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## Coherence Making

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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.

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### What Coherence Is and Is Not

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*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

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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.

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## The Wrong and Right Drivers in Action

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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.

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Wherever we go in the world and ask educators what issues they are facing, at the top of the list is confusion and overload, variously expressed as the following:

- Initiative fatigue
- Ad hoc projects
- Arbitrary top-down policies
- Compliance-oriented bureaucratization
- Silos and fiefdoms everywhere
- Confusion
- Distrust and demoralization

The more that system leaders try to correct the problem, the worse it gets. At the top of the list is punitive accountability. Daniel Pink (2009) has shown conclusively that this “carrots and sticks” approach works at best for only the most mechanical tasks, not for anything that requires ingenuity and commitment. You don’t get coherence by imposing diktats.

Decision makers also have turned their attention to individualistic strategies—let’s attract and reward better teachers, better school principals, and so on. Good individuals are important, but cultures are more so. As we will see if you want to change a group, an organization, or a system, you actually have to focus on the culture as well as the individuals within it. The culture will eat up individuals faster than you can produce them—so we focus on culture and on individuals simultaneously.

To make matters worse, the first two wrong drivers are often used in tandem. Focus on individuals and employ punitive accountability. These dual forces make matters worse. Once you face tasks where judgment is required, people do not respond to monetary rewards or threat of punishment. In challenging situations, people are motivated primarily by intrinsic factors: having a sense of purpose, solving difficult problems, and working with peers on issues that are of critical importance to the group. Attempting to entice individuals through extrinsic rewards and sanctions demotivates most people.

The third wrong driver that needs to be recast is technology. We ourselves are increasingly committed to integrating digital into our whole system change strategies (Fullan, 2013c), but this is in the face of the history of technology as a solution that can be summed up in one word—*acquisition*.

The tacit assumption is that if you want to be progressive, buy more digital devices. If you want to add to the confusion, layer on a bunch of technology.

The fourth and final bad driver is ad hoc policies. Politicians try to solve problems one at a time or simultaneously through separate initiatives. Let's call this the silo problem. One part addresses teachers, another administrators, still another technology, curriculum, standards, and so on. Implementers receive them exactly as delivered—a stream, a torrent, or a trickle—arriving as waves of segmented remedies. “Initiativitis” is enough to give change a bad name.

Note that the wrong drivers operate perversely. Each one is ineffective enough on its own, but they usually appear together like amateur actors in a bad movie! The result is that people are always off balance. Even those with the greatest motivation end up getting discouraged.

This book is about “what else to do.” We know this because we work closely with education systems around the world, partnering with them to figure out and implement what works. The work is characterized by five things:

1. It is all about doing, working from practice to theory, and getting better by doing more with added knowledge.
2. It is about whole systems—all the schools and all the students in the district, state, province, and country.
3. It zeroes in on precise pedagogy—what works in promoting engaging learning for students and teachers alike.
4. It identifies and establishes the conditions, the cultures if you like, at the school, region, and broad infrastructure levels that push for and support deep implementation.
5. It always determines impact on learners and those who relate to them.

Through working with large numbers of people on this agenda, we have identified four so-called right drivers for whole system change: capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness. These elements form the basis of our action strategy for whole system improvement that we spell out later as the Coherence Framework.

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Capacity building refers to the skills, competencies, and knowledge that individuals and groups need in order to be effective at accomplishing the goals at hand. We generally think of them in two bins: the pedagogical bin (expert teaching and learning) and the change bin (expert leadership for change). We have developed and integrated both of these capacities on the ground in partnership with practitioners especially over the past decade.

The next driver, collaboration, involves the development of social capital. Social capital is the quality of the group, or as we say, if you want to change the group, use the group to change the group. A succinct example comes from the work of business professor Carrie Leana (2011) from the University of Pittsburgh. Leana typically measures three things in schools: human capital (the qualifications of individuals), social capital (with questions to teachers like “to what extent do you and other teachers in the school work in a collaborative focused way to improve the learning of all students in the school?”), and progress in math achievement from September to June. While she finds that some teachers with higher human capital get good results, the schools with higher social capital got the best overall math gains. Leana also found that many teachers with lower human capital who happened to be working in schools with high social capital also did better at increasing math achievement. Social capital is more powerful than human capital, and they function virtuously by feeding on each other (see also Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Third, if you mix in good pedagogy as the driver (versus technology) as part of the content of capacity building and social capital exchanges, you get a triple benefit. The synergy is powerful. Good pedagogy is what teachers like to do every day. It is close to their hearts and minds, individually and collectively. *Then* you can integrate digital that, under these conditions, becomes an amazing accelerator and deepener of learning.

