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# Obama: Leading in a Culture of Change

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On Wednesday, January 27, 2010, President Obama delivered his *State of the Union Address*. We all remember his campaign, ‘change we can believe in.’ He refers to this slogan near the end of his speech, and he acknowledges that “there are many Americans who aren’t sure if they still believe we (the nation) can change --- or that I (Obama referring to himself) can deliver it (Obama, 2010).”

My purpose in this essay is not to debate political issues. It is not to evaluate Obama’s proposals as a means of accomplishing his ‘promise of change.’ Rather, my purpose is to analyze President Obama’s leadership in this culture of change through the lens of Michael Fullan’s book on leadership titled *Leading in a Culture of Change*.

Fullan recognizes that “these are exciting times – there is a lot going on (Fullan, 2001, p. viii).” He also affirms that “leadership is key to large-scale improvement yet must be radically different than it has been (Fullan, 2001, p. viii).” On at least three occasions in Obama’s *State of the Union Address*, he refers to the leadership under the Bush administration. He purports, “The problem is that’s what we did for eight years (Obama, 2010),” and, “We can’t do it again. Rather than fight the same tired battles that have dominated Washington for decades, it’s time to try something new (Obama, 2010).” Obama and Fullan make parallel points that, in order to lead for change, leadership must also change according to the changing needs of society.

Obama follows with arguably one of his most powerful lines all night, “We have to recognize that we face more than a deficit of dollars right now. We face a deficit of trust (Obama, 2010).” And shortly after, Obama declares “none of these reforms will even happen if we don’t also reform how we work with one another (Obama, 2010).” According to Fullan, “moral purpose is job one (Fullan, 2001, p.51)” and “relationships are job two (Fullan, 2001, p.51).” The recurring theme of trust that Obama speaks about falls under overarching idea of moral purpose, and working together is clearly an aspect of creating and maintaining relationships.

In this essay, I will expand on how particular themes and examples evident in the *State of the Union Address* compare and contrast with Fullan’s five themes in *Leading in a Culture of Change*, namely: moral purpose, understanding change, developing relationships, knowledge building, and coherence making.

**Moral Purpose**

“In the end, it’s our ideals, our values that built America (Obama, 2010).” Obama repeatedly proclaims that moral purpose, or in his words, ‘the shared aspirations’ of ‘what the American people hope,’ is above all, “the ability to give their children a better life (Obama, 2010).” He speaks about the spirit that America had throughout history’s struggles that allowed the nation to prevail because the people “chose to move forward as one nation, one people (Obama, 2010).” He insists that this spirit, the spirit of Americans as a whole, of ‘great decency and great strength,’ is what gives him hope about the future - to not give up or quit. He makes a statement about the government matching this decency and strength of its people. He promises that as President, he “wouldn’t just do what was popular – (he) would do what was necessary (Obama, 2010).”

Obama speaks to America’s ideals abroad. He states that America’s “destiny is connected to those beyond our shores. But we also do it because it is right…We must always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity (Obama, 2010).” His examples are not only of our actions abroad in Muslim communities, developing countries fighting HIV/AIDS, rebuilding Haiti, and so on; they are here in the U.S. such as ensuring women equal pay and securing borders. He verbalizes his own moral purpose, for example, after discussing his plan to work with Congress and the military to repeal the law denying gay Americans the right to serve their own country, when he adds, “It’s the right thing to do (Obama, 2010).”

Fullan asserts that “moral purpose is about both ends and means (Fullan, 2001, p.13).” He continues, “In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students (Fullan, 2001, p.13).” I’d be willing to bet that Fullan would also, then, agree that in government, an important end is the make a difference in the lives of the citizens. Fullan professes that the “means of getting to that end are also crucial. If you don’t treat others well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers (Fullan, 2001, p. 13)” and that, “to strive to improve the quality of how we live together is a moral purpose of the highest order (Fullan, 2001, p. 14).”

There are several examples in Obama’s *State of the Union Address* that demonstrate this moral purpose of the higher order, in addition to those abroad and national issues I already mentioned. For example, to instigate and stabilize the economy again, Obama touts his financial rescue program, the stimulus bill, the fact that he extended or increased unemployment benefits, cut taxes, and has a goal of doubling exports. He talks about “building the infrastructure of tomorrow (Obama, 2010)” not only by focusing on the skills and education – both school reform and financial literacy of all citizens, but by also encouraging innovation and believing that American WILL be the nation that leads the clean energy economy. He speaks about both the necessary precursors to clean energy in this nation and also outlines results of becoming the leader in clean energy. He asserts that “providing incentives for energy efficiency and clean energy are the right thing to do for our future (Obama, 2010).” This is a demonstration of how moral purpose is about both ends and means. And, although I have promised not to take a political stance, I do appreciate Obama’s clear train of argument – how he communicates how one proposal will affect another aspect of his plan and will lead to his overall goal of moral purpose.

