Alma Harris & Linda Lambert

What is Leadership Capacity?

"As long as improvement is dependent on a single person or a few people or outside directions and forces, it will fail. Schools, and the people in them, have a propensity to depend too much on a strong head or other authority figures for direction and guidance."

NCSL National College for School Leadership

This short paper has been taken from the forthcoming book by Alma Harris and Linda Lambert. It is the introductory chapter of Building Leadership Capacity for School Improvement, in full, and is due to be published, by Open University Press, in January 2003. The book studies alternative, more distributed leadership models and explores the concept of leadership capacity.

"Good leaders foster good leadership at other levels. Leadership at other levels produces a steady stream of future leaders for the system as a whole" (Fullan, 2001: 10)

When Jennifer Fielding decided to apply for a job at Rookwood School, it was with good reason. With almost three years of teaching experience, she was beginning to feel a new sense of confidence. Not that she knew all there was to know about teaching, but she was ready to be more involved in work beyond the classroom. She found herself more concerned with children in other classrooms, families in the surrounding community and felt uncomfortable with the restrictions of her subject area.

This year, she had participated in several LEA courses, completed her masters degree and had been part of a National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Networked Learning Community project involving ten schools. There she had met a few teachers from Rookwood School. She was impressed. They talked with clear excitement about what was going on at Rookwood; they seemed to share an enthusiasm about the improvement work they were trying to accomplish. By mid-April, she had made her decision. When the head of English post was advertised, she applied and was successful.

In early September she was immersed in getting ready for and beginning to teach in her new job at Rookwood. She was given a school mentor, Gary, who had taught at the school for eight years. The orientation and support were extremely helpful. Gary shared lesson plans, answered questions, and introduced her to other teachers, and a few active parents. Yet in the corridors and staff room she detected a familiar tone: cynicism, misplaced humour, even anger about the school's future plans for improvement. "What happened?" Jennifer asked. "This isn't quite what I expected."

Gary replied, "You see, our head left."

This is not an unfamiliar story. In many schools throughout the country; momentum, energy, and growing commitment begin to form around some key improvement ideas and a change among key personnel or mandated directions derails the effort. Even the most committed teachers become discouraged and cynical as improvement efforts diminish when the head leaves. How far will teachers go on the conveyor belt of change only to be told to get off and start again?

Ask any number of strong and seemingly effective heads what happened in the school that they just left. Many will reluctantly admit that the failure of succession planning and over-reliance on their leadership meant the school was once again reverting to previous practices and disbanding from school improvement efforts. However, schools and people never entirely return to the way they were before. Each time they rebound from a failed or terminated effort, they are more deeply disappointed, more cynical, more wounded. Each time, improvement in that school becomes more difficult to achieve.

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Any number of responses could now occur at Rookwood School. A few key teachers could refuse to let their progress slip away and decide to take hold of the reins of reform and pull things back together. The new head could be strong and wise and able to work with the school to recapture some of its previous momentum. The school could choose to envelop itself in regrets and remorse and let go of cherished innovations. When Jennifer asked her powerful question, 'What happened?' several teachers at Rookwood School were enmeshed in a stage of self-pity. Those who had been tentative about the reforms were quick to point out how fragile they were; those who had been somewhat resistant felt vindicated. Hadn't they warned that the school was moving too fast, with too many changes? Accustomed to looking to someone with formal authority to lead the way, the teacher analysts failed to recognise that leadership lies within the school not just with the head. They were unable to see that sustained school improvement requires a school to build its own leadership capacity if it is to stay afloat, to assume internal responsibility for reform, and to maintain a momentum for self-renewal. But how is this achieved in practice? How is leadership capacity generated and sustained?

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Building leadership capacity, means broad-based, skillful involvement in the work of leadership. At least two critical conditions would have been necessary in order to establish enduring leadership capacity at Rookwood:

- There would need to be a significant number of skillful teacher leaders who understood the shared vision in the school, the full scope of the work underway, and are able to carry it out. These teachers ideally would be involved with the selection and induction of the new head
- There would need to be commitment to the central work of self-renewing schools. This work involves reflection, inquiry, conversations and focused action – professional behaviours that are an integral part of daily work.

These conditions speak to two critical dimensions that this book will explore in depth:

- breadth of involvement
- understandings and skillfulness of those involved.

Understandings and skillfulness involve more than the knowledge of an innovation (ie new teaching approaches, material, or arrangements). The skillfulness addressed here are those skills of leadership that allow other teachers to capture the imagination of their colleagues, enable them to negotiate real changes in their own schools and to tackle the inevitable conflicts that arise from such courageous undertakings. The book from which this chapter is taken will explore in detail the meaning and strategies involved in building leadership capacity for school improvement. Before focusing on the concept of 'leadership capacity' it is important to say a little more about what we mean by 'school improvement' and 'leadership'.