Fourth, figuring out how to achieve systemness by making the policy framework more cohesive is difficult and deceptive. As we have said, you can't just align the policies on paper. This theoretical or delivered alignment has little to do with how people in the field experience it. Coherence making, in other words, has to be achieved at the receiving end, not the delivery end. We will offer a solution in subsequent chapters, but essentially, it involves a combination of a small number of ambitious goals being

relentlessly pursued, being vigilant about reducing distractors, helping with professional capacity building, using student and other data transparently for developmental purposes, building in strategies for implementers to learn from each other on an ongoing basis, and marking progress with lots of feedback and supportive intervention.

The cumulative effect of downplaying the wrong drivers and employing the right drivers in concert is greater clarity and cohesion. The right drivers on the move mean two things: political ascendancy and concrete examples on the ground. In this shift to more effective system solutions, politicians begin to embrace the drivers and enact them in legislation and strategic action. Ontario was the first. The drivers are firmly embedded in the politics and practices of the sector from top to bottom and laterally across the system (Fullan & Rincón-Gallardo, in press). Another jurisdiction that has politically taken up the right drivers is the state of California—again from top to bottom and sideways. The governor, Jerry Brown, has enacted legislation to decentralize funding and accountability actions; the state board and the California Department of Education (CDE) are repositioning themselves to support the new direction; the unions, the California Teachers Association, and the American Federation of Teachers are becoming more and more involved in the professional capital agenda; the statewide administrator association (Association of California School Administrators [ACSA]), with its 1,009 school districts and 17,000 members, has explicitly aligned itself to the right driver agenda, as are the county offices; many districts and especially clusters of districts are becoming engaged, from the very large California Office of Reform in Education (CORE) with its 10 districts, to the small consortia of three districts that we lead, and numerous other district clusters that are forming; and many statewide interest groups and associations support the new direction (for an overview of the California situation, see *California's Golden Opportunity: A Status Note* [Fullan, 2014a]). In short—and we are still speaking politically—some states are showing strong interest in moving toward the right driver agenda. And, of course, if California embeds more of these ideas and starts getting significant results, it could have a cascading effect across the country. Beyond all of this, scores of individual school districts across North America are incorporating the elements of right drivers as they blunt the presence of wrong drivers.

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The second way that right drivers are on the move involves the greater specification and development of what the strategy looks like in practice. The original formulation was only a framework, not a plan. We have been working with many partners at the school, district, and state levels to spell out in more detail how small and very large systems can find and sustain focus.

*Coherence* is our attempt to spell out the solution that anyone can master with focus and persistence. We offer core insights and a simple but powerful framework for action. We see our book as helping schools and districts and systems achieve greater cohesion. We also direct our messages and ideas to provinces, states, and countries where system cohesion can pay off for everyone—literally benefiting the society as a whole.

There has to be an abiding focus and set of integrating forces at play. The initial right drivers set these forces in motion, and our developed version of the drivers in action take us to the next stage. One method we use to get at the most practical, powerful, cohesive ideas is to work with practitioners who have done it and to ask them what they were thinking and how they went about it. Two of these people are Laura Schwalm, who was superintendent from 2000 to 2013, and her successor, Gabriela Mafi, of Garden Grove Unified School District in the Anaheim area. Garden Grove is high-poverty and diverse (mostly Latinos and Vietnamese, with some 85 percent on free lunch) and has about 80 schools. When Schwalm began her stint, the district was well below the state average on all measures of performance. Steadily thereafter, and to the present, they have moved well above the state average (for a third-party research study, see Knudson, 2013). Here is what Schwalm (personal communication, July 2014) highlights about the journey:

You need to be preoccupied with focus: a state or condition permitting clear perception or understanding; to direct your attention or effort to something specific; a main purpose or interest; direction. With so many issues that feel urgent, the necessity to focus is often overwhelmed by the number and magnitude of the problems faced by the system leader. You need “one main thing” or central



improvement strategy that consists of the leaders' nonnegotiable view of what, over time, will have the greatest impact on improving the systems performance for children. As superintendent of GGUSD [Garden Grove Unified School District], my big circle was "increasing the capacity of the adults in the system to support improved student outcomes." Within that circle, I prioritized building teacher capacity by focusing on improved pedagogy and building principal capacity to support teacher growth. While that was my first priority, the focus also included building capacity of classified employees and building the capacity of parents to support what teachers were asking of students as well as to push on us. Each of these had multiple entry points, which evolved over the years, and as we made strides in each we continued to refine the work.

