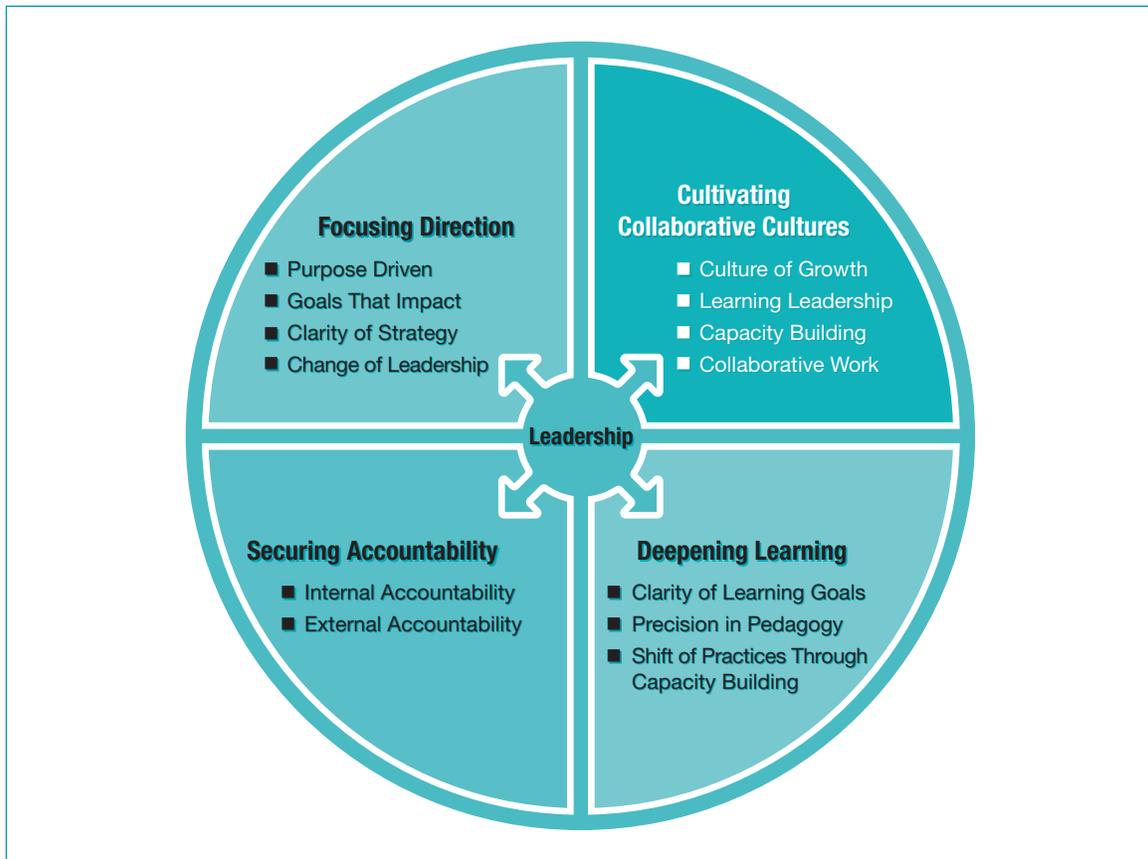




# GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

## COHERENCE MAKING

Take a few minutes to study the concept map or framework created by Fullan and Quinn (2016) to describe coherence making. A concept map or a framework creates ways of calling forth a coherent whole, so it can be shared with others.



*Coherence*, Fullan & Quinn, Corwin (2015)

As you look at the concept map, what parts of it make sense? What is perhaps not clear? What direct connections might you intuit to coherence making?

### Seeking a Definition for Coherence Making

Coherence making is the continuous process of seeking meaningful connections in your own mind and across groups. Coherence is a double-edged concept in that both the quality of the idea and the quality of the process are equally important. Indeed, it is lingering in the process that allows groups to dig deeper and find more connections. When teams learn to linger, they find that it opens up thoughtful responding and invites more voices into the conversation.

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The value of coherence for teaming is evidenced in the “actionable responses of teams.” Fullan and Quinn state, “When larger 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” (p. 1). They continue, “Coherence is what is in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” (p. 2). Below we interpret Fullan and Quinn’s framework for coherence making through our own practice-based lens and provide examples further deepening our own and the learning community’s knowledge. Our experiential knowledge allows us to go deeper and add some practical specificity to this framework. To review, Fullan and Quinn have identified four variables that support coherence making: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability.

### **Focusing Direction**

In our work we have found that “focusing learning in service of teaching” helps teams understand what is expected. Teaching and learning are concurrent behaviors, and too often the focus is on what teachers do, not on evidence of student learning. By focusing on learning, we push the focus to these key questions:

- What are my students learning as a result of my teaching?
- What are my students learning as a result of specific, targeted interventions?
- What are students learning as a result of collaboration with other teachers?

