**The Challenges of Relationships, Relationships, Relationships**

Marjee Chmiel

George Mason University

# The Challenges of Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

# Thesis & Introduction

## Fullan (2000) uses case studies and exemplars from the business and education worlds to construct his model for leadership. In what follows, I will describe the personal best of a man named Dan Norton, an entrepreneur, partner, and creative director of a successful educational video game development company. Norton works in my field of interest (educational technology) and his position at the intersection of business and education align very nicely with the case studies provided by Fullan. In Norton’s personal best story, he shares his first experience of ever having to fire an employee. Norton’s story points at many of the arguments Fullan makes regarding the importance of relationships and emotional intelligence in a culture of change. Norton’s story demonstrates how individual relationships can sometimes be at odds with larger organizational relationships, and highlights the importance of emotional intelligence for leaders.

## Norton is an incredibly bright and talented man, but he was never keen on school. Incredibly curious and well read, Norton was failing out of high school before his parents put him into an alternative school. With their open approach to curriculum, the alternative school allowed Norton to succeed, encouraging him to apply to college. Despite being accepted to some of the top schools in the state, Norton dropped out, twice. Shortly after dropping out for the second time, Norton was in a serious accident leaving him homebound for two years. During that time, he taught himself computer-aided graphic design. He also played a lot of video games. When he recovered, he began to work for a university as a graphic designer. Here, he met several educational technology scholars interested in researching the potential educational benefits of video games. This concept sparked Norton in a way his formal education never did. Over the coming years, Norton began to explore the possibility of leveraging his passion for video games with his beliefs that there had to be a better way to engage students with learning. Norton’s company started as a team of three, working out of his rented living room-home office. From there, the partners managed to win a $1 million grant from the Kauffman Foundation to partner with National Geographic. This opportunity opened the door to numerous grants and partnerships with some of the biggest names in educational publishing and non-profits. His company, Filament Games, now employs nearly 30 fulltime individuals, including programmers, artists, user-interface designers, producers, project managers, and grant writers, not to mention several coveted, paid internships. Norton selected his most challenging task thus far as the leader of a successful organization as the “personal best” story he wanted to share. Fullan’s model has a lot to say regarding the issues Norton has faced as a leader in a creative industry, but in the end, Norton’s personal best case leaves me with a few questions for Fullan. To be sure, Fullan’s very book title points at Norton’s challenge: leading in a culture of change. In Norton’s case, his company has grown significantly every year they’ve been in business. That means new people are hired, new relationships are formed, positions get redefined, need for new skill sets arise, and offices are relocated. Filament Games went from a tiny shop no one thought would make it out of the living room to an award-winning and nationally recognized company. The young men who started with half of a dream are now on various advisory boards and are regularly turning down paid speaking engagements for lack of time. Change has been and continues to be a big part of Filament games at every level. As Fullan notes, “In a culture of change, emotions frequently run high” (Fullan 2001, p. 74). This is certainly true for the staff of Filament games. They recruit highly talented staff − many of whom turn down much higher salaries elsewhere for the opportunity to work at a place that will allow creative control and encourage professional development. To lead a team like that, Norton has found his emotional intelligence invaluable, and an important counter-balance to the leadership strengths of the other partners.

## Description of Method

## Norton and I met when we both worked at the university in 2003 and it was there that we became friends. We continued to collaborate on large, high profile projects even after we both left our respective positions. I contacted Norton and he agreed to be interviewed and audio recorded over the phone. I told Norton the purpose of the paper prior to our interview so that he had a few days to reflect on the topic. The interview was very open-ended and relatively informal, so I kept notes of time-stamps that I thought would be particularly valuable to return to for analysis. In particular, I was looking for elements in the interview that could be classified and categorized according to the headings of the Fullan model. I followed up with a member-check by asking Norton to review the description presented below and allowed him the opportunity to clarify any points I might have misunderstood or unintentionally misrepresented. In what follows, however, I will describe how Norton’s emotional intelligence led to one of his most difficult moments as a leader, and a moment he considers his personal best because he felt that it really tested his strength as a leader.