Gabriela Mafi is carrying on and deepening the work at Garden Grove. Schwalm now works with us more widely in California in maximizing what we call "leadership from the middle" (LFTM). LFTM is based on the assumption that the center (the government) cannot effectively run large complex systems and that local school autonomy, if left on its own, will never add up. Hargreaves and Braun (2012) first identified LFTM as a powerful strategy—hence, the notion that clusters of districts working and learning together on specific solutions and working on coherence, really, is the way to go. There are a growing number of overlapping clusters of districts (over 50 clusters in our last count) working in such fashion. With 1,009 districts, greater coherence through the middle can be a powerful force for coherence statewide. The idea is that these clusters become better partners upward to the state and within their own communities through greater focus and capacity.

Speaking of the whole state, we also asked Davis Campbell, one of our close colleagues and partners in this work, why he thought the right drivers was the way to go. Campbell has seen it all over the past four decades in California. Campbell is a former deputy superintendent of the CDE (where in our language he was in charge of implementing the wrong drivers) and is currently on the board of the Stuart Foundation (one of the main funders of the right drivers work in the state) and on the faculty

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at UC Davis, where he has helped develop a superintendent leadership program. Here is what he said:

California has always been known as having a strong top-down education governance system. But this system has also, in recent years, been characterized as very dysfunctional with shifting power centers at the state level. All of this has led to a high level of stress between the state educational agency and school districts.

For the state education agency in California to be truly effective, there needs to be a conscious shift in both the mind-set of the staff and the basic culture of the organization. Historically, the Department of Education has operated on the assumption that mandating statewide reforms could solve problems in public education and that the state's job was to police districts to ensure that the state requirements, which define those programs or reforms, were met. This created a basic compliance mind-set and organizational culture in the department. It also created a perception that the people in Sacramento knew better than the professionals in the districts. The state has focused on inputs to districts rather than helping them improve their outputs to children.

School districts, however, need something very different. They need professional leadership from the state that is informed by deep thinking about strategies that help districts build capacity to undergo systems change. The districts need the state to understand that major reforms such as the Local Control Funding Formula will have limited impact on their own unless they are utilized as tools to open up the system.

The state projects a top-down image, districts want a resource, and a partner not a parent. What districts don't need are more rules and regulations. What they need and want is a state agency whose primary goal and mission, their internal compass so to speak, is to find ways to connect them with high-performing professionals and systems in a collaborative and mutually reinforcing way. The state needs to help find ways to empower successful professionals, in both teaching and administration, and provide them the opportunity to influence their colleagues in a comprehensive, sustained way.

School districts need the state to understand accountability as a strengthening process not a punitive exercise designed to punish for lack of performance according to state process requirements. (D. Campbell, personal communication, 2014; see also Fullan, 2014b; Michael Fullan Enterprises & California Forward, 2015, for status reports on what we refer to as “California’s Golden Opportunity”)

We are seeing a growing interest in policy and practice in embracing the right drivers framework from countries, states, provinces, districts, and schools. More and more educators are saying to us “we agree with this direction, but *how* do we do it?” This book represents where we are in this “how” quest. Arising from our work with districts and states, we have developed a model—the Coherence Framework—that will guide the rest of the chapters.

