

# Coherence

*The Right Drivers in Action  
for Schools, Districts, and Systems*

.....  
**Michael Fullan**

**Joanne Quinn**  
.....



.....

# Contents

.....

<b>Authors' Note: The Time Is Now!</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter 1. Coherence Making</b>	<b>1</b>
What Coherence Is and Is Not	1
The Wrong and Right Drivers in Action	3
The Coherence Framework	11
Get the Right Mind-Set for Action	14
<b>Chapter 2. Focusing Direction</b>	<b>17</b>
Purpose Driven	17
Goals That Impact What Matters Most	19
Clarity of Strategy	24
Change Leadership	27
Focused Direction in Action	35
Final Thoughts	45
<b>Chapter 3. Cultivating Collaborative Cultures</b>	<b>47</b>
Culture of Growth	49
Learning Leadership aka Lead Learners	53
Capacity Building	56
Collaborative Work	60
Collaborative Work in Action	64
Final Thoughts	73
<b>Chapter 4. Deepening Learning</b>	<b>77</b>
Develop Clarity of Learning Goals	83
Build Precision in Pedagogy	88
Shift Practices Through Capacity Building	99

Moving Whole Systems Toward Deeper Learning	105
Final Thoughts	106
<b>Chapter 5. Securing Accountability</b>	<b>109</b>
Internal Accountability	110
External Accountability	118
Final Thoughts	124
<b>Chapter 6. Leading for Coherence</b>	<b>127</b>
Master the Framework	128
Develop Leaders at All Levels	134
Final Thoughts	135
<b>References and Further Readings</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>151</b>

.....

# Authors' Note

.....

## *The Time Is Now!*

**H**ow do you turn overload and fragmentation into focus and coherence? This is what this book is about.

We have been involved in developing coherence for student learning in districts and systems (provinces/states) since 1988. We have helped practitioners do this, but more than that, they have helped us understand the details. This work—bringing about system change within reasonably short timelines—has become increasingly clear. It is difficult to do but not overwhelming. And once you get the knack of it, the process of change moves more quickly and deeply (see Fullan, in press).

Part of the subtitle of the book is “right drivers in action.” In 2011, one of us, Fullan, wrote a policy paper titled “Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform” (2011a). The wrong drivers were external accountability, individualism, technology, and ad hoc policies. The corresponding right drivers were capacity building with a focus on results, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness (coordinated policies).

The wrong drivers paper immediately hit a responsive chord especially at the middle (district and regions) and school levels. Many leaders embraced the distinction and were quick to denounce the wrong driver tendencies of policy makers. But our “drivers paper” was not a plan of action (if you like, it was better at describing what not to do than it was at figuring out what actually to do). Thus, *Coherence* represents going into action with the right drivers as the foundation.

The Coherence Framework has four components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. Separate chapters delve deeply into each of the components. We will also show how the four elements intersect to form a dynamic

whole and how leadership at all levels is essential for integrating the core ideas. The action framework we have developed aligns to the original four right drivers as follows:

Original Right Drivers	Right Drivers in Action
Systemness	Focusing Direction
Collaboration	Cultivating Collaborative Cultures
Pedagogy	Deepening Learning
Capacity Building for Results	Securing Accountability

- *Focusing direction* is systemness (the need to integrate what the system is doing).
- *Cultivating collaborative cultures* oversees individualism by producing strong groups and strong individuals.
- *Deepening learning*, which is founded on new pedagogical partnerships, is the driver for better outcomes using technology as the accelerator.
- Capacity for results is based on developing skills and competencies within the group that, in turn, serves as a basis for being self-responsible and accountable to the outside. The road to *securing accountability* is through developing capacity within the group that, in turn, interfaces with the external accountability system.

At the center of the framework is leadership. Leaders must find the right combination of these four components to meet the varying needs of their context. One last clarifying point is this: We don't have capacity building as a separate component in the Coherence Framework because particular capacities are contained and necessary within each of the four components. Leadership, thus, infuses capacity building into all levels and work of the system as it combines the four components.

The audience for this book includes leaders at all levels of the education system—school and community, district and region, and state level. For those at the school and district/regional levels, you can take action using the Coherence Framework directly. State-level people have a double agenda: use the framework in your own actions but also create the infrastructure of policy, budget, and partnerships at the middle and local levels

for “whole system improvement” to flourish. Our approach is a win-win proposition, but it has to be deliberately fostered by many leaders working individually and collectively.

The term *simplicity* captures what we do. We take a complicated matter, identify the smallest number of key factors or domains (typically four to six), and work together with practitioners to become clear about and to master the factors in actions. The simple part is the small number of key domains; the complex part is making the ideas gel or cohere with all participants, given the politics, pressures, and personalities involved. The good news is that it works. It is doable and as such is catching on. Wallowing in confusion is not all that enjoyable. Our alternative is much more satisfying. Most people would rather be challenged by change and helped to progress than be mired in frustration. Best of all, this work tackles “whole systems” and uses the group to change the group. People know they are engaged in something beyond their narrow role. It is human nature to rise to a larger call *if* the problems are serious enough and *if* there is a way forward where they can play a role with others. Coherence making is the pathway that does this.

You will see in this book how Garden Grove Unified School District overcame the challenge of high poverty, with over 80 percent English-language learners (ELLs) to become one of the highest-performing districts in the state of California. You will witness how the province of Ontario took a stagnant school system of 5,000 schools and 72 districts and transformed it into one of the highest-performing systems in the world. You will find out how a highly diverse urban school district, York Region District School Board, with some 200 schools declared literacy—the ability of children to read by the end of grade 1 and to read well by grade 3—priority number one and then proceeded to make it a reality in less than a decade. And you will see how principal James Bond (no, not *that* James Bond) and his teachers at Park Manor Senior Public School formed a strong base of pedagogy and then used digital to accelerate learning, moving to high proficiency in writing from 42 percent of the students to 83 percent achieving at those levels.

