

# LIBERATING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

---

Pathways to  
Educational Wisdom

Linda Lambert  
Diane P. Zimmerman  
Mary E. Gardner

Foreword by Andy Hargreaves



# Contents

<b>Foreword: Leadership for Liberation</b>	<i>Andy Hargreaves</i>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Preface</b>		<b>xi</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>		<b>xv</b>
<b>1. Leadership Redesigned</b>		<b>1</b>
Oak Valley Middle School		1
Shifts in Leadership Thinking Change the World of Schooling		4
A Quarter Century of Leadership Evolution		5
A New Century of Leadership Dawns		9
Conclusion		19
<b>2. Fostering Leadership Capacity</b>		<b>21</b>
Leadership Capacity as an Organizational Concept		22
Images of Authority Distribution		27
Leadership Capacity as a Personal Construct		28
Interventions Designed to Foster Leadership Capacity		29
The Role of the Principal in Fostering Leadership Capacity		32
The Role of Teacher Leaders in Fostering Leadership Capacity		37
Student and Parent Leadership		38
Conclusion		40
<b>3. Designing Professional Learning Cultures</b>		<b>42</b>
Major Design Purposes for Professional Learning		42
New Professional Learning Designs		43
Professional Learning in High Leadership Capacity Organizations		50
Leadership Skills and Participation in High Leadership Capacity Organizations		54

Recognizing and Learning from Exemplary Programs	57
Conclusion	62
<b>4. Collaborative Dimensions of Leadership</b>	<b>64</b>
Leadership Communities	65
Four Collaborative Dimensions of Leadership Capacity	65
Building Protocols for Participation	68
Standards and Working Agreements Build Trust	68
Embedded Linguistics of Listening	73
Facilitating Conversational Flows	79
Benefits of Collective Efficacy	82
Conclusion	83
<b>5. Democratization of Knowledge</b>	<b>85</b>
What Is Knowledge?	86
An International Call for Transformation	87
Integrating Research and Practice	88
Generating Knowledge	92
Sustaining Knowledge	97
Beyond Explicit Knowledge	99
Conclusion	100
<b>6. Creating Capacity for Systems Change</b>	<b>102</b>
Shifting Conceptions of Change	103
Nested Adaptive Systems	103
Leadership Capacity and Systemic Change	106
Systemic Change in International Settings	114
Conclusion	121
<b>Pathways to Educational Wisdom: An Epilogue</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>147</b>

## Leadership Redesigned

Ask a thousand random individuals about one of the most persistent problems in schools, organizations, and countries today and you are likely to hear: leadership. Yet there is little understanding about this elusive concept. Many hold a belief that in times of distress people often look for someone to be in control, a directive leader who can tell them what to do. School boards seek out dominant superintendents who can “take charge”; schools are assigned principals to guide or push teachers into current reforms and fads. We challenge the contention that directive leadership is justified. Schools and organizations are rich with talented, thoughtful individuals who, when given the opportunity to work in open, engaging, and democratic cultures, consistently emerge as leaders and innovators. Adults learn; children learn. Creating these learning, leading schools and organizations is the mission of this book.

This chapter traces the transformative changes that have taken place in understandings of leadership during the past quarter century and offers a new definition of the concept. This provocative evolution has reframed the way leaders, leadership, and leadership capacity are defined—and therefore practiced—in leadership communities. How leadership is defined will determine how, when, and in what ways people participate. Leadership must offer a perspective designed to invite equitable participation, engage collaboration, and create sustainable organizations.

### OAK VALLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Our story begins at Oak Valley Middle School at 4:00 P.M. on a Wednesday afternoon. (Oak Valley Middle School is a fictitious name. The stories about the school in this text are drawn from a composite of schools directly observed by the authors.) The school, built in the early 1970s, is situated in a low-income, moderately transient community on the outskirts of a major midwestern town. The culture of the school was not unlike many others: The principal led, faculty members were occasionally consulted but primarily worked alone, teachers did not perceive themselves as leaders, and

mandated programs were administered by the district. Tensions arose over daily routines such as yard supervision and other extracurricular duties. Student performance and staff cohesion had been marginal until a new principal, a counselor, and two new teachers came to the school 3 years earlier. Now, this faculty is well steeped in norms of collaboration, dialogue, reflection, and inquiry. It is emboldened by a growing track record of successful cooperative action.

An English teacher, Joan, enters the library, early for the scheduled staff meeting, grabs a chair from one of the tables and sets it in the center of the room. Other teachers enter and follow her lead. Within a few minutes, 19 middle school teachers are formed into a circle. The principal has a critical time conflict and will be late.

“Just when I had the writing standards built into my curriculum, along comes a new list similar to the last, yet different. Much more complex. Listen to this. I am quoting from the Common Core State Standards information adopted by the district. ‘Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.’” Joan pauses.

