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Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education

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M. Fullan & Geoff Scott; Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2009)

Reviewed by Chris Abrams

“While academia is slow to adopt change in any form, university leaders are under tremendous pressure to institute change on their campuses in order to keep pace with rapidly evolving conditions. Change leaders at all levels of the university need to grapple with both the content and the process of change” (Fullan & Scott, 2009, inside flap).

In *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education*, Michael Fullan and Geoff Scott attempt to explain how leaders in the academy can meet the ever-changing needs of higher education. *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education* is the second “turnaround” book by Michael Fullan. In 2006, he authored a book simply entitled *Turnaround Leadership*, in which he focused on the leadership needs of traditional K-12 education. In *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education*, the authors endeavor to explain how current leadership and the readiness of a culture to change at any given institution must mirror each other in order to bring about the type of change that will ultimately aid the institution.

Fullan and Scott’s text is divided into seven chapters, each of which examines the challenges facing the modern university in the 21st century, the failed strategies for change of the past, a new agenda of change, building quality and capacity, leadership capacity, leadership selection, and finishing with their move from “ready, ready, ready” to “lead, lead, lead.”

According to Fullan and Scott, the challenges that face the university in the 21st century are the opening of access, changes in funding and pressure to generate new sources of revenue, the export market and new growing competition, user pay and changing patterns of participation, the changing expectations of students, and growing diversity while maintaining standards.

After discussing the challenges that face higher education, Fullan and Scott explore strategies that have failed in the past. According to the authors, the majority of the failures of the past can be linked to the unwillingness of the academy to change. Discussed in the section is the academy’s tendency to spend all of its time talking and never getting around to doing. The authors state approximately six reasons why the academy is “change averse,” including inefficiency, poor decision making, disengagement from the core purposes of the institution, unresponsiveness, unclear accountability, unaligned structure and process, unproductive planning and review, too little focus on implementation, poor leadership, underdeveloped quality management systems, unclear standards and new focus on outcomes.

Next, *Turnaround Leadership* explores their new agenda. According to Fullan and Scott their new agenda can be boiled down to four overarching areas: 1) practical reasoning or a more integrated conception of the role of knowledge that combines collaborative engagement with real world issues, analysis, and application, 2) putting teaching and learning at the center of the traditional triumvirate of research, teaching, and university engagement and service, 3) turning inquiry on itself to establish quality processes, data, and implementation, and 4) building and corresponding leadership

capacity based theory and knowledge” (Fullan and Scott, 2009, p. 43). According to these two gentlemen, if higher education is to meet the needs of a changing higher education population as addressed earlier, it will need to adopt their new agenda.

In Chapter 4, Fullan and Scott address how to implement change. According to the authors, there are 12 elements of a change-capable university. A change-capable university:

- is undefensive
- is evidence based
- sets priorities
- can make hard decisions
- makes clear who is responsible for each role within the institution
- acknowledges that all staff have a role to play
- is outcomes focused
- only uses complex, hierarchical systems when necessary
- makes sure all meetings are justified
- operates in a responsive, collaborative, team-based, and focused fashion
- trials improvement strategies in controlled conditions
- is strategically networked

Fullan and Scott believe that through these elements, institutions can more easily facilitate change.

The authors then turn their focus to the leader, how the turnaround leader goes about leading, and the characteristics required to be a change agent within higher education. They state that turnaround leaders listen, link, lead and/or model, teach, and learn, and that possess multiple types of competencies and capabilities. The authors address competencies as both role-specific and generic, and capabilities as personal, interpersonal, and cognitive. According to Fullan and Scott, the greatest probability for turnaround leadership exists where these characteristics intersect.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the authors make a case for how to select leaders who have the capacity for change and how to train those leaders so they can meet their fullest leadership potential. The authors conclude by debunking many of the myths of leadership in higher education and restating society’s needs for strong higher education and higher education’s need for a learned society.

Turnaround Leadership is one more note in a symphony of books, journal articles, and presentations on the need for change and stronger leadership in higher education. Like many before them, Fullan and Scott do an excellent job explaining to the academy that without change, failure is eminent. They also offer some well researched and articulated ways to bring about change in higher education.

However, Fullan and Scott are both members of large institutions of higher education: the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada, and the University of Western Sydney in Sydney, Australia. Are their strategies one size fits all? The University of Toronto serves more than 50,000 students where the average CCCU institution serves 1,100 students. Does denominational affiliation have something to say about how leaders effect change at a CCCU institution? At Malone University, the institution where I serve, the Friends/Quaker tradition compels us to strive for consensus and operate with corporate leadership. Does that fit into Fullan and Scott’s findings? I am not sure that

Fullan and Scott's examinations of leadership and change have looked beyond the types of institutions they represent.

Secondly, like many before them, Fullan and Scott do not ask the primary question around the changing higher education landscape: What is the purpose of higher education? Will Fullan and Scott's ideas help the academy meet its purpose? It will if change is the goal, if growth is the goal, if more people receiving degrees is the goal, if generating new revenue is the goal, or if beating the competition is the goal. But are these the goals? No one would argue the importance of these elements; we all know institutions need financial resources to survive. However, until we answer the purpose question, it is difficult to know if the proposals offered by Fullan and Scott are what is needed in higher education. Nevertheless, in addressing their challenges for the 21st century, Fullan and Scott do an excellent job and their text should be viewed as an important work for future conversations about change in the academy.

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