All of these systems, and others we cite, used “coherence making strategies” as the route to success. They focused direction, employed collaborative capacity building, went deep in pedagogy, and secured

internal group-based accountability across the whole system. The researcher John Hattie (2015) has added further confirmation to our conclusions in his report *What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*. His conclusion represents a powerful endorsement of our findings: “the greatest influence on student progression in learning is having highly expert, inspired and passionate teachers and school leaders working together to maximize the effect of their teaching on all students in their care” (p. 2).

Our book is a story of how regular school systems can achieve remarkable and lasting success by focusing on the right things and staying with them. For the first time, these strategies are accessible to all. Our intent in this book is to make coherence making an understandable and valuable resource for leaders who want to make a lasting difference.

# Coherence Making

It is time to make good on the promise of public education. Our children need it, the public is demanding it, and indeed the world needs it to survive and thrive. Public education is humankind’s future—for better or worse. For the first time, we have the knowledge and expertise to deliver. What we need is consistency of purpose, policy, and practice. Structure and strategy are not enough. The solution requires the individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action. When large numbers of people have a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done—and see their part in achieving that purpose—coherence emerges and powerful things happen.

In this chapter, we define what coherence is and is not, describe the “wrong and right drivers,” and provide the Coherence Framework that forms the basis of the solution and the chapters in this book.

## What Coherence Is and Is Not

*Merriam-Webster* defines *coherence* as the “integration of diverse elements, relationships, or values.” Images of coherence have to do with making sense, sticking together, and connecting. Note that these elements relate to what people on the ground, so to speak, find coherent and meaningful. This gives us a hint as to what coherence is not. It is not structure. It is not alignment (although that can help) as when those in charge can explain how things fit (really, how things, *should fit* from their perspective). It is not strategy.

Coherence pertains to people individually and especially collectively. To cut to the chase, coherence consists of the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work. Coherence, then, is what is



in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively. We can see instantly why coherence is so difficult to accomplish under conditions of overload, fragmentation, and policy churn. Yet it can be done. There is only one way to achieve greater coherence, and that is through purposeful action and interaction, working on capacity, clarity, precision of practice, transparency, monitoring of progress, and continuous correction. All of this requires the right mixture of “pressure and support”: the press for progress within supportive and focused cultures.

As critical masses of people engaged in coherence making evolve, it becomes more powerful, almost self-sustaining. In Ontario, where we have developed many of these ideas over the past 15 years, we stumbled on an indirect indicator of sustained coherence when scores of visitors came on study visits to see what our schools, districts, and Ministry of Education (state department) were doing in practice. They visited different schools; talked to teachers, principals, and students; met with district leaders; and had discussions with policy makers and those in the ministry who were in charge of the effort. There was a single thing that amazed the visitors almost universally. They said that when they asked various people about the main priorities, the strategies in action, progress, results, next steps, and so on, what they got was consistency and specificity across schools and across levels (see Fullan & Rincón-Gallardo, in press, for an analysis of the Ontario strategy). We have come to call this phenomenon the ability for those in the system to “talk the walk.” We all know about “walk the talk,” a good quality but not sufficient by itself. When people can talk the walk, you know that it is the real McCoy. When people can explain themselves specifically, they become clearer; when they can explain the ideas and actions to each other, they become mutually influential. When large numbers of people come to do this over time they socialize newcomers, and the whole thing becomes sustainable. Coherence making and its key components that we establish in this book are about this deep specificity and clarity of action.

One other crucial point about coherence is this: you never arrive once and for all, nor should you want to. There are always new developments so that you need to be plugged into innovations and the wider knowledge arena (without becoming an innovation junkie), there are

always newcomers and change in leadership, and the perfect group does not last forever (thankfully nor does the terrible group). Coherence making in other words is a continuous process of making and remaking meaning in your own mind and in your culture. Our framework shows you how to do this.

---

### The Wrong and Right Drivers in Action

---

I (Fullan) wrote a policy paper five years ago called “Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform” (Fullan, 2011a). The wrong drivers are punitive accountability, individualistic strategies, technology, and ad hoc policies. It is not that these factors should never be included but rather that we should not *lead* with them. Instead, I suggested that there is a set of right drivers that are effective: capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness (coordinated policies).

*Coherence* provides the remedy to the wrong driver approach. We have renamed the right drivers into an action framework consisting of four main components: *focusing direction*, *cultivating collaborative cultures*, *deepening learning*, and *securing accountability*.

Our wrong driver analysis showed how politicians were making matters worse by imposing solutions that were crude and demotivating for the very people who have to help lead the solution—teachers and administrators. In the United States, various forms of these wrong drivers have been intensively in place since 2001, starting with No Child Left Behind and moving to Race to the Top and its associated components such as high-stakes teacher evaluation. Because they take a structural—and indeed negative—approach to change, they have no chance of generating coherence. They have, in other words, no chance of working.

You might ask why politicians endorse solutions that don’t work. The answer is not complicated: because they can legislate them; because they are in a hurry; because the remedies can be made to appeal superficially to the public; because (and unkindly on our part) some of them really don’t care about the *public* education system, preferring that education be taken over by the private sector; and (more kindly) because they do not know what else to do.