**Description of Personal Best Case**

As the creative director, Norton deals with the day-to-day work of the artists, games designers, and user-interface designers , programmers, as well as the clients at Filament Games. This is in opposition to his two other partners: one is the technical director who works in and advisory capacity with programmers in addition to doing numerous feasibility studies to keep the company competitive with various new platforms of technology distribution strategies, and the other being the executive officer who is primarily concerned with getting new clients and sources of revenue. Norton chuckles as he confesses learning that the staff call him and the executive officer , “mom and dad,” and a brief conversation is all it takes to reveal that Norton is certainly the “mom.” Compassionate and understanding, Norton is very concerned with relationships not only among staff and management, but between the staff members themselves and the staff and their own work. Norton takes no offense in the “mom” moniker. In his dealings with academics, CEOs, government officials, and educational administrators, he has identified a lack of traits such as empathy, self-regulation, self-awareness, social skills, and other components fundamental to emotional intelligence. Norton has seen first-hand the discontent and dysfunction this can breed among a staff, and for this reason, he is very reflective about developing those very skills to make him a more potent leader. I’ve never seen him stressed out or rattled, even though is very forthcoming about his challenges.

Upon this backdrop I tell the story of Norton and one particular employee. This is my attempt to retell the story from Norton’s perspective because this is a paper about his personal best. I did not get the other person’s account of what happened and cannot claim any sort of objectivity in the presentation below, as that is beyond the scope of the paper. My hope is to accurately capture Norton’s perspective on the situation.

It was Norton’s closeness with his employees, his “mom-ness” that led Norton to a disturbing discovery concerning Samantha (a pseudonym), an executive assistant: She was desperately unhappy with her position, and her unhappiness was affecting other office relationships. Samantha had a great personality and was very well liked by the staff and the management. That is to say, she was personally liked by them all. From a business standpoint, Samantha wasn’t organized or detail oriented. These skills were vital to her role as the executive assistant and while it was clear that she was having great difficulty carrying out her responsibilities, she continued to be well liked, even by “dad”. Nonetheless, Samantha’s mistakes were causing trouble for the management: Samantha would send convention supplies to the wrong city. She would triple-book the CEO. She would fail to notify the partners of important meetings. Sometimes, she would forward invoices to the wrong clients. Despite the fact that the management never confronted her about these matters, Samantha’s demeanor began to change. She became withdrawn and angry.

 Norton suspect that Samantha knew, on some level that she was in a situation where she could not succeed. As Fullan notes, people want to feel like they are part of an organization where they can be successful and contribute. Lacking this, Samantha’s frustration became noticeable and she began to take it out on the management. One example of this is that during open enrollment, she declined her health covers. She later told members of the staff that the management “wouldn’t allow” her to enroll for health benefits. A member of the staff confronted Norton about this directly, “Why won’t you guys let Samantha have health coverage?” the concerned employee asked. Concerned by te false rumors, Norton to had the first of what he calls the “I know you aren’t happy here” conversations. Regarding the health coverage rumor, Samantha admitted to be frustrated by what she perceived as her ineptitude and was looking for a way to make others as upset as she was feeling. Despite the conversation, other similar incidents occurred. Norton realized that not only was Samantha desperately unhappy in a job she wasn’t very good at, but she was also beginning to affect the morale of his typically happy office. He terminated her employment.

