

Systems Thinkers in Action - Michael Fullan's Hotseat Summary

"Even the most ambitious education reform initiatives amount to adjustments to the present system rather than a new and more fundamental way of working."

Michael Fullan's Booklet on 'Systems Thinkers in Action' formed the basis for discussion in this hotseat in the DfES Innovation Unit Community. It was well received and energetically debated. There were 493 hits and 33 contributions in seven days.

Key points raised were:

CONCEPTS FROM THE BOOKLET

- For 'adaptive challenge' and forward momentum, response beyond the 'current repertoire' is needed – it is easier to be in the plateau or comfort zone.
- The plateau represents an accomplishment but it is also a barrier - new ideas, goals and activities are necessary to reach the next step.
- Innovation is only possible with risk taking and original thinking
- Sustainability is not linear. It moves ahead (at best) cyclically - distributed leadership can burst through following times of flux like policy change.
- There are lots of natural forces keeping things the way they are – supporting inertia. The idea is to get more counter examples underway, both by individual initiative, and by new policy / resources that provide incentives for change. As you push you move beyond the plateau there comes a tipping point that makes it easier to go further.

WORKING TOGETHER

- Collaboration between school leaders, to look into best practice, needs to be keenly focussed on recognising 'improvement areas' within an organisation, and then focussing research on that area.
- We need to create shared values - get people engaged in the question *"what do you want and how could we start pursuing it"*. We should try to 'create with others' rather than getting them to join in our creation.
- We often hide behind issues of *context*, or become ruled by it, rather than seeing that we in fact create it.
- Networking is vital as it widens horizons by informing you about other people's contexts.
- The more that people engage in lateral exchanges such as SIP the more normal it becomes ... and the more likely the previous barriers (like real or perceived competition) recede in importance.
- Inherent complexity is being recognised in schools, and departments have learnt that cooperation and interdependence do not have to mean compromise and mediocrity, but can lead to excellence for the school as a whole. Leadership in schools is changing as a result of this - we need to make it happen more at a regional level.
- Competition has led to a plateau, we need to model collective action that goes deeper and gets results.

WORKFORCE CHANGE

- I think we all suffer from the speed of imposed change and have got into "hurry up" modes - we need to have the confidence to take time to consider what is really important.
- The remodelling agenda (not just the workload agreement or PPA time) gives us the opportunity to pursue adaptive change with all our staff and stakeholders. System thinkers in action exploit new policy.
- There is still a place for an independent advisory service in such a system, because, notoriously, blindness to weaknesses over time, (or complacency?) happen in even the best schools.
- The creativity and possibilities of creating new knowledge are what sustain me in my assistant head role.
- Taking ownership of the knowledge governing our own profession is a good start to moving beyond informed prescription and looking towards "alternative therapies".
- Our school became more people-centred as it took proper account of the many influences on its stakeholders, rather than focussing purely on the 'informed prescription'. We can really systematically improve relationships.
- Time to think is essential - if this kind of thinking is to be valued, it needs to be realistically resourced!
- The new agenda is still driven by the Government and advisers such as yourself - therefore the issue of ownership as a driver for universal engagement with improving one's own practice needs to be considered.
- Ownership is more an outcome of a *quality process* than a *precondition* - hence the emphasis on action.