Author’s Note

Deep Leadership: Managing Six Big Tensions

It is significant that the concept of depth is rapidly coming to the fore when we talk of so many things that matter, such as beliefs, relationships, learning, and the meaning of life itself. Paradoxically, the recent focus on depth may be because the world is awash with superficiality. Humans can stand only so much triviality before our evolutionary instincts kick in and people become receptive to the question “What are we here for?” What, indeed, is the purpose of life, of work, of being? At first the idea that something might be wrong, even radically wrong, can lie dormant. People keep on doing what they have been doing until something or someone disturbs the status quo and reveals fundamental flaws that cannot be ignored. This is what deep leaders do. They help unleash, uncover, ferret out, extract, and enable new ways of thinking and acting.

Revealingly, flaws are rarely the starting point for deep leaders. They can be just as surprised as anyone at what turns up once they help create certain change dynamics focused on high-leverage questions and processes. Indelible leaders have a knack for uncovering and helping the group pursue new ideas that solve problems in ways never before experienced. It involves complex and hard work that does not seem unreasonable for those doing it—because
they become individually and collectively motivated to keep on going deeper. People become so immersed that what they are doing doesn’t even seem like work.

We see this phenomenon in our global leadership initiative New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, or “Deep Learning” for short (www.npdl.global). The negative impetus (that makes some action inevitable) is that traditional schooling is boring as you go up the grade levels. By the time students reach Grade 9 or 10, only a little over one-third are engaged. And needless to say, teachers are not all that happy (teaching the bored is at least one step more unsettling than being bored). To be clear, there are some fantastically interesting teachers, classes, and schools, but they are in the minority, and the current culture and structure will always contain their spread. Indelible leadership concerns systemic change—practical, realistic, probable change across the whole system.

Our motto in Deep Learning—our value proposition—is “Helping humanity change the world.” In keeping with my main argument, I should stress that this propensity to help humanity, as part of helping ourselves be human, is a natural force in our evolutionary makeup.

Currently in our Deep Learning initiative we have more than 700 schools (and growing) in networks and clusters in seven countries (Australia, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, New Zealand, United States, and Uruguay) that have readily joined to create alternatives to the present system. I have already mentioned the deep learning outcomes as the 6Cs or global competencies.
The 6Cs

1. Character
2. Citizenship
3. Collaboration
4. Communication
5. Creativity
6. Critical thinking

The Deep Learning pedagogies consist of learning partnerships between and among students, teachers, and families in the pursuit of deep learning experiences and outcomes. Together we are co-creating powerful breakthroughs and insights, such as how readily children can be activated to take control of and responsibility for their own learning, how naturally they take to actions that are focused on “helping humanity,” and, indeed, how suited they are to becoming change agents (10-year-olds, for example, are great forces for societal change; for a snippet, see Fullan, 2015c). Deep Learning and its corresponding leadership from many quarters permeate this work. In later chapters, I will provide several concrete examples of the nature of these changes and the kind of leadership that stimulates and responds to these developments.

Cal Newport, a computer scientist, social critic, and consultant based at Georgetown University, has a new book. Guess what it is called? *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (2016). We will return to this book later when we examine solutions to superficiality. Kaufmann and Gregoire (2015) say that people are “wired to create,” but something goes wrong with the wiring as we experience a counter-creative world, including schooling. The business professor and neuroscientist Alan Watkins (2014) shows how most leadership focuses on the tip of the iceberg (results and behavior) whereas the depth is found in thinking,
feeling, emotion, and even physiology (physical and mental well-being). My colleague Andy Hargreaves and his team delve into *Uplifting Leadership* in especially high-performing organizations and uncover many of the dimensions of what I have called “indelible leadership” (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014). We will take up these and other ideas in the following chapters.

The above set of “depth probers” address many of the same overlapping issues (and this is the good news), such as passion, meaning, collaboration, solitude, coherence, imagination, creativity, overcoming adversity, high performance, sustainable success, and so on. But alas (and this is the troubling news), most people find these concepts overwhelming and anything but straightforward. My goal in this short book, then, is to portray this new knowledge in a way that is accessible. I have tried to capture just the right amount of complexity that is essential for going deep and is achievable for anyone willing to go for it. I warn the reader that it is hard (especially at the beginning) to become as good as you will need to be, so expect to invest time and persist. The payoff, however, will come sooner than later, and it will come through surges of energy and periodic breakthroughs. I can also pretty much guarantee, as I said above, that it won’t seem like hard work once you and others are immersed in it because the focused energy that is generated is irresistible. The forces you generate are beyond your direct control but not beyond your influence.

As noted earlier, I have boiled down the main themes to six interlocking tensions (see Figure 1).

