

# WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP CAPA

BY LINDA LAMBERT

**T**hroughout this hemisphere, conferences, seminars, and academies are hosting events on leadership capacity. The Internet lists dozens of online courses about leadership capacity. Google reports more than 3 million hits under the title “leadership capacity.”

What is really meant by leadership capacity? The term has been around for some time. What is my leadership capacity? What is the leadership capacity of individual teachers, our principal, our political figures? This personal usage, while central to school improvement, does not offer a framework or schema to sustain school improvement. Since the publication of *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools* (ASCD, 1998), educators use the term “leadership capacity” as an organizational concept meaning broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership that leads to

lasting school improvement.

First, let’s look closely at these terms.

- **Leadership** — and therefore the work of leadership as used within the definition of leadership capacity — means reciprocal, purposeful learning together in community. Reciprocity is essential to solving problems and working collaboratively. Purpose suggests values, focus, and momentum. Learning is mutually creating meaning and knowledge. Community is the essential environment for experiencing reciprocal, purposeful learning. These four ideas frame a definition of leadership in which all can see themselves reflected. It is the mirroring pool of a professional culture.

- **Broad-based participation** refers to who is at the table, whose voices are heard, and what patterns of participation exist. These patterns form the structure through which the work of the school or organization is done. Also, it is within these patterns

of participation (teams, cadres, learning communities, study groups) that individuals develop lasting and respectful relationships. To be effective, participation requires skillfulness.

- **Skillful participation** is the understanding, knowledge, and skills that participants either develop or bring to their engagement in purposeful learning. The work of leadership



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# ACTIVITY

## really mean?

involves developing skills in dialogue, inquiry, reflection, collaboration, facilitation, and conflict resolution. Leadership skills for adult learning parallel good teaching: A good leader is a good teacher who uses her knowledge and skills with colleagues.

By defining these terms and how they interact, we are able to understand schools' differing levels of ability to sustain improvement. Schools at varying stages of developing leadership capacity may be described as follows:

- Low leadership capacity schools

tend to be principal-dependent, lack a professional culture and are significantly unsuccessful with children. Only the principal, serving as a top-down manager, is referred to as the “leader” in the school. Teacher leadership is not a topic of conversation, let alone interest. Educators in such cultures deflect responsibility while preferring blame; they avoid focusing on teaching and learning while holding fast to archaic practices. While professional relationships may be congenial, they lack the challenge of collegiality. Tests and test scores may be considered the only valid measures of student success, and promising products and performances revealed by student

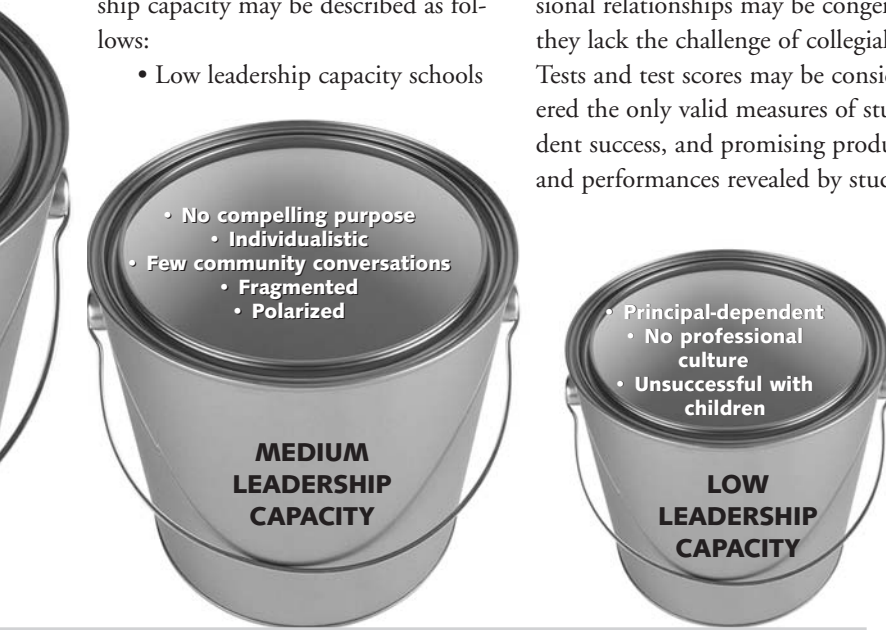
work are neglected. Absent an internal accountability system, these schools are subject to the whims, demands, and pressures of parents, districts, and states.