School improvement

For school improvement to occur, there has to be a commitment to changing 'the ways we do things around here' for the better. School improvement is essentially a process of changing school culture. To achieve this, teachers need to be committed to a process of change that involves them in examining and changing their own practice. Research has demonstrated the vital importance of teacher development in school level change. It has consistently shown that teacher development is inextricably linked to school development and is an essential part of school improvement. It has shown that within improving schools leadership is shared and distributed. Also, school improvement work has highlighted the importance of teacher collaboration. A school culture that promotes collegiality, trust, collaborative working relationships and that focuses upon teaching and learning is more likely to be self renewing and responsive to improvement efforts.

In addition, the evidence reinforces the importance of teacher enquiry and reflection. The analysis and application of research findings by teachers as part of their routine professional activity has been shown to have had a positive effect upon the quality of teaching and learning. There is evidence from highly successful school improvement projects to show that providing teachers with the opportunity to enquire into their practice leads to changed attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Moreover, that these changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours positively affect their classroom teaching and result in improved learning outcomes for pupils. School improvement depends upon sustaining a culture of opportunity for pupils and teachers. This depends upon teachers and pupils who trust one another and work together with a common purpose. It depends upon building a school community that is inclusive and values, above all, individual development and achievement.

In short, effective school leaders build the capacity for improvement within their schools. They generate the conditions and create the climate for improvement to be initiated and sustained. Effective leaders orchestrate rather than dictate improvement and create learning communities within their schools. The role of leadership in school improvement is primarily to act as a catalyst in creating a learning environment for both teachers and pupils. This necessarily involves building the capacity within the school for learning and improvement to take place. Schools that 'build the capacity' for implementing change are more likely to sustain improvement over time. In other words, they are able to generate both the readiness to change and the internal capacity to manage the change process.

At the core of successful school improvement is a form of contructivist leadership (Lambert et al, 1998). It is a form of leadership that is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. This approach to leadership creates the opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership. Leadership is about learning together.

But what is leadership?

Most of us probably think of a particular person and associated set of behaviours when we think of 'leadership'. When we use the word 'leadership', the next sentence often suggests what the headteacher did or did not do of importance. 'We have strong leadership in the school'. 'We have weak leadership in this school, and we are clearly not going to achieve our goals'. 'We need a change of leadership!' Each of these assertions refers to the headteacher. Leadership is generally considered to be synonymous with a person in a position of formal authority.

When we equate the powerful concept of 'leadership' with the behaviours of one person, we are limiting the achievement of broad-based participation on the part of a community or society. School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviours. It needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community.

When we equate 'leadership' with 'leader', we are immersed in 'trait theory': if only a leader possessed these certain traits, we would have good leadership. This tendency has caused those who might have rolled up their sleeves and pitched in to help to abstain from the work of leadership, thereby abdicating both responsibilities and their opportunities. While leaders do perform acts of leadership, a separation of the concepts can allow us to reconceptualise leadership itself.

Leadership, needs to speak to a group broader than the individual leader. This breadth can become more evident if we consider the connections or learning processes among individuals in a school community. This concept which Lambert (1998) calls 'leadership' is broader than the sum total of its 'leaders' for it also involves an energy flow or synergy generated by those who choose to lead. Sometimes we think of our reactions to an energised environment as being caught up in the excitement and stimulation of an idea or a movement. It is this wave of energy and purpose that engages and pulls others into the work of leadership. This is a group of 'leaders', including of course the head, engaged in improving a school.

The key notion in this definition of leadership is that leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations. It means generating ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership. Leadership is about learning together.

When the Rookwood School staff and community, working together, identified and clarified their values, beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions about what they wanted children to know and be able to do, an important next step was to discover which of these values and expectations were now being achieved.

Such a discovery required that the staff and community members inquire into their own practice. What information do we have? What information do we need? The problems to be solved rested in the discrepancies: is there a gap between our current practice and achievements and what we want children to be able to know and do?

These conversations clarified and framed the school's plans and actions for improvement. Further, these conversations also identified responsibilities and strategies for implementation and continuous feedback that the school community understood – not just the head or the head and one or two teachers. This is a difficult undertaking. Throughout this book, we will describe the leadership dispositions, understandings, and skills that are essential if schools are to tackle such elegant and demanding work.

Using the Rookwood example above, let's look more closely at the key reciprocal learning processes that engaged this school in the process of self-renewal. In chapters 3- 5, the case studies will describe some of the ways in which these processes are carried out in schools.

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Surface, clarify and define values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and experiences

Rookwood chose to use this process as a means to discover what they valued about pupils' learning (what pupils should know and be able to do). Such an effort requires many small and informal conversations as well as large-group work, in which teachers confront what they already believe, think and know about the school. Fundamentally, learning is about altering these personal schemas, and shared beliefs as new purposes are created and evolve.

Inquire into practice

School improvement necessitates inquiring into practice. It means examining or generating information (data) that could point to whether or not – and how well – pupils are learning. These data include pupil work and disaggregated performance and attendance data. Teachers must be involved in identifying and securing these data if they are to use what they find to generate priorities for improvement.

