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Book Review: Wilson: The Human Side of Changing Education: How to Lead Change with Clarity, Conviction, and Courage

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Review

Change is a scary process for anyone involved, but school change can often seem impossible — leaving educational leaders zapped of their energy, guiding and directing an unmotivated staff. What energy they do have is spent trying to sustain little to no progress, only to have to shift focus on the next big thing and start all over again. Often, the focus of the change process is on the content of change rather than the people involved. However, it is a beautiful thing when leaders are making sure people understand themselves and others during the change process. This humanistic approach, a refreshing and realistic lens through which to view the change process, is precisely what Julie Wilson accomplishes with her practical guide in *The Human Side of Changing Education: How to Lead Change with Clarity, Conviction, and Courage*.

With the help of Wilson's practical framework, leaders learn to shift their focus and help themselves and others understand the learning process associated with change. This learning process allows educators to reframe change as a developmental task instead of viewing it as something that happens to them. Furthermore, for aspiring educational leaders, discussing the change process can be difficult, as it is hard to wrap one's head around the complexities of the process. Wilson's guide is an excellent resource to facilitate a rich discussion and prepare future leaders for what is to come.

The Human Side of Changing Education is organized into five chapters and each chapter is equipped with prompts for meaningful dialogue in our school systems. Wilson provides numerous opportunities for reflection and supports core concepts with visual figures and tables to enhance general understanding. Overall, this book provides the foundational skills and knowledge leaders can immediately put into action while experiencing personal and professional growth. The focus on personal growth is probably one of the most rewarding aspects of this book since leaders tend to focus more on those they are leading. The equal consideration of both the change facilitator and change follower sheds light on the importance of lifelong learning and how, to lead others through change, we must first understand our view of the change process.

The first chapter, entitled “What is Worth Learning? Your North Star,” sets the stage for understanding the change process by reevaluating what we learn and how we learn. Wilson discusses eight skills (self-directed learning, creativity and innovation, planning, adaptability, agility, strengths awareness and application, self-efficacy, global citizenship, relationship building, critical thinking, and problem-solving). Wilson deems these eight skills worthy of the human-centered change process with the caveat that, to move forward, we sometimes must visit the past to see what needs to be unlearned. This unlearning process is essential to success and supports the notion that thriving professionally begins with thriving personally — as human beings. Only after we acknowledge these worthy skills as necessary tools in our toolbox can we begin to dig deeper in establishing roots for sustainable change.

In Chapter 2, “How Do We Redesign an Existing System?” Wilson expands on her initial question of, “What’s worth learning?” to include a deeper reflection in the question, “How it is best learned?” Redesigning a system takes time, but to pave a path to a more flexible learning environment that supports worthy skills, cultural shifts must take place, which support the ideals of learning. To understand this concept, Wilson identifies several cultural shifts that must take place to move a system from a traditional model in the industrial era to a system that prepares students for an unknown future in a post-industrial era. Furthermore, to support the cultural shifts, Wilson explores three approaches to change, depending on what type of shift is required. In order to support sustainable change, the utilization of these approaches must be interchangeable.

Chapter 3, “Five Success Factors for Change,” highlights the training wheels necessary to support profound, sustainable change in identifying five critical factors for success. Wilson acknowledges that while all schools have unique factors that affect their ability to change, common elements elevate a system’s potential. Each factor is examined in detail and supported by real-world examples to give context, which provides a foundation for leadership strategies outlined in Chapter 4.

The fourth chapter, “Leading Your Organization Through Change: Strategies,” is the hands-on resource guide leaders need at their fingertips when working through meaningful change. Everything leading up to this chapter sets the foundation for applying the concepts discussed, and Wilson does a fantastic job in ensuring leaders are equipped with all the tools necessary for implementation. Not only does she provide a connection between the success factors outlined in Chapter 3, but she breaks down each strategy with a specified purpose, supports them with real-world examples, and identifies tangible resources for additional reference. Finally, to support the

application of strategies, she coaches leaders through practical exercises to test their abilities and reflect on the individual learning process.

The fifth and final chapter, “Leading Yourself Through Change,” brings the humanistic approach to change full circle, in which Wilson sets aside the idea that change must happen formally and calls for educators to examine their path of change. This journey, known as the *Hero’s Journey*, takes an individual from the known to the unknown and represents the core motivation for initiating systemic change. As Wilson states, “Change is messy” (p. 7); however, change begins with one’s desire to see a shift, and everyone, regardless of their position, can set out on their own *hero’s journey*.

Any educator, whether in a formal leadership position or not, would be remiss without this handy guide on their bookshelf. Even more so, faculty of formal leadership preparation programs would find their curriculum whole-heartedly enriched by Wilson’s approach to discussing and understanding the change process from a developmental lens. Changing anything in an educational system can seem like moving a mountain, especially when knowing that education systems are slow-moving in general. However, Wilson encourages educators to dig deep and reflect on the core components of the change process and reframe it with a humanistic lens. Once we understand that “the core of change is learning” (p. 3), we can then take the necessary steps to equip ourselves with tools for success.

References

Wilson, J. M. (2018). *The human side of changing education: How to lead change with clarity, conviction, and courage*. Corwin Press.