System Coherence: A Framework for Change Leadership
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The Case for Coherence

In Change Forces: the Sequel, Michael Fullan eloquently describes how easy it is for educators to experience overload and fragmentation. "Policies get passed independent of each other; innovations are introduced before previous ones are adequately implemented, the sheer presence of problems and multiple unconnected solutions are overwhelming." Does this sound familiar? The personal consequence of this pattern is profound. Members of educational organizations often experience high levels of stress, disconnection and feelings of powerlessness.

Leaders need tools to help them deal with complex realities while bringing coherence to the efforts of their organizations. When leaders have these tools, they not only help improve organizational performance, they also help focus the organization's energy and sense of optimism. The System Coherence Framework for change leadership can serve as a useful tool for these purposes.

What Are The Components of The System Coherence Framework?

The System Coherence Framework consists of four dimensions of coherence vital to the successful stewardship of a change process over time. The four dimensions are:

1) **Directional Coherence --** identity, vision and strategy – who we are, where we are headed, and how we are going to get there;

2) **Contextual Coherence** -- connecting and aligning with the larger environment and with key external stakeholders;

3) **Relational Coherence --** shared ownership and creation of connections among people and across functions, initiatives and decision-making structures; and,

4) **Task Coherence --** action and accountability -- the right work, being done by the right people, at the right time.

How Was The System Coherence Framework Developed?

The framework evolved out of an in-depth study of a complex organizational change effort at the Rossier School of Education (RSOE) at the University of Southern California

(Barbeau and Aronson, 2006). We tracked what happened at RSOE over 2 ½ years, including "after the consultants left!" The story has a familiar ring for many leaders.

A Leadership Challenge

When the new dean, Karen Gallagher, arrived at the RSOE she found an organization characterized by a loose confederation of programs, with little connection or collaboration across departments. The culture was entrepreneurial, with little sense of a collective identity. The school had once enjoyed a positive reputation, but in recent years its position in the field had diminished considerably. A University Committee on Academic Review identified deep, serious problems confronting the school and recommended that the new dean develop a strategic plan to address them.

A Whole-System Approach

The dean decided that a large group, whole system approach was needed. A pivotal event in this process was a Future Search Conference (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000). The conference brought 100 internal and external stakeholders together to establish the academic core, or foundation, for the redesign of the school.

Two and a half years after the future search, the results were dramatic. The random collection of courses had been transformed into streamlined, coherent degree programs. Faculty had collaboratively developed core courses for the degree programs. Strides had been made in repositioning the school in the larger educational environment.

Given the degree of fragmentation that existed in the beginning of the change process and the results achieved in a relatively short period of time, our curiosity certainly was piqued. We wanted to find out how and why this had happened. We knew that future search was a powerful tool, and we were interested in understanding more of the story. We arranged a meeting with the dean.

In true consultant style, we designed some questions and had pens poised to get the essence of the story. We asked the dean to create a timeline showing the major steps in the change process. We figured this would take about thirty minutes. It actually took six hours. As consultants, we often understand change at the strategic level – about thirty minutes worth. As the dean with accountability for implementation, she had led and lived change at the ground level – about six hours worth! It was indeed humbling and enlightening.

As we studied what happened, we began to perceive a <u>pattern</u> of the elements that were sustaining momentum and continually moving the system toward results/transformation. Having identified this pattern, we called it the System Coherence Framework, which includes the four dimensions of coherence that are critical to systemic change over time.

Why Is The Framework Useful To Leaders?

Leadership attention to the directional, contextual, relational and task dimensions of coherence expands the capacity of an organization to align with its external environment while managing the internal tasks and the human elements of change. The framework focuses attention on results and on creating shared meaning, building collective ownership and engaging members of the system in meaningful ways.

