the planning and implementation of MTSS practices, Kansas emphasizes the examination of how families are communicated with, and involved, in the schooling and decision making process. Discuss what steps has happened to date with regard to family involvement. What are your next steps?
- 2) What does the concept of “assessment for learning” mean to you? To the group? Within the context of MTSS?
- 3) One of the steps in planning for implementation of MTSS practices is commitment to the core beliefs. Fullan writes in this chapter about changing school cultures – those things that your colleagues collectively “agree are true.” Talk about the consensus process your school or district went through with regard to commitment to the core beliefs. Was consensus really achieved? How were issues addressed or worked through?
- 4) As you examine the findings of the Hay Group, 2004, do you anticipate that your school would have rank ordered the traits in a similar fashion?
- 5) What factor does trust play in your school and community with regard to family communication and involvement? What impact (direct and indirect) will this have on the implementation of MTSS practices?

Chapter 6: Leadership at the District Level

Overview

As the title implies, this chapter examines those things that help or hinder sustainability at the district level within the historical context of the pendulum swinging between centralization and decentralization practices. Lessons learned from work in districts will culminate in the impact on sustainability.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Fullan presents ten elements learned from the literature as preconditions for sustainability. Which element fits with where you are at this moment?
- 2) Given your current status with MTSS, the notion that “terms travel fast, but the meaning of the underlying concepts do not” should hit very close to home. What is a personal example you see happening in your school or district that needs immediate attention? Use the group to generate practical strategies that could help.
- 3) Fullan talks about capacity building as the “daily habit of working together.” Take this concept and connect it with the staff development taking place related to MTSS and the connection to the structures built and utilized in the school related to data analysis and problem solving.
- 4) Is lateral capacity building occurring in your district? How could it be developed and built productively?
- 5) In addition to thinking of assessment for learning as it relates to student outcomes, Fullan talks about the ongoing assessment of whether policies and strategies are working within the school or district. Has this been addressed in your school or district?
- 6) Taking Fullan’s notion of pressure and support, fill in the squares with probable outcomes:

		Pressure	
		High	Low
Support	High		
	Low		

- 7) What is one thing your district should have at the top of their “sustainability agenda” as you think about MTSS?

Chapter 7: Leadership at the System Level

Overview

This chapter examines the dual role that systems leaders must carry out to increase system thinking.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are examples of networked learning communities that could or do exist? These could be in your current environment or ones that you are familiar with in other areas.
- 2) What did the illustration of the robins and titmice mean to you?
- 3) How can a network be developed that promotes coherence rather than just promoting the proliferation of ideas?
- 4) To this point, questions have been geared at the building and district level. In this chapter, Fullan emphasizes the tri-level solution, adding the state level to the equation. What role does, or should, the state play in helping districts with MTSS implementation and sustainability?
- 5) Discuss the proposed agenda for the immediate future on pg. 90 in the context of lessons presented to date.
- 6) How do we align our words with our actions? Where our intent and our actions are coherent? Go ahead... share a personal example where you have found your intent with your actions in contradiction. What was the outcome?
- 7) Fullan coins an interesting difference – “assessment of learning at the expense of assessment for learning.” Within MTSS practices, we need both fulfilled – how do we accomplish this? The more they are dichotomized, the harder it will be to allow assessment to stimulate broader and deeper discussions and actions.

Epilogue: It's Going to be Hard

Overview

Fullan acknowledges the difficulty in developing sustainability

Discussion Questions

- 1) Fullan makes a powerful statement about regressive interactions – what is your reaction? So that this isn't dwelled upon, what is your immediate need for progressive interactions so that you are propelled forward with your MTSS efforts and momentum is not built only to run head on into the wall of past implementation failures?

- 2) In five years, what do you want to see and hear in your school, district, and state? What about 10 years?

- 3) Fullan talks in this chapter about the pace of change and avoiding taking on yet another priority. Is this part of your reality? Your role?