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The COSMIC C-B Approach

A Prelude

There is no chance that large-scale reform will happen, let alone stick, unless capacity building is a central component of the strategy.

—Michael Fullan (2005b, pp. 10–11)

INTRODUCTION

In our introductory chapter, we reviewed global developments in school improvement and also explored significant pioneering initiatives in school capacity building. We learned from our review that capacity building is much more than school improvement; it is school improvement that matters, that works, and, as Michael Fullan put it in our opening quote, that “sticks.”

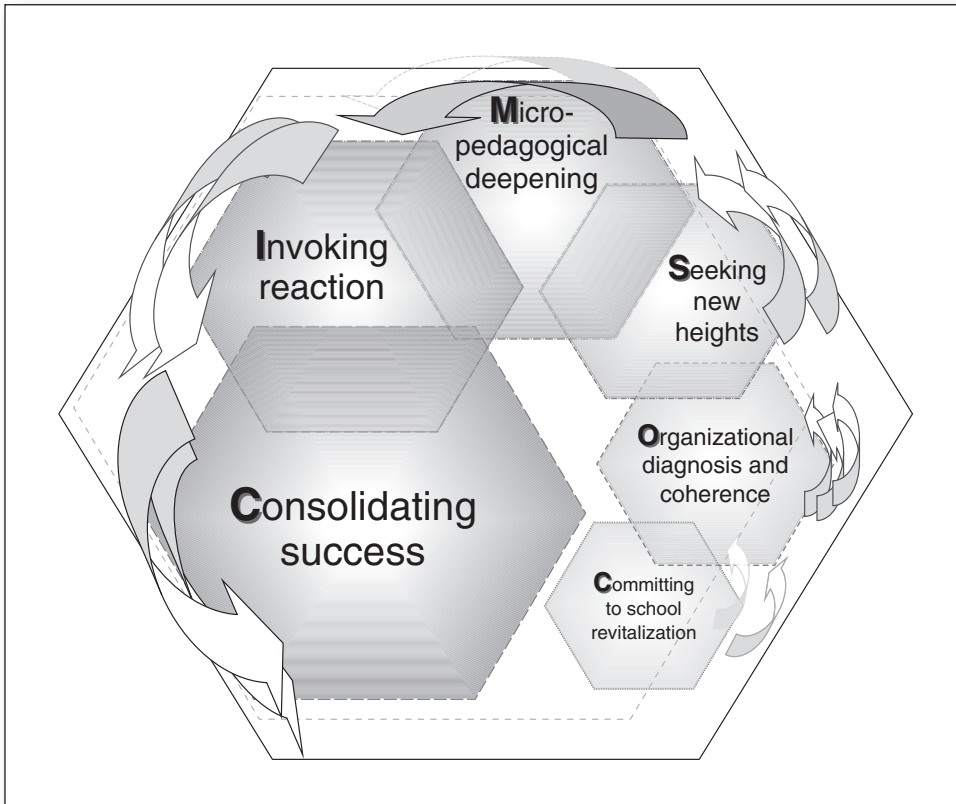
Our conclusions from our analysis of global capacity-building developments were largely, but not totally, encouraging. On one hand, we concluded, the range of explanatory conceptual models that is now available to educational leaders is very impressive. On the other hand, it is all too apparent that we know relatively little about the leadership and management strategies that are needed to proceed through a school improvement process to the point where success is achieved. We know even less about strategies that are needed to sustain that success. The net effect is that we can only agree with Fullan—immense professional effort is currently expended by school leaders in the name of school improvement but, because that effort does not incorporate capacity-building strategies, it is largely wasted.

In this chapter, we outline the features of a capacity-building model—COSMIC C-B—that we believe provides an antidote to this very serious educational concern. We say this because the six dynamics that make up the COSMIC C-B model contain criteria that can be employed by school leaders at either of two critically important stages of a school improvement process: first, during the project design stage; second, in conjunction with ongoing progress reviews.

If COSMIC C-B is used in conjunction with preimplementation, activities to design and plan a school’s improvement project, then the improvement project will in all probability become hybridized with COSMIC C-B. That particular use of COSMIC C-B, we believe, is fully justified. If, on the other hand, the COSMIC C-B dynamics are used as yardsticks in conjunction with periodic progress reviews, then the essence of the school’s own improvement process will probably be retained, enriched by the COSMIC C-B dynamics. This use of COSMIC C-B is also legitimate. In both instances, the application of COSMIC C-B to a school improvement initiative will, we believe, heighten the chances of achieving meaningful school-based success.