Fullan writes, in the last few pages of his chapter on moral purpose that “to achieve moral purpose is to forge interaction – and even mutual purpose – across groups. Yet the problem is that people are not equal, and the privileged have a vested interest in the status quo as long as it works in their favor (Fullan, 2001, p.25).” This point resonates in Obama’s proposal of a fee on the biggest banks. He acknowledges that “Wall Street isn’t keen on the idea. But if these firms can afford to hand out big bonuses again, they can afford a modest fee to pay back the taxpayers who rescued them in their time of need. (Obama, 2010).” The mutual purpose, again, is the shared aspirations of the people (Obama’s followers): “a job that pays the bills; a chance to get ahead; most of all, the ability to give their children a better life (Obama, 2010).” Obama infers that this modest fee is an inevitable moral way of coming together as a nation to give back to the people a chance to get ahead.

**Understanding Change**

Fullan begins his chapter by emphasizing that “a culture of change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be positive without accompanying messiness (Fullan, 2001, p.31).” Obama capitalizes on the ‘messy’ state that nation was in when he took office by highlighting opportunities not only to stabilize it but also to expand it. I’ve highlighted several of these examples in the previous section, but I would like to expand on Obama’s view of change – again, that unforgettable buzzword during campaign.

President Obama tells his story of coming into his first day of office, being warned that he should put things on hold for awhile because it was too ambitious to address the larger challenges. His response was “How long should we wait? How long should America put its future on hold? (Obama, 2010)” He reflects that all the while that we ‘wait,’ other nations are “not standing still, ...aren’t playing for second place, …rebuilding their infrastructure, …making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs (Obama, 2010).” He realizes that these larger challenges are hindering the nation’s growth as whole, and cannot be put on hold. He acknowledges what Fullan refers to as the ‘implementation dip.’ Fullan defines this as “a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings (Fullan, 2001, p. 40).” We have to believe that spending money on research for cancer, education reform,and innovation in clean energy, for example, will later come back later two-fold, even more as solutions emerge to these larger problems. Obama remains confident in his decision to act now.

As I noted in the introduction, Obama stresses that now is the ‘time to try something new’. As Fullan writes in his section on ‘redefining resistance,’ “we are more likely to learn something from people who disagree with us than we are from people who agree (Fullan, 2001, p. 41),” Obama acknowledges Republicans who believe that by making fewer investments in the people, extending tax cuts that include the wealthy, etc., the deficit will go away. He doesn’t agree, but he addresses that fact that change is not easy, that he cannot do it alone, that “democracy in a nation of 300 million people can be noisy and messy and complicated. And when you try to do big things and make big changes, it stirs passions and controversy (Obama, 2010).”

This noisy, messy, complicated nation that Obama speaks about parallels the chaotic conditions that Fullan continually references in his book. Obama reacts to the chaos by staying true to his moral purpose and calling for the nation to work together as one nation and act now. He refers, like I said, at least three times to the Bush administration. He makes a point that we as Americans must change how we do things around here, that it’s not working. This is precisely what Fullan calls ‘reculturing.’ Reculturing, according to Fullan, “activates and deepens moral purpose through collaborative work cultures that respect differences and constantly build and test knowledge against measurable results – a culture within which one realizes that sometimes being off balance is a learning moment (Fullan, 2001, p.44).” Obama recognizes that in order to accomplish “what the American people hope – what they deserve – is for all of us, Democrats and Republicans, to work through our differences (Obama, 2010).” As Fullan concurs on the first page of his book, “For better or for worse, change arouses emotions, and when emotions intensify, leadership is key (Fullan, 2001, p. 1).”

**Relationships, Relationships, Relationships**

Working through differences strengthens relationships. Fullan notes that it’s not exactly the people that make the difference, “it is actually the relationships that make the difference (Fullan, 2001, p.51).” Yes, Obama talks continuously about ‘the people’ that make up America, but he also calls for them to move forward as ‘one people.’ Fullan writes about when relationships flourish, the people “become connected to something deeper – the desire to contribute to a larger purpose (Fullan, 2001, p.52), and Obama’s ‘something deeper’ is exactly that, his moral purpose.

Obama listens and relates to those that are frustrated. He shares personal stories such as the child writing him to ask when their parents can go back to work or the other child who sent his allowance asking the President to send it on to Haiti, the small business owner struggling that still shows hope, and the women who says she and her neighbors are ‘strong, resilient, and American.’ He shares his purpose of running for president was to diminish some of these historical anxieties that he has witnessed firsthand. He creates that bond with his followers and shares hope. And, as I spoke above, he also acknowledges those followers that are currently comfortable in today’s economy and are, therefore, less dependent on his proposed changes, by calling them to action to help ‘change the tone of our politics.’