- Moderate leadership capacity schools lack a compelling purpose and focus, are governed by norms of individualism, hold few conversations among members of the whole community, and suffer from fragmentation and polarization.

Concerns regarding teachers who will “not buy in” may arise when a small group of more skilled educators form an isolated inner core of decision mak-

ers. Either scenario — dispersed and individual action or corralled and exclusive action by a few — will leave the school without a focused, professional culture. The first scenario calls for a concerted effort to create a shared sense of purpose. The second scenario requires using broad-based, inclusive strategies (e.g. norms, collaborative action research, dialogue, inquiry) to involve everyone in the work of leading the school. In a

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school with moderate leadership capacity, disaggregating student scores inevitably reveals a lack of success for its more vulnerable or challenged students.

- High leadership capacity schools are learning communities that amplify leadership for all, learning for all, success for all. These schools have developed a fabric of structures (e.g. teams, communities, study groups) and processes (reflection, inquiry, dialogue) that form a more lasting and buoyant web of interrelated actions.

The principal is only one of the leaders in the school community and models collaboration, listening, and engagement. Each participant shares the vision, understands how the school is moving toward the vision, and understands how he or she contributes to that journey. The quality of the school is a function of the quality of the conversations within the

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school. Student success is revealed by multiple measures of contribution, products and performances, including the vivid presence of student voice. High leadership capacity schools hold great promise, but no guarantees, of sustainability. In other words, schools that include everyone within collaborative patterns of participation are able to develop greater levels of leadership skillfulness. This achievement can move a school closer to lasting school improvement than would otherwise be possible.

### SIX CRITICAL FACTORS

If high leadership capacity schools are good, why are they not always able to sustain improvement? That question usually leads to issues of values, authority, dependence, and identity within schools and districts. A study of high leadership capacity schools (Lambert, 2004) found several critical factors must be addressed to

fully realize leadership capacity's promise:

**1. The school community's core values must focus its priorities.**

Democratization and equity must be foremost among these values and are interdependent. Democratization is the means through which staff experience and honor equity. Members of high leadership capacity schools accept responsibility for all students' learning and include all voices.

**2. As teacher leadership grows, principals must let go of some authority and responsibility.**

When principals lead for sustainability, teachers and principals become more alike than different. They share similar concerns, blend roles, and ask tough questions. They find leadership and credibility within each other through frequent conversations, shared goals, and, ultimately, collective responsibility.

**3. Educators must define themselves as learners, teachers, and leaders.**

How we define leadership determines who will participate. This broad perspective encompasses sharing and distributing leadership. Leadership becomes a form of learning — reciprocal, purposeful learning in community. To learn is to be able to lead. Like children, all adults can learn, all adults can lead.

**4. We must invest in each other's learning to create reciprocity.**

When principals engage teachers in problem solving rather than render them helpless through directives and granting or withholding permission, natural capacities for reciprocity come to life. Dependencies cause us to ask permission, to abdicate responsibilities, and to blame. Learning communities require reciprocity.

**5. The first tenet of leadership capacity is "broad-based participation." Schools must create the structures through which participation**

occurs. Structures for broad-based participation include teams, study groups, vertical communities, and action research teams. These are the settings in which people deepen relationships, alter their beliefs, and become more skillful in the work of leadership. Without these structures, reculturing is unlikely.

**6. Districts must negotiate the political landscape to provide professional time and development, a conceptual framework for improvement, and tailored succession practices (fitting the principal to the school).**

This work requires engaging the board and the community in conversations that build an understanding of lasting school improvement. Without this groundwork, schools continually fight the same battles for time, for professional development, and for selecting principals who can take a school from where it is to where it ought to be without losing momentum or denying the worthy experiences of teacher leaders.

These factors are particularly challenging because they challenge our beliefs and traditional conceptions of leadership, how we relate to each other and ourselves and how we distribute power and authority. We consistently have called on ordinary people to do extraordinary work, and many times we succeed. We can succeed more often if we understand and implement the tenets of leadership capacity for lasting school improvement. The notion of "lasting" or sustainable improvement may well represent today's major learning edge.

### REFERENCES

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