

The Original Six Secrets

The Big Decline

Turning the System on Its Head

The New Six Secrets

In Search of a Better Future

Systemness in Action

The Future

The Original Six Secrets

We can start with the secrets as originally identified, quoted directly below (Fullan, 2008). In Part 2 I will update them as they fit present circumstances in 2026.

1. Love your employees.

If you build your organization by focusing on your customers without making the same careful commitment to your employees, you won't succeed for long. And we have all seen the opposite: the organization that seems to run for the benefit of the employees, with the customer perceived as an intrusion. Neither will do. I will provide powerful evidence that investing in your employees in the right way can be enormously profitable. The key is in enabling employees to learn continuously and to find meaning in their work and in their relationship to coworkers and to the company as a whole. As we will see in this new edition (almost two decades later), this secret has become more important. The biggest motivator for many young people in job seeking is finding meaning and purpose in their work. (Note: I am using the term

employees metaphorically to include all members of the organization. Students and teachers are “employees” in this sense.)

2. Connect peers with purpose.

All large-scale reform in the public or private sector faces what I call the too tight–too loose dilemma. If you want large-scale reform, you had better focus and tighten the requirements; but if you go too far, people feel constrained, and rebel. At the same time, local people need to be empowered. But if you devolve power and resources to local entities—the “let a thousand flowers bloom” approach—you get uneven results. (A thousand flowers do not in fact bloom, and those that do are not perennial!) I will show, with plenty of concrete examples, that the solution to this dilemma can be helped from the top, but not directly. It comes from leaders who embed strategies that foster continuous and purposeful peer interaction. The social glue of simultaneously tight-loose systems will stick, not when rank-and-file workers fall in love with the hierarchy—those in charge at the top—but rather when they fall in love with their peers, and the nature of their work together. The job of leaders is to provide good direction while pursuing its implementation through purposeful peer interaction and learning in relation to results.

3. Capacity building prevails.

Capacity building entails leaders investing in the development of individual and collaborative efficacy of a whole group or system to accomplish significant improvements. In particular, capacity consists of new competencies, new resources (time, ideas, expertise), and new motivation. Many theories of action use fear and punitive accountability.

I will maintain that this gets at best short-term and fleeting results. Bullying backfires when it comes to complex change. The opposite of such approaches—non-judgmentalism—doesn't mean that you avoid identifying things as effective or ineffective. Rather it means that you do not do so pejoratively. Put another way, there are better ways to instill fear and motivation than through negative judgment—for example, by combining transparency and peer interaction. Pejorative judgments have their place, as when someone is abusive or engaged in criminal and fraudulent acts, but as motivators they need to be used sparingly. The main gains will come from the six secrets in concert, none of which contains blatant judgmentalism.

4. Learning is the work.

One of my Australian colleagues wrote a paper with the wonderful title “Professional Development: A Great Way to Avoid Change” (Cole, 2004). In other words, there is far too much going to workshops, taking short courses, and the like, and far too little learning while doing the work. Learning external to the job can represent a useful input, but if it is not in balance and in concert with learning in the setting in which you work, the learning will end up being superficial. I will present evidence that effective organizations see working and learning to work better as one and the same. Most real change occurs on the job or it doesn't occur at all.

5. Transparency rules.

By transparency I mean clear and continuous display of results, and direct access to practice (what is being done to get the results). Transparency can be abused, such as when

results are used punitively, but there is no way that continuous improvement can occur without continual transparency fueled by good data. When this secret is implemented in combination with the other five, the gains far outweigh the costs. Besides, transparency is here to stay in the flat world of the 21st century. When transparency is consistently evident, it can create an aura of “positive pressure”—pressure that is experienced as fair and reasonable, pressure that is actionable in that it points to solutions, and pressure that ultimately is inescapable.

6. Systems learn.

Systems can learn on a continuous basis. The synergistic result of the previous five secrets in action is tantamount to a system that learns from itself. Two dominant change forces are unleashed and constantly cultivated: knowledge and commitment. People learn new things all the time, and their sense of meaning and their motivation are continually stimulated and deepened. As we shall see, learning also means being humble in the face of complexity.

At that time—2008—I felt confident that we were on the right track. As it turned out there were hidden factors at work that have taken their toll. The original six secrets are no longer up to the challenge. In addition, we need powerful new understanding of the secrets for the next phase. Truth, for example, is hard to come by in 2026. Thus, we need to design change strategies in a way that participants find new insights. This is the focus of the rest of the book.