System Coherence Framework

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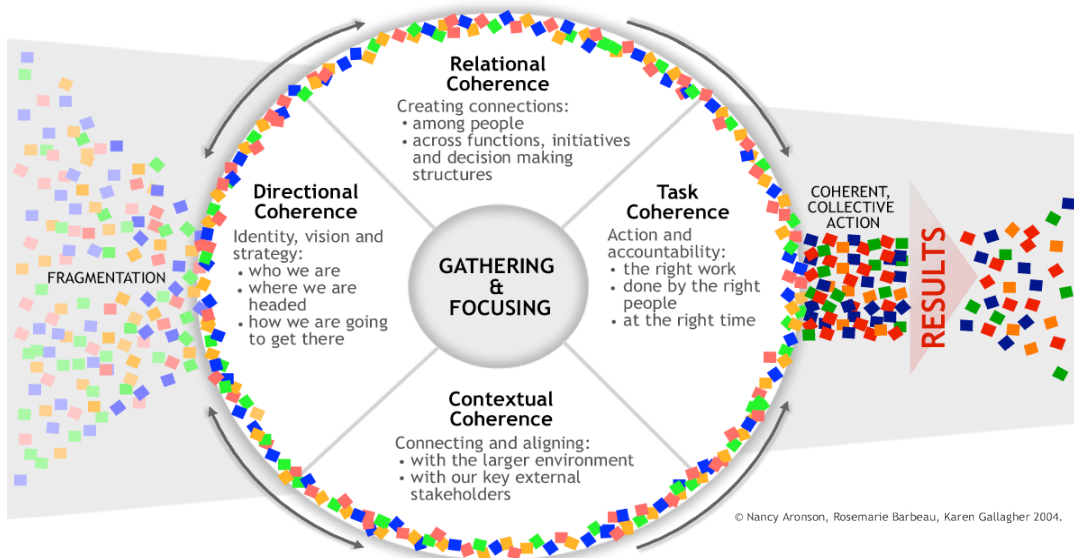
The above visual shows the high level of fragmentation that usually exists at the beginning of a new change process. It also can represent a snapshot of daily life in many organizations. People are primarily focused on day-to-day activities in their own functional areas. They are not necessarily aware of any new change efforts, what these efforts are intended to accomplish or what they need to do to support change. One critical role of leadership, then, is to gather and focus the attention of the organization on the "what" of the change effort -- in order to create directional coherence.

The arrows around the perimeter of the circle depict the interplay among directional, contextual and relational coherence. If directional coherence relates to the "what" of the

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change effort, relational coherence and contextual coherence inform "how" direction gets set through engagement with internal and external stakeholders. These three dimensions form the foundation for a change process that is feasible, well designed, and internally and externally relevant. Task coherence then builds the bridge to coordinated, collective action and to tangible results by developing internal clarity on the work to be done-- who will do it and in what time frame.

How is the System Coherence Framework Being Used?

The concept of "coherence" seems to resonate for many different types of organizational leaders. The System Coherence Framework helps define this concept for leaders and makes it actionable for them. Today, this framework is being used:

- *To design a large group, task focused meeting.* The framework has been turned into a practical listening and framing tool to help leaders cut through the complexity of a situation and figure out: who needs to get together, for what conversations, towards what outcome.

- *To sustain momentum after a large group event.* This framework is a useful adjunct when any of the contemporary large group methodologies are being used to launch a large-scale change initiative. It provides guidance for leaders and consultants as they build bridges between their specific large group event achieving the intended results of their change effort. The System Coherence Framework can help guide follow-up activities so that integrated ways of working, introduced during the change initiative, can be sustained.

- *To develop change leadership skills in individuals.* In one school district, people representing various levels of leadership responsibility -- a vertical slice -- came together for a four-day summer seminar and used the System Coherence Framework and associated tools to assess, organize, and map their individual initiatives. One participant called the System Coherence Framework "a GPS for leaders." In addition to helping individuals think strategically about their initiatives, the System Coherence Framework helped participants connect and coordinate their efforts on behalf of the system.

- *To identify course corrections or paths forward when a change effort is stuck or stalled.* For each dimension of the System Coherence Framework, we have identified

critical questions that identify what is happening in the system and where to intervene. Activities can then be designed to bring greater coherence to the system's efforts. A leader recognized that a major change effort in his organization was not having the desired results. He used the System Coherence Framework to diagnose which dimension of coherence needed attention. He saw that individual initiatives were not well aligned with the major change effort, and that they were not well coordinated with each other. Using the framework, he understood that his organization needed more directional and relational coherence. This information enabled him to intervene, helping the system refocus its attention and its energies.

- *As a framework to describe the leader's role in change.* The System Coherence Framework provides language to describe the leader's role as a steward of change. As a manager in one client system commented, "The words really help. I've experienced all the things described in the framework, but I've never had words for them before."

Closing Reflections

We call the System Coherence Framework a change *leadership* framework because we believe the stewardship of large-scale change is a leadership imperative. The System Coherence Framework equips leaders as they help their organizations collectively focus on what is important and plan for coordinated, effective action. For each leader, particular dimensions of the framework may come more easily and naturally. For example, in today's "ready, fire, aim" workplace, many leaders are skillful at getting tasks done. Others are masterful at relationships, at being attuned to the community and larger external environment, at being visionary. The challenge for leaders is to make sure all four dimensions are addressed throughout the change effort. This framework can help.

<div align="center">References</div>

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