1. Breakthrough moral imperative and uplifting leadership
2. Master content and process
3. Lead and learn in equal measure
4. See students as change agents and protégés
5. Feed and be fed by the system
6. Be essential and dispensable
I will introduce them briefly in this Author’s Note so that the reader gets a quick overview. I will then devote a chapter to each of the six. The first tension to manage involves how to combine “moral imperative” and “ubiquitous uplifting leadership.” Moral imperative is about one’s commitment to what we do. We can use several synonyms for this attribute: identity, passion, and meaning. We will see that establishing a strong identity with a cause is tricky in that you can’t just will moral imperative in yourself or demand it in others. You certainly can’t get it directly. (How do you get passion, anyway? And is it possible to have “too much passion”? The answer is yes.) Crucially, because we are talking about deep change in a superficial situation, you are going to have to break through the status quo without knowing exactly how things

![Figure 1 Deep Leadership: Six Big Tensions](image-url)
will turn out. In order to do this you will need to mobilize moral imperative through what Andy Hargreaves and his team (2014) have called a spirit of “uplifting leadership” that inspires emotional and spiritual engagement in relation to improved performance.

Fortunately, if you address all six tensions you will garner many allies and many good answers to the “What to do?” dilemmas. You will need leadership in every quarter to move the system, but how do you achieve that and retain coherence? The complex answer right now is that you have to name and focus on “breakthrough moral imperative” and “ubiquitous leadership” and make the combination come alive through the other five dimensions. In this sense, none of the six sets of tensions are stepwise. All six are pursued simultaneously.

The second big leadership quality concerns managing the tension of the relationship between the content of a given change and the process. By that I mean on the one hand, the content of a given change idea should get shaped and reshaped as people grapple with its best implementation, and, on the other hand, leaders must adapt the process of change to how people are responding and the issues they raise. As you master the dynamics of content and process you will discover radical new ideas. I will give you some clear examples of what this looks like and why quality change is dependent on the leader’s sophistication in relation to the dynamics of both content and process deliberations. In Chapter 2, for example, you will hear from a deputy high school principal how resistance dissolved when an innovation—peer coaching, in this instance—was worked through in a process where teachers had a chance to help shape the change as they developed capacity and increased ownership. In other cases you will find out why I say “students are radical change
agents”—something we did not realize until we delved into Deep Learning.

The third quality consists of managing another productive tension—leading and learning in equal measure. You can never be too sure of yourself, so you always have to be learning. But you also have to be helpful, clear, and decisive along the way. What are the ins and outs of learning and leading simultaneously?

Fourth, a powerful and unanticipated finding from our Deep Learning work is that students of all ages are a hidden source of change leadership. On the one hand they need good pedagogues to help shape their learning (students as protégés), and on the other hand they readily emerge as change agents in terms of pedagogy, learning environment, and social change. We have vastly underestimated what children and youth can do. Our goal is to make them part and parcel of system change.

In another twist, I see student agency as an indirect way of transforming the teaching profession in terms of our powerful concept of professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Professional capital consists of three components: human capital (the quality of the individual), social capital (the quality of the group), and decision capital (the quality of expert judgments). As I discuss in Chapter 4, no “task forces” on transforming the teaching profession have made any difference in the quality of the profession. Students and teachers working together on scale could change the profession more rapidly and deeply. Professional capital is a new currency, and if you increase its circulation, deep change will be the result. Our finding is that students are potentially great agents for increasing the velocity of professional capital and its spread.

The fifth dynamic involves the balancing act of going outward in order to improve inward. You will need to link your organization to the wider system (otherwise your chances of sustainability become seriously compromised, and you will not get your share of good ideas). Your best way of accomplishing this is to contribute to the betterment of the larger system as you gain from it. You need, in other words, to feed and be fed by the system. But what does
this mean in practice? I call this “systemness,” and you will learn what it means in Chapter 5.

Finally, and paradoxically, the way to sustain the work into the future is for leaders, as essential as they are in the early stages, to deliberately become dispensable over time. Sounds like an odd leadership goal, to make yourself less needed, but when you think about it, the best contribution that you can make is to develop individual and collective leadership in others who become capable of carrying on and going further after you leave. You pave the way toward this state through qualities 1 through 5. You consciously work from Day 1 on the proposition “How can I work with depth today in order to make myself dispensable to the future good of this organization?” The answer, which is more ego enhancing than ego smashing, is that I build a culture that has depth. We will examine indicators of depth such as coherence, which we define as the “shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work among organizational members” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). You can’t establish permanence by ignoring what might happen after you leave.

In sum, my challenge to the reader is to pose and pursue the question of how you can master all six sets of tensions, for yourself and for those you work with. To do this is to become efficient under complex conditions because as you consciously work on each of the six you are feeding the other five. You end up working on all six simultaneously, thereby achieving cross-cutting efficiencies that make this work possible and deeply engaging for all.

I believe that the timing is right in education for the kind of leadership that I will portray because the cracks in the status quo are becoming ever more visible and intolerable, and the insights we have about the six sets of tensions are coming into focus. Under some circumstances, taking a risk invites martyrdom. Under current scenarios, it’s a chance to become a hero. Indelibly speaking, it’s a chance to generate many, many heroes who, in turn, spawn others. This book will set you on an irreversible path for deep change. Each chapter will end with a list of three or four action steps. It is time to help yourself and others learn your way into the future, thereby creating a society radically different from the one we have today.