Construct meaning and knowledge

In order to improve a school must decide upon strategies that fit the particular issue or problem that the school currently faces. In this sense the school must adopt a differentiated approach to change that pays attention to the particular context of the school and the specific challenges it is facing. In this respect, school development and improvement needs to be 'custom built' to match the needs of each individual school. The limitations of the 'one size fits all' approach to improvement are well documented and well known.

Frame action and develop implementation plans

In order to sustain improvement there has to be a means of implementation planning and evaluating progress. The drive for improvement is important if momentum is not to be lost or energy dissipated. Early signs of success are important, as is the presence of feedback systems that remind teachers of the progress and gains being made.

These processes are part of a repertoire of continuous learning interactions. Teachers need to continually tie their work conversations to their shared purpose: 'Now, what is it that we are trying to do here?' 'Why is that?' Altering personal and collective understandings requires revisiting and reinterpreting ideas many times – in staff-rooms, informal small group dialogue, as well as departmental meetings.

For school improvement to take place organisational and individual learning must be embedded in a trusting environment in which relationships form a safety net of mutual support and challenge. Especially in the beginning, people are taking risks. Because these processes occur among participants in a school community it means that people are in relationship with one another. To be in authentic relationships with one another means that we provide long-term support for one another, challenging each other to improve and to question our current perceptions, and to learn together. Attention to relationships is therefore critical for, just as in the classroom, 'process is content' (Costa, et al, 1997).

As Michael Fullan noted 'not all change is school improvement', similarly, not all learning processes constitute leadership. Leadership processes must enable participants to engage in a shared sense of purpose – a purpose made real by the collaboration of committed adults. Leadership has direction, momentum, and it negotiates tough passages. It is this type of leadership we are seeking to 'build the capacity' to collectively generate purposeful action that allows a school community to keep moving in the face of external demands, imposed change or when an excellent teacher, a charismatic head, or a powerful parent leave.

Summary and key assumptions

- **Leadership is not trait theory**

  Leadership and leader are not the same. Leadership can mean (and does mean in this context) the reciprocal learning processes that enable participants to construct and negotiate meanings leading to a shared purpose of schooling.

- **Leadership is about learning that leads to constructive change**

  Learning is among participants and therefore occurs collectively. Learning has direction toward a shared purpose.

- **Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader**

  Leading is skilled and complicated work that can be learned by every member of the school community. Democracy clearly defines the rights of individuals to actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

- **Leading is a shared endeavor**

  This is the foundation for the democratisation of schools. School change is a collective endeavor; therefore, people do this most effectively in the presence of others. The learning journey must be shared; otherwise, shared purpose and action are never achieved.

- **Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority**

  Shared learning, purpose, action, and responsibility demand the realignment of power and authority. LEAs and heads need to explicitly release authority, and teachers need to learn how to enhance personal power and informal authority (for a fuller examination of this notion, see Lambert, Kent, et al, 1997, pp. 122-143).

These five assumptions form the conceptual framework for leadership capacity building for school improvement. Together, they advance the ideas that are essential if we are to develop sustainable, self-renewing and improving schools.

In the remaining chapters of the book the notion of capacity building will be discussed by examining schools with low, moderate, and high leadership capacity. The five critical features of schools with high leadership capacity are discussed and ways of building leadership capacity are outlined. In chapter 3 the role of the head in building leadership capacity is explored. In chapters 4-6, case studies of schools with differing capacity for improvement are described. The five critical features of schools with high leadership capacity will serve as the framework for discussion. Chapter 7 details how to get started on the path to building high leadership capacity. Chapter 8 outlines the role of the LEA, as an external agent, in capacity

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building and chapter 9 considers how professional development contributes to building leadership capacity.
Chapter 10 presents some questions and answers you might have while reading the book. In the Appendix, a range of support material is offered to provide readers with some of the tools needed to undertake this work.

Take some time to reflect upon the following questions:

- What does leadership practice currently look like in your school?
- How far is leadership shared with teachers, pupils and parents?
- To what extent is your school a learning community?
- How could leadership capacity be built in your school?

Contributors' notes

Alma Harris is Professor of School Leadership and Director of the 'Leadership, Policy and Improvement Unit' at the Institute of Education, University of Warwick. She has published extensively on the theme of leadership and school improvement and her latest books include: Harris et al (2003) Effective Leadership for School Improvement Routledge/ Falmer; Harris (2002) 'School Improvement: What's in it for Schools? Routledge/ Falmer. 'Leading the Improving Department', (2002) David Fulton Press. Her most recent research work has focused upon effective leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances and the relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement. She is currently working with the DfES, National College for School Leadership, General Teaching Council and NUT in a research and development capacity.

Linda Lambert is a Professor Emeritus and the founding Director of the Educational Leadership Center. Lambert has been a teacher, leader, principal, district and county professional development director, coordinator of a Principals' Center and Leadership Academy, and designer of four major restructuring programs. From 1989 to 1993 she worked in Egypt to set up a National Curriculum Center, and in Thailand and Mexico in leadership development. She is the author of several books including: Developing Sustainable Leadership Capacity in Schools and District, Building Leadership Capacity in Schools, The Constructivist Leader, and Who Will Save Our Schools: Teachers as Constructivist Leaders.

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