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## The Coherence Framework

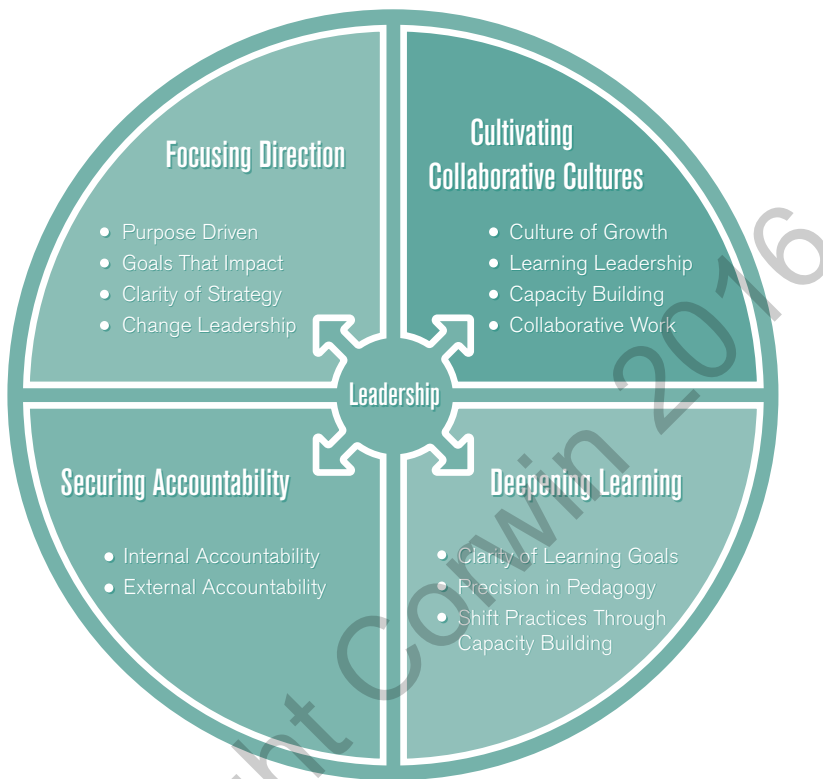
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What we need is a framework that can guide action and that is comprehensive but not unwieldy—something that works and that can be mastered by any leader or group that puts in the time to learn how the main elements fit in their own situation. This is the framework we have developed in working with the Schwalm and Campbells of the world and is depicted in Figure 1.1.

Our goal is to help others—scores of others—become immersed in work that develops focus and coherence across complex systems. We set out to show clearly that there is “something else” other than the constellation of wrong policy drivers and that this alternative works because it stimulates and motivates hordes of system members to rise to the occasion and experience the satisfaction of coherence amidst an otherwise messy world.

The four components of Figure 1.1 work together. It is important to understand the inner workings of each component as we do in successive chapters, but the big message is that they go together and must be addressed simultaneously and continually from day one. Think of each of the four components, the right drivers in action, as serving the other three. The total interaction effects are linked through leadership and are powerful.

Figure 1.1 The Coherence Framework



Focusing direction operationalizes the systemness dynamic vis-à-vis ad hoc policies. This component plays an overriding role because the moral imperative and directional vision are crucial, but you cannot settle the direction at the beginning and simply pursue it. Focus is something that comes alive through the other elements. It gets shaped and reshaped by the interactive forces of collaboration, deep learning, and accountable actions. Focus gets clearer and more shared as a process of deliberate action evolves.

Second, cultivating collaborative cultures is at the heart of system transformation. This second component clarifies the relationship of teamwork vis-à-vis individualism and the role collaboration plays in producing both strong groups and individuals. But collaboration as an end in itself is a waste

of time. Groups are powerful, which means that they can be powerfully wrong. Getting together without the discipline and specificity of collective deliberation can be a grand waste of time. We show how developing collaborative cultures is careful and precise work and has profound impact when carried out well because increasing social capital improves coherence, which in turn attracts newcomers and feeds forward into better results.

Third, the agenda must tackle deepening learning, and this component addresses the relationship of pedagogy and technology. Traditional schooling is increasingly boring for students and for teachers, yet the solution of buying technology has failed to have significant impact. New pedagogies—new learning partnerships between and among students, teachers, and families—are rapidly emerging. Such learning is revolutionizing learning outcomes and their measurement, related to what can be called the 6Cs: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, character, and citizenship. Crucially, the development of new pedagogies and their link to deep learning outcomes are being accelerated by digital innovations. We ourselves are immersed with districts and schools in this work that we call “the Stratosphere agenda” (see Fullan, 2013c) and New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) ([www.NPDL.global](http://www.NPDL.global); 2014). This focus on deepening learning uses pedagogy as the driver with technology as an accelerator. The challenge for schools, districts, and states is to manage their need for continuous improvement of foundational skills, while identifying and supporting innovation to foster new learning outcomes. This will be part of our chapter on deep learning.