Isaac, the music teacher, responds empathically. “You’re an experienced teacher, Joan. I haven’t seen you thrown like this before. Is there more?” Others are silent. Waiting.

“Thanks, Isaac,” says Joan. “It goes on, ‘. . . then pair it with all the standards on argumentative writing.’ I hardly know where to start.”

The math teacher chimes in: “We need to approach this as a team. The new Common Core has been adopted by the state. Correct?” The counselor nods.

“But there aren’t history standards yet, just nonfiction reading and writing standards. And math,” adds the veteran history teacher.

“No, no history standards yet. I think they’re coming,” says Wayne, a new core teacher. Others look at him expectantly. “We were working with these standards last year in my teacher certificate program. My observation is that they’re a bit linear and avoid some crucial areas of learning, but there are ways to work with them—and benefit from them.”

“I hope you’re right. That’s not how I see it right now. I’m weary from the cycle of new initiatives.” Colleen, another English teacher, pauses, takes a deep breath. “I’m feeling successful right now with our literacy program. . . . I guess I don’t want to upset the apple cart.”

“Very understandable,” says Aretha, the principal, as she enters the library, pulls up a chair, and joins the circle. “We share the familiar experience that imposed change can be frustrating,” she says, speaking directly to Colleen. Scanning the room, she prompts, “Fill me in.”

A veteran science teacher turns toward the principal. “We were discussing the new Common Core State Standards. So far we’ve heard several

concerns: They are complex, linear, and may even discourage intellectual curiosity. They lack content in the social sciences and sciences. Wayne says they hold promise. But, as Colleen noted, we don't want them to dismantle successful practice."

Feeling heard, Colleen takes a deep breath and slides back into her chair.

"Thanks," says Aretha. "That's helpful. Sorry I'm late." She pauses and glances around the room.

"My sister teaches in Ohio," begins John, a second-year English teacher. "She hasn't been able to teach creative writing for more than a year. Just the essay."

A new science teacher, Raul, listens carefully, glancing around the room. "My primary concern is that the standards could crowd out and devalue student experiences and prior knowledge. We are working to incorporate how students learn—how we learn, for that matter. We all need to explore, to make sense of what we're learning. We have to leave space for connecting the curriculum, for asking questions."

"Well said, Raul. That's exactly our aim here: to incorporate how we know students learn," says Aretha. "District plans are under way to tackle this work as a cluster of schools working together."

The technology teacher, George, waits for a moment of silence, then begins. "I am very moved by Raul's and Aretha's comments. We have to ask hard questions about these standards. We also need to work with them. Working across schools can be very productive."

"As Isaac suggested earlier, we'll approach this dilemma as the team we've become," says Joan. "After all, we have the capacity to face this challenge," she observes, noticeably more relaxed. Several teachers and the principal nod.

"So let's come up with a plan, a plan to bring our experiences together in preparation for the cross-school meetings," suggests the art teacher.

The faculty at Oak Valley School designed a set of approaches for working within the CCSS that had been adopted by the district. Initially, these steps included reviewing the standards together, watching a video interview of the writers of the standards to understand their perspectives and expectations, and meeting in vertical teams (6th–8th grades) to explore cross-discipline impact.

Members of the Oak Valley staff were provoked into reflection and action by challenging external demands. What processes led to a collaborative plan for working within the standards? What actions will the staff take? What distinguishes this school event from a multitude of others? The quality of the staff members' thinking, their skills, and their relationships was different from that at many other schools. The faculty were willing to surface assumptions, critique the standards, and seek to understand each person's viewpoint; they were ready to inquire into practice by posing

questions and designing research approaches. When tensions occurred, faculty members sought to acknowledge and clarify differing points of view. The principal was engaged but not the center of the process; each teacher took responsibility for participating in the collaboration. They were not powerless in the face of state policy, but were ready to take actionable steps, for they possessed a passion for discovery and a sense of collective agency.

Collective agency—the deep capacity to work together—had not always been the case at Oak Valley Middle School. Three years earlier, staff members began to reconceptualize leadership—how they could engage as co-leaders. By defining leadership broadly, they removed the concept from role and person and embedded it in the center of their collaborative community.

### **SHIFTS IN LEADERSHIP THINKING CHANGE THE WORLD OF SCHOOLING**

For the past 30 years, the authors of this book have worked in multiple leadership positions and participated in many forums designed to explicate essential leadership capabilities observed in successful schools like Oak Valley. Many writers and thinkers have struggled with what it means to be a good leader. An abundance of ideas sprang forth as state after state recognized the importance of leadership in schools and organizations, and grappled with their own training programs. A new wave of change was taking place. But where was it headed?

More than 25 years ago, Lambert was invited by Phil Schlechty to a conversation on leadership in Kentucky to define an “enlightened approach to leadership.” The question was simple: What is good leadership? Brainstorming by educators from across the country began. “Leadership is: good communication, being trustworthy, respecting others, being decisive. . . .” Such attributes and traits flew onto the charts. The group gained momentum, demonstrating a shared assurance that they were in pursuit of those magical ingredients that make for “good leaders,” “good leadership.” Surely, one and the same.