When teachers ask these questions, they take responsibility for their actions. They begin to learn how to seek individual and collective efficacy—the ability to articulate how we make a difference. Central to coherence making is each individual’s ability to articulate his/her insights and actions that make a difference.

For an example of how important this variable is, reread the introduction to this chapter about Green Valley Schools and think about the differences in learning between the three groups. (For a team reflection, have three different teachers read the text about Green Valley out loud. Ask the teachers to discuss what they are coming to understand.)

### **Cultivating Collaborative Cultures**

For our purposes we seek ways to “create collective understanding” in our teamwork. This focus on collective authentic learning is essential for helping teachers develop collective efficacy, which contributes to collaborative cultures. When we focus on collective understandings, we can ask teachers the following questions:

- What collective understandings have informed your teaching or student learning?
- How is the team able to capture dissenting ideas and use them to go deeper into the coherence making?
- In what ways can collective understandings contribute to other teams, such as grade levels, departments, or in other schools?

Effective group processes create coherent learning opportunities. The example below demonstrates how tools give groups the power to spontaneously organize for productive learning.

Dissatisfied with the climate in the sixth grade, the sixth grade teachers decided to explore ways to reframe their problem. Before leaving for the summer, they developed an “outcome map” (Costa & Garmston, 1993). (This tool is further outlined in the tools and strategies section at the end of this chapter.) First, the teachers described the existing state. The problem could be summed up as too many students requiring monitoring for naughty behaviors. Next, they identified the desired state—students individually and collectively self-regulating. They began to identify ways they could foster more self-regulation. Through this process, the teachers agreed on some changes that they felt would better amplify the positive voices and drown “naughty” students. They realized that the more they tried to control as teachers, the worse the behavior had become. Instead they needed to build on the positive interactions and encourage students to monitor peer behavior. They also needed to seek out productive tasks for the so-called “naughty students.” They spent the rest of the time thinking about ways to accomplish this outcome. These teachers left for the summer with a coherent plan and feeling renewed and ready for the next school year. They also had the summertime to further reflect personally on what this would mean for their own teaching.

### **Deepening Learning**

When collective knowledge building and the seeking of coherence become the mission, teams behave differently. They ask more questions, they commit more readily, they learn from each other, and when the conditions are right, they speak their disagreements. They deepen their learning and build capacity. These teachers can also answer the following questions:

- How are you capturing your collective knowledge?
- How have the collective understandings of the group created new insights?

What processes have been useful in helping your team go deeper and find coherence? A caution, however, reminds that this expectation can create a trap. When we ask for evidence from this work, it can turn into lengthy reports or long reporting-out sessions. We have found that what works best is a loosely coupled process. For example, one principal realized that he had never read the lengthy collaboration notes required by his predecessor. So, he implemented a simple two-part framework: List the goals for collaboration and write a brief synopsis of the conclusions. Teachers appreciated the time saved, and now he knew what mattered to the teachers and engaged them in conversations about their work. He also discovered that when teachers set their own agendas based on what they wanted to talk about, they naturally went deeper, got more done, made more changes, and benefited from the collaborative time.

### **Securing accountability**

Accountability can be a real hot button in educational arenas. Standardized tests have dominated the collaborative agenda for far too long and in the end have not proven to be of much value when

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it comes to closing learning gaps. Actionable collaborative learning requires authentic accountability. The only authentic accountability we know is tangible student performance. When a teacher learns a new way of doing something, she needs to learn ways to be accountable to her students. Some teachers regularly query their students and seek advice from them about their teaching. Others collect their own data and have devised ways to collect evidence of success. Others invite peers into their classrooms to observe and give feedback. The sky is the limit, and yet, schools continue to tinker with benchmark assessments and multiple choice tests that at best are composites, not actual evidence of deep learning. Furthermore, these data points provide limited actionable evidence for teachers and, as a result, distract from authentic accountability. Here are some questions to encourage accountable thinking:

- How do you learn about your teaching from your students?
- What insights have you gained from students that have had an impact on your teaching?
- If you are a primary teacher, compare with other teachers the kinds of observable results that your peers use to measure learning.
- If you are teaching in fourth grade or above, what questions might you ask students to learn more about what works best for them?

A teacher, Ellie Bonner, whom we all came to love because we featured her in an ASCD training video about Cognitive Coaching, always asked her sixth graders for input at the end of any lengthy learning process. These sixth graders gave her invaluable feedback. These reflections also modeled for her students an important learning axiom: “To be good at anything you need to seek feedback, reflect on it, and make changes as needed.” What better lesson can we teach any of our students about learning?