More specifically, he reminds that nation that “none of these reforms will even happen if we don’t also reform how we work with one another (Obama, 2010).” He proclaims that he’s not naive, and then jokes that he “never thought that the mere fact of (his) election would usher in peace and harmony (Obama, 2010).” He acknowledges that there are philosophical and historical differences in opinions about national priorities, security, role of government as a whole, etc. but calls the American people to get rid of the ‘belief that if you lose, I win.’ He goes on to talk about how this sort of relationship is even more destructive to the trust in our government, and we must unite ourselves as one nation.

He speaks about his dedication to get all people, regardless of political affiliation to work together for our nation’s citizens as ‘we face big and difficult challenges.’ He jokes this time about meeting monthly with both Democratic and Republican leadership. He talks about how 9/11 unified the nation and surmises that we shouldn’t need such an event to bring us together. He speaks about working together and building relationships with other countries - that all play into his moral purpose. I will not reiterate the examples from the above section here. All in all, Obama shows effort in building relationships at all levels in order to move forward as one nation, one people.

**Knowledge Building**

It is fitting that knowledge building comes after the section on relationships because knowledge is people. Fullan writes that we need to “understand the role of knowledge in organizational performance and set up the corresponding mechanisms and practices that make knowledge sharing a cultural value (Fullan, 2001, p. 78).” Information is not valuable in any way until it takes on a social context.

Obama appreciates the social aspect of learning and building knowledge by strategizing a multi-level plan. As I stated that I appreciated before, it’d be easy to map out which initiatives lead to others and so on. (“It is less about strategy and more about strategizing (Fullan, 2001, p. 31).”) Obama makes financial literacy a priority. He states, “We need to make sure consumers and middle-class families have the information they have to make financial decisions.” He talks about investing in “the skills and education of our people” (Obama, 2010) and elaborates on some financial credits for families and students investing in furthering education. He quotes, “because in the United States of America, no one should go broke because they chose to go to college (Obama, 2010).” He supports innovation by funding research initiatives that support his moral purpose and are promising to the nation’s future.

**Coherence Making**

The last of Fullan’s themes in *Leading in a Culture of Change* is coherence making. Even in the very last sentence in the section above, one can note that: research initiatives, one form of knowledge building, depend on people, and people mean relationships, and the goal of these relationships is to work together sharing a moral purpose to bring about a particular change. I promise that sentence didn’t take much thought ☺; rather, it came naturally because the five themes are completely interrelated and interdependent.

Fullan writes about three features of coherence-making: lateral accountability, a sorting process embedded in the knowledge-creation and knowledge-sharing activities, and a shared commitment to selected ideas and paths of action (p. 118). Leading is a complicated journey, a cycle of reculturation that never ends. Obama alludes to lateral accountability when he makes such statements as, “Tonight, I’m calling on Congress to publish all earmark requests on a single Web site before there's a vote, so that the American people can see how their money is being spent (Obama, 2010).” In such a way, he will make it impossible for the money to be spent without being noticed by those that contribute and show interest.

On a large scale, Obama describes on multiple occasions during his address that what has been going on is not working and that it is not feeding into the nation’s overall purpose. This is an example of the sorting process Fullan describes in deciding whether or not one should retain an idea.

Last, the shared commitment is evident in Obama’s moral purpose. According to Fullan, “people stimulate, inspire, and motivate each other to contribute and implement best ideas, and best ideas mean greater overall coherence (Fullan, 2001, p.118).” Again, and for the last time, Obama emphasizes that “the aspirations that (the nation) holds are shared: a job that pays the bills; a chance to get ahead; most of all, the ability to give their children a better life (Obama, 2010).”

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I’d like to revisit the point I made in my introduction: Obama and Fullan make parallel points that, in order to lead for change, leadership must also change according to the changing needs of society. Although “leadership is required, it is not straightforward. We are living in chaotic conditions. Thus leaders must be able to operate under complex, uncertain circumstances (Fullan, 2001, p. ix).” Obama is one specific example of Fullan’s more general view of leadership, and as detailed above, there are several examples of each one of Fullan’s five themes evident in his 2010 *State of the Union Address.*

**References**

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Text: Obama’s State of the Union Address.* (2010). Retrieved February 20, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/us/politics/28obama.text.html>.

Sarah, you develop and support your ideas nicely. I can tell you are passionate about the parallel nature of the two, Obama and Fullan. Now, I want you to take the points you made as you analyzed Obama’s ideas as expressed in his address, and think about how they and the parallel points made by Fullan, connect to YOU, Sarah, the educational leader. Which aspects will serve you in creating your leadership pathway? Which points that you made will help you see below the surface and consider, perhaps, the perspectives of others?

A very nice (yet long) analysis.

Reflective Analysis grade: A