This Kentucky experience was a moment of epiphany into a new future for leadership. Narrow views of leadership were vigorously questioned, noting that “leader” and “leadership” typically were not distinguished in the minds of those who wrote about and applied these concepts. Leaders considered “exceptional and skillful,” virtually always individuals in formal positions of authority, were described as being vested with a set of leadership skills and personal traits that enabled them to make the school’s important decisions and lead others in their implementation—to influence,

pressure, and nudge toward school goals. After all, hadn't the great leaders of history—those whom history designated as having changed the direction of civilizations—possessed remarkable leadership attributes? Didn't these visionary characteristics entice and enchant followers?

During the past century, an array of writers and philosophers, including John Gardner, James MacGregor Burns, Warren Bennis, Peter Drucker, Michael Fullan, and Tom Sergiovanni, among others, described and reinforced the myth of the flawless single leader who is moral, courageous, bold, audacious, compassionate, and ethical. While these attributes are important, when they are assigned to a singular, designated leader with formal authority, the chances of others assuming leadership roles are diminished—one of the almost inevitable downfalls of charisma.

Traditional leadership models persist in many schools and celebrate the single enlightened leader. At the heart of many traditional views of leadership is the belief that there are only certain individuals who can lead.

Excessive centralization of authority, as applied in traditional leadership, constrains the maturation of a democratic citizenry, often seducing followers to believe that significant formal authority invested in the chosen leader can solve intractable problems. And what about the rest of us who have not been so anointed?

The uses of authority present a dangerous dilemma: a codependency, or dominance, sure to steer in unhelpful directions, away from a complex notion of leadership capable of more fully democratizing and building community capacities. Individuals, concepts, and institutions needed to be liberated from the hold placed on them by traditional notions of leadership and followership. As Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) claimed, "Leadership is too complex to be described as only the act of an individual or individuals; rather, it is a complex interplay of many interacting forces" (p. 314).

### A QUARTER CENTURY OF LEADERSHIP EVOLUTION

By the early 1990s, researchers began to question the fundamental assumptions about who could lead and who could learn. Societies entered the knowledge era, no longer satisfied with the industrial era in which bureaucratic hierarchies managed workers and followers toward production. This knowledge era demanded that each person possess greater knowledge and expertise (McKelvey, 2001); a sense of agency and commitment were vital. Writing from a biological perspective, King, Johnson, and Van Vugt (2009) pointed out that the history of human and other animal dominance that originally formed the basis of leadership was no longer suited for complex, knowledge societies.



The knowledge era drew from the sciences as well. In 1992, Wheatley composed the first edition of *Leadership and the New Sciences*, noting the parallels between the fluidity and unpredictability signaled by quantum physics, chaos theory, and the world of leadership. She noted that individuals created information in interaction with one another, and information spiraled into new meanings. The observation that the new sciences are integral to the understanding of leadership is also supported by research on the brain.

New understandings of the brain confirmed that learning could be understood as a constructivist process through which the learner imbued new ideas and experiences with meaning. The brain was a malleable, rather than a fixed, organ and learning could be undertaken at any age. As the brain grew, it formed relational maps, neural networks, creating an ever-more-complex organ capable of accessing new knowledge and engaging in multi-layered relationships.

Layered relationships and networked interactions provided the underlying framework for sharing leadership fundamental to democracy. Mary Parker Follett (1924), a pioneer in the field of organizational theory and behavior, insisted that a person should look beyond the appointed leader for guidance. Kocolowski (2010) summed up nearly 8 decades of organizational thinking in his observation: “Shared leadership is a relational, collaborative leadership process or phenomenon involving teams or groups that mutually influence one another and collectively share duties and responsibilities” (p. 24).

With the writing of *The Constructivist Leader* (Lambert et al., 1995, 2002), the authors presented concepts that promised another seismic shift in the leadership landscape. *Leader* and *leadership* were not used interchangeably, since leadership could be understood as an integral part of a larger ecology, not as an individual. Complex ecological systems recognized that interaction and interdependence among individuals created unique learning environments greater than the sum of their parts. Therefore, considering the two terms, *leader* and *leadership*, as interchangeable narrowed and limited the scope and dynamics of leadership.

Drawing from decades of observations and studies of the nature of leadership and learning, the authors of that text proposed a new idea: “leadership as reciprocal, purposeful learning and action in community” (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 29). Authority, expectations, and knowledge would no longer be vested in only a few formal leaders and their followers.

Constructivist leadership challenged traditional thinking regarding the concept of leadership. At that time, the gap between traditional leadership and this newer conception was dichotomized (see Figure 1.1). The movement from traditional to constructivist leadership shifted from top-down, directive leadership to horizontal, shared leadership.