COSMIC C-B IN BRIEF

Figure 1.1 The COSMIC C-B Model



Our capacity-building framework is labeled COSMIC C-B for three reasons: first, C-B is our stylized representation of the concept of school capacity building, and second, COSMIC is an acronym drawn from the six dynamics that make up the model:

- *Committing* to school revitalization
- *Organizational* diagnosis and coherence
- *Seeking* new heights
- *Micro-pedagogical* deepening
- *Invoking* reaction
- *Consolidating* success

Third, COSMIC derives from *cosmos*, which is not only ever-evolving but also dynamic, harmonious, and orderly—every school leader’s dream.

The COSMIC C-B model represents what we regard as the clearest picture yet developed of how a school can achieve enhanced outcomes and sustain those outcomes in the face of changing times, changing circumstances, changing external priorities, and changing people. The C-B model has five features.

First, it contains six “dynamics,” and associated criteria, that need to be clearly in evidence at particular junctures of a school improvement process if that process is to achieve sustained success.

Second, each dynamic provides a foundation for the other five dynamics. This particular feature of the model is reflected in Figure 1.1 in the overlaps of the dynamics and the increasing size of the hexagons as COSMIC C-B develops. The counterclockwise direction of the dynamics in Figure 1.1 indicates an important reality that we associate with successful school improvement—it frequently gets started “against the grain.”

Third, while each dynamic is critically important in its own right, we regard the fourth dynamic, *micro-pedagogical deepening*, as the centerpiece of COSMIC C-B. It is this dynamic where teaching, learning, and assessment are the focus of concern. Our research showed that it is this dynamic that was most challenging for schools and where a new paradigm of leadership—one that emphasizes teachers as leaders—is most needed.

Fourth, the model is underpinned by a form of distributed leadership that we call “parallel leadership.” The increased size of the arrows linking the six dynamics in the diagram in Figure 1.1 connotes the growth and maturation in parallel leadership as a school improvement process generates success.

Fifth, the model asserts that each school is primarily responsible for its own improvement. Thus, while we recognize the importance of systems, networks, clusters, and alliances, COSMIC C-B asserts that schools exist in individual contexts and must respond to particular circumstances. School leaders must, in the final analysis, assume responsibility for their individual school’s developmental processes and outcomes.

The six dynamics that constitute COSMIC C-B are generic in the sense that they are fundamental in any process of school improvement that is designed to create and sustain enhanced success. But each of the dynamics must also be understood and valued in its own right.

The six dynamics that compose the model have precise meanings:

C-B dynamic 1—Committing to school revitalization—making a firm decision to undertake school improvement (or revitalization) as an immediate leadership priority.

C-B dynamic 2—Organizational diagnosis and coherence—facilitating shared understanding within the school community of the degree of alignment (or misalignment) of the school’s key organizational elements.

C-B dynamic 3—Seeking new heights—developing an image of the future that is both inspirational and optimistic. This image manifests primarily in two interrelated forms—a motivational vision statement and a transformative schoolwide pedagogical framework (SWP).

C-B dynamic 4—Micropedagogical deepening—engaging teachers in forms of professional inquiry that will enhance schoolwide pedagogical practice. Professional inquiry for micro-pedagogical deepening incorporates three strategies: reflection on personal gifts and talents, conceptual exploration of the school’s pedagogical principles, and development of classroom strategies relating to the SWP principles.

C-B dynamic 5—Invoking reaction—disseminating and refining significant new school-based knowledge (organizational and pedagogical) through networking, “double loop” learning, and professional advocacy.

C-B dynamic 6—Consolidating successes—identifying core processes that have contributed to enhanced school outcomes, and embedding these processes in the ongoing work of the school. The processes incorporate organizational, cultural, and professional learning strategies.

Thus, it can be seen that the origins of COSMIC C-B reside in three factors: a concern for contemporary school leaders’ lack of ability to ensure that the effort they devote to school improvement has commensurate payoff, the emergence over the past decade of a number of authoritative explanations of the meaning of school capacity building, and research into a large-scale school improvement initiative that achieved documented success in a range of student outcomes areas. COSMIC C-B is undoubtedly not the final word in school capacity building, but it extends previous educational thinking to a

new level of understanding. It does so primarily because its six dynamics provide practical and authoritative criteria that school leaders can use to ensure that their school improvement processes demonstrate the potential for sustained success.

