Savvy change leaders, according to Fullan (2010), not only acknowledge when improvement is needed, but they act on this information. They are proactive in building cultures where capacity building is the norm. Capacity building promotes an organisational learning environment which addresses knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for change to happen. This approach is underpinned by leadership which is honest about the nature of issues at hand and balanced by respect and empathy for both individuals and groups who will need to make the change. Fullan alerts us to the dangers of directing leadership energies to apportioning blame. He coins, the term ‘judgementalism’ to describe such unproductive leadership practices. In his view, judgementalism serves as a barrier to ‘moving’ people forward leaving people feeling discouraged and frustrated.

Fullan illustrates these concepts powerfully by drawing on the experience of well known celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver. Jamie Oliver was appalled at the cooked lunches provided for students in the borough of Greenwich in England. Outraged, he decided to make a difference. He was driven by a strong moral purpose which was to ensure that these students, whose bodies were still growing and developing, should be exposed to healthy, tasty, nutritious meals. In addition to this, he knew that this would have to be achieved on a budget. This was challenging on several levels, the first being that the students had become accustomed to diets which had a high fat and salt intake and were consequently resistant to experimenting with a broader range of food types. Secondly, The Head Dinner Ladies had historically been given the responsibility of preparing food by re-heating pre-packaged meals.

“...it is possible to know that something is terribly ineffective and still have empathy and respect for people who have not had the opportunity to develop the capacity to become effective.”

(Fullan, 2010, pp. 51)

Oliver started by targeting a school in Kidbrooke. He transformed the practices of the dinner ladies, by working closely with the head dinner lady, Nora. Working closely at this school became the test case for understanding existing food preparation procedures, limitations and most importantly was the platform for identifying the training necessary to equip Nora and her team to develop new techniques.

He then tested a range of recipes with a group of six students in the borough of Durham. This was complemented by the development of a ‘food theme’ week at the school involving the use of songs and dressing up. Over time, students were trying and enjoying the new meals. Before embarking on his venture of transforming the lunch meals at 60 schools in the borough of Greenwich, he conducted a final fact finding experiment. He gave one dinner lady, Leslie, the task of preparing a meal based on a straightforward recipe he had developed. His intention was simply to observe and see how the task would be managed. Following a recipe for lemon chicken proved to be a frustrating experience for Leslie, but an opportunity for Oliver to gain some important insights. In light of this experience he decided to rewrite his recipes and review the types of training that would be necessary. In terms of training, he adopted a strategic approach, targeting the head dinner ladies first. He understood the importance of mobilising them as the key agents of change.
He co-opted the support of Nora, the head dinner lady from the original pilot school. This was a critical move. She was perceived as a credible peer who had successfully managed the transition. Alongside this, he provided an intensive three-day training program for the dinner ladies. In order to do this, he obtained the services of the chefs from the military. This was instrumental in reinforcing Oliver’s position that it was possible to prepare nutritious meals on a limited budget.

Oliver understood that a three-day program would not in itself create sustained changes and he continued to trouble-shoot with the dinner ladies. He did not apportion blame but engaged in continuous learning conversations. These involved the use of feedback describing desired behaviours and outcomes. Fullan applauds the potent combination of capacity building and non-judgmentalism that Oliver engaged in.

It must be said that high levels of frustration were experienced by both Oliver and the dinner ladies at several points along the journey. Oliver despairs that the dinner ladies overcook the food; use too much oil; and worst of all, in his view, they don’t adopt basic culinary practices such as tasting the food they have prepared. The dinner ladies are incensed and complain about the intensity of the new work and some threaten to resign, saying: “I can’t do this. I can’t keep up. This is not my life; it is just my job. It is slave labor {sic}.” (Fullan, 2010, pp.50)

“…if you want to get movement from a critical mass of people, you can’t go around judging them. Judgment is a dish best served through the natural process of purposeful peer interaction, capacity building and daily work – focus and use of transparent data.” (Fullan, 2010, pp. 52)

Fullan recognises that non-judgementalism is not a disposition that all leaders possess and that some leaders need to become increasingly mindful of their interactions during a change process and learn to practice ways to ‘park judgementalism’. Furthermore Fullan contends that when this is done, improvement becomes embedded and accountabilities improve as individuals increasingly take responsibility for their work. He challenges us all to become ‘savvy leaders’ who encourage individuals to become collectively mobilised for enabling and sustaining improvement.