Fourth, we think we have a solution for the big bugbear—securing accountability. It is, as you know, public enemy number one as the chief wrong driver. But you can’t have a public education system absent of accountability. In our original description of wrong drivers, we cast the wrong driver of negative accountability versus capacity building. Now that we have moved to operationalize the right drivers in action, we see that the proper symmetry should have been “internal accountability versus external accountability.”

Thus, the fourth component, securing accountability, is based on developing internal capacity to be effective, to be responsible within the group or system (internal accountability), and to respond to and engage system priorities and performance therein (external accountability). The road

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to securing accountability is through developing capacity within the group. We show how the first three components of our model put us in a position to secure accountability by leading with internal accountability within the group, and reinforcing it with external accountability.

The core of the framework is “Leadership for Coherence,” which links all four components. Leaders working in partnership with others determine how to combine the four components to meet the varying needs of their context—how to make the four “gel” and increase coherence. The coherence making model—its four components in action—must (oddly enough) be pursued *coherently*. Our framework is a dynamic model that ramifies, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Master it, and you and your colleagues will be amply rewarded.

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### Get the Right Mind-Set for Action

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Success is not a matter of working your way through the four components of the framework. You have to have the right mind-set. You have to respect what we know about the change process. Here is a good basic definition: *Effective change processes shape and reshape good ideas as they build capacity and ownership among participants.* There are two components: the quality of the idea and the quality of the process. Neglect one or the other and you will fail. And as you see by the definition, things change as you work with them. It was Kurt Lewin who said “if you really want to understand something try changing it.” So, have a deep respect for the unpredictability of change.

There is not one surefire way to go about it. Susan Moore Johnson, Geoff Marietta, Monica Higgins, Karen Mapp, and Allen Grossman (2015) studied five school districts reported in their book, *Achieving Coherence in District Improvement*. Three districts—Aldine, Texas; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Long Beach, California—were relatively centralized. Two—Baltimore City Schools and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina—were following a path of relative decentralization. All five districts were achieving some success. Even though the five were following different pathways, there were fundamental commonalities. All worked hard on district-schools partnership and trust. All paid attention to lateral relationships between and among schools.

All needed to focus on and figure out the relationship among “programming, budgeting and staffing.” All needed to understand and continually engage the culture of their districts and the changing dynamics of their external environments. The essential ingredient for success, says Johnson and her colleagues (2015), was “whether a district could effectively implement whatever theory of change [with the common elements we have identified] it chose” (p. 20). Further, “policies and practices succeeded when they were continuously informed by the knowledge, skills, and experiences of educators from all levels of the system” (p. 49).

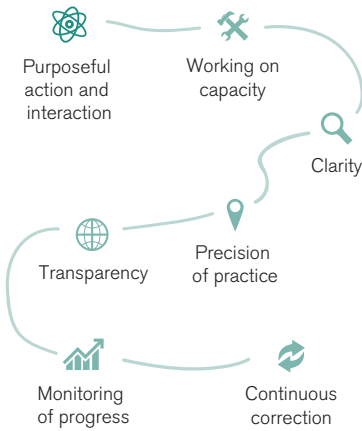
Andy Hargreaves, Alan Boyle, and Alma Harris (2014), in their study of especially effective organizations in three sectors—business, education, and sport—identify key characteristics of what they call *uplifting leadership*. Their conclusions have much in common with our framework, but a particularly salient one was the finding that these highly successful organizations learned from the success of others but never tried to imitate what others did. Instead, they found *their own pathway to success*. They did many of the right things, and they learned and adjusted as they proceeded.

The bottom line in our book is this: use our framework, but find your own pathway!

To get you started, review Infographic 1 on Coherence Making.

# Infographic 1 Coherence Making

## To Achieve Greater Coherence



Achieve remarkable and lasting success by focusing on the right things and staying with them.



## Coherence Is

... a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively.

## Coherence Is Not

Structure  
Alignment  
Strategy



## The Coherence Framework

Each of the four components serves the other three and must be addressed simultaneously and continually. Leadership both activates and connects the four components.



## The Wrong and Right Drivers in Action

Coherence represents going into action with the right drivers as the foundation.

## Get the Right Mind-Set for Action



... and have a deep respect for the unpredictability of change.



## Talk the Walk

The cumulative effect of downplaying the wrong drivers and employing the right drivers in concert is greater clarity and cohesion.



A full-color version of this infographic is also available for download at <http://www.corwin.com/books/Book244044> under "About" and then "Sample Materials and Chapters."