#  Norton regards this incident as a personal best because he said that despite the inherently difficult nature of the conversation, the talk went very well. He genuinely felt that Samantha was doing herself a disservice by staying at a job that stressed her out, frustrated her, and made her sick. He enjoyed speaking with her in depth about what he thought her strong qualities were, and why those were not being allowed to shine in the particular situation she was working in during her time at Filament. Because he prides himself on his ability to work so many different people and win over even the toughest client, he saw this conversation and further evidence of his ability to make anyone feel at ease at just about anything. “I always want people to get something great with every interaction they have with Filament Games, and this was no different. I started to see her as another client. She came, she gave us her valuable time, and I wanted to make sure she walked away with something important to her. I wanted to make sure she walked away knowing more about herself, her talents, and what she valued out of work life.” This required several aspects of emotional intelligence on his end as he really liked Samantha as a person and knew she was well liked by the staff. It required a good deal of self-regulation stress management, and empathy to have a constructive conversation with Samantha but he did so in a way that left her happier at the end of the conversation (where she got fired) than she had been for the years she worked there. To this end, Norton’s leadership was certainly good for his organization, but he maintains that it was good for Samantha’s professional development as well. He continues to do what he can to be supportive of her: Several months later, Samantha remains unemployed but busy. She invited Norton to see her dance at a “geek burlesque show.” In an effort to be supportive, Norton did purchase a ticket but to his wife’s satisfaction, declined to actually attend.

 The purpose of this research is to learn how the three participating districts resemble one another in their strategic decision making and how unique choices superintendents made shape differences in decision outcomes. Although some aspects of similarities and differences are revealed in previously published individual case studies (Brazer & Peters, 2007; Brazer & Ross, 2006; Rich & Brazer, 2007), bringing the three together in this article allows for more comprehensive comparison and contrast. Studying the kinds of similarities and differences revealed in these three cases helps to explain why merely involving multiple stakeholders in decision making does not necessarily lead to better decisions, greater commitment to implementation, or distributed leadership—although it could.

# Case Analysis

Norton and his organization wholly embrace Fullan’s emphasis on moral purpose in two ways: the first is their explicitly company mission to design deep, meaningful, constructivist opportunities for learning. Over the years they have honed their understanding to this moral purpose to better pay attention to issues of representation and inclusion in their game design. But their moral purpose applies to how the company is run as well. One of their greatest competitors for talent is the main stream video game industry, which offers much higher salaries that come with more demanding hours and are devoid of work-life balance. In this respect, the moral purpose is much more locally focused, but demonstrating that Filament’s value for the individual worker goes beyond the paycheck is part of the company’s sustained performance: components Fullan finds to be inextricable from one and another (2001).

While the moral purpose for Norton and his organization are central, the story of Norton’s personal best is a story about relationships. Norton takes his relationships with his employees very seriously and it was the threat to those relationships that made him ultimately decide that Samantha could no longer stay at Filament. Fullan gets at this in his examination of Lewin and Regine when they write that people want to be part of their organization; know the organization’s purpose, and be able to make a difference. From Norton’s interview, it is clear that while the organization may have thought they wanted Samantha, and while Samantha was willing to go along out of some desire to be part of an organization, she saw that she was not making difference; she didn’t feel as though she had a role in the organization’s purpose. In this respect, Norton’s shepherding of Samantha out of the company is at a fascinating case that calls to question Fullan’s limitations on where he thinks relationships end. In my reading of Fullan, he is clearly concerned with leadership tucked within the boundaries of an organization. For Norton, his personal best came through by taking someone outside of those boundaries, outside of the organization, where she could perhaps find greater professional fulfillment.

# Conclusion and Implications

## A high emotional intelligence has been invaluable for Norton as he leads his organization through constant growth and exciting change. He can attract and maintain talented workers because of his ability to be an empathetic leader and help his employees feel as though they have a voice and wield influence in an organization with a clear moral purpose. It was when those relationships were tested the most that Norton felt he saw his personal best come out. He had to table his feelings in order to do what he thought was best for Samantha and his company. In sharing his first (and so far only) experience of ever having to fire an employee, Norton’s story shed light on the importance and precariousness of maintaining relationships in a culture of change. His story also demonstrates an additional layer to Fullan’s model by showing us that sometimes individual relationships can sometimes be at odds with larger organizational relationships. The challenge for emotionally intelligent leaders is to figure out how to steer safely between the two.

# References

Fullan, M. (2001).*Leading in a Culture of Chang,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.