THE SCHOOL RESEARCH ORIGINS OF COSMIC C-B

COSMIC C-B derives in part from research into a particular school improvement process, the IDEAS Project, which has been implemented in over 300 schools internationally. The major features of the IDEAS Project are described in Resource A. In summary, the features are

- a five-phase, three- to four-year revitalization process, supported by descriptive professional learning materials and ongoing assistance from the IDEAS Project consultancy team;
- a construction of parallel leadership roles and functions that recognizes metastrategic principalship and teacher leadership;
- an established framework for organizational alignment (the Research-Based Framework for Organizational Alignment) and survey instruments to ascertain a school's *index of coherence*; and
- a three-dimensional framework for expert pedagogical practice.

The IDEAS Project schools that participated in the research ($N = 22$) commenced their involvement as an “IDEAS cluster” in 2004. Nineteen of the schools completed the requirements of the project in the period 2004 to 2008 and were found to demonstrate important improvements in teacher esteem and morale, as well as student attitudes and engagement. A comprehensive three-phase research design was agreed on with state education officials in order to explore and explain these improvements.

THE PHASE A RESEARCH

The research problem that guided the Phase A research was as follows:

What changes, if any, in school outcomes can be attributed to the research schools' implementation of the IDEAS Project, 2004 to 2008?

As a result of the Phase A research, significant improvements were identified in 17 of the 19 schools in teacher morale, teachers' perceptions of the

effectiveness of their pedagogy, student engagement, and students' perceptions of the efficacy of their teachers' pedagogical strategies (see Resource B for details).

The following definition of “success” was then developed:

School success means the achievement of enhanced school outcomes in one or more agreed priority areas, based on documented evidence of those outcomes and teachers' confidence in their school's capacity to sustain its achievements into the future.

THE PHASE B RESEARCH

Analysis of five Phase A schools that had achieved documented success in an area of priority importance to the school (e.g., student literacy, student engagement) was then undertaken by the research team. The Phase B research problem was as follows:

What lessons for school improvement can be learned from the experiences of schools that have achieved enhanced outcomes in conjunction with implementation of the IDEAS Project, 2004 to 2008?

As a result of the case study research, the research team developed the COSMIC C-B model (Figure 1.1) and also the following definition of “capacity building”:

Capacity building is the intentional process of mobilizing a school's resources in order to enhance priority outcomes—and sustain those improved outcomes. It comprises six dynamics as outlined in Figure 1.1.

THE PHASE C RESEARCH

A follow-up research initiative was undertaken by the research team to explore the leadership constructs that underpinned the six capacity-building dynamics. The research problem that guided the Phase C research was the following:

What forms of principal and teacher leadership are associated with successful implementation of the six COSMIC C-B dynamics?

The Phase C research resulted in four key outcomes:

1. Parallel leadership grows in maturity and importance as school improvement unfolds successfully.
2. Middle managers (deputy principals, heads of department) are critical to the success of parallel leadership.
3. Existing professional conceptualizations of teacher leadership and principal leadership should be expanded to incorporate capacity-building functions.
4. The leadership functions of principals and teacher leaders vary in accordance with the demands of individual capacity-building dynamics.

To conclude, the Phase C research revealed that parallel leadership is more definitive in nature than has often been presumed. It connotes variations in roles and functions for teacher leaders, middle managers, and principals, as well as linkages to systemic agencies, that have not been taken into full account in leadership research and theory building in the past. But that deficiency can now be addressed. It can be addressed because the dynamics of successful school capacity building have been identified and their underpinning leadership dimensions are beginning to take clear shape.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

We began this chapter with a statement in which Michael Fullan indicated that school improvement without a capacity-building component is a virtual waste of time, effort, and resources. But what is capacity building, and how can it be integrated with a school improvement initiative in the interests of heightened school success?

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of our response to this question—the COSMIC C-B model.

COSMIC C-B is a unique educational model. It captures features of six particularly significant and reputable approaches to school capacity building that we have reviewed but differs from them in two key respects: its process orientation and its grounding in a “parallel” leadership approach.

With this brief overview of COSMIC C-B completed, we now proceed to explore each of the six capacity-building dynamics in detail.