

❖ Preface ❖

Islands of hope existed in each decade yet even these remarkable islands drop below sea level when founders, principals or key teachers, leave. As long as any one individual is indispensable, sustainability is a distant dream.

—Linda Lambert
(2007, p. 311)

WHY THIS BOOK AND WHY NOW?

School leaders in today’s world often seem to be caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. School improvement is a case in point. If, on the one hand, principals and their co-leaders are *not* leading a comprehensive process of school improvement, they may be accused of “near enough is good enough” complacency by their system supervisors and also by their school boards and councils. But if they *are* leading such a process, they may harbor deep-seated doubts as to whether the immense effort that the process requires of them and their colleagues will have commensurate payoff.

According to leading international authorities, their doubts are justified. For even if their process of improvement is sound in theory, it may not be responsive to key systemic priorities or contextual values. Moreover, important infrastructural considerations that are required to see the improvement process through to a point of long-term embeddedness—such as retention of key staff, continuity in systemic priorities, provision of external supports, and leadership succession strategies—may not be in place, resulting in the jeopardizing, or even undoing, of their efforts.

It is for reasons such as these, says Linda Lambert in our opening quote, that the sustainability of hard-earned success remains for many schools a distant dream. While islands of educational hope may occasionally be built, they are of limited value if they drop below sea level whenever a new educational wave sweeps through.

It is in the context of this debilitating void in educational understanding and practice that this book has been written.

I became convinced in early 2008 that major developments in educational thinking during the preceding decade had resulted in the evolution of a very powerful new concept—“capacity building.” This concept appeared to me to be essential to the work of 21st-century school leaders because it goes beyond processes of improvement to emphasize the sustainability of what has been achieved through an improvement process. In so doing, it appeared to provide an overdue response to the expressed needs of school leaders for guidance about how to get past the “boom and bust” cycle of school improvement that has plagued them since the school improvement movement began about 30 years ago.

My confidence in the concept of capacity building as a critically important tool for 21st-century educational leaders derived in large part from my analysis of five highly credible school capacity-building models that had been developed internationally over the previous decade. This examination led me to believe that capacity building may very well represent the missing link between school improvement and sustained school success. If principles of capacity building are not acknowledged in a school’s improvement process, I deduced from my analysis, school improvement is conceptually, strategically, and practically incomplete.

But this book derives also from serious research with which I have had personal involvement. In mid-2008 I turned my attention to a major school improvement initiative—the IDEAS Project—with which I had close association (co-director) and which had enjoyed apparent success in 300-plus schools in a range of international contexts. The IDEAS Project was about to be evaluated in one large education district where it had been comprehensively implemented. Based on perceptual data, the 22 schools in question had shown important improvements in teacher morale and student engagement over a four-year period and were in the process of attempting to consolidate those improvements. What insights, I wondered, could the impending research reveal about sustainability as a feature of hard-earned school success? And what implications might ensue about the promising new concept of school capacity building?

The research project that was undertaken over the next six months resulted in the COSMIC C-B capacity-building model that provides the basis for this book. It was with a sense of deep satisfaction that I decided in early 2009 that answers to three core questions were within grasp:

- What is needed for school improvement to become sustainable school success?
- What are the constituent parts of capacity building as a process of building and sustaining school success?
- What forms of leadership are needed in order to ensure capacity building for sustainable school success?

And so my colleagues and I began to think about the possibility of this book.

So, Why This Book and Why Now?

In a nutshell, the answers to three questions of critical importance to school leaders are now available. But they have only just become available. This book represents a state-of-the-art description of what capacity building means and how to use a particular form of distributed leadership—“parallel leadership”—to achieve and sustain it. The book not only presumes to provide insights, processes, and skills that are essential to 21st-century school leadership and management, but it may well be the first major publication to illustrate how the roles of school leaders—principals and teacher leaders—vary and strengthen in relation to each other as a successful school improvement process evolves into a sustainable capacity-building process. It is a cutting-edge book that will help ensure that hard-earned improvements in school outcomes can be sustained, that professional effort toward school improvement can be justified—and that school leaders’ sanity can be preserved (or restored).

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK UNIQUE?

This book has four features that make it unique.

First, it describes in detail not just what capacity building means, but the constituent elements (we call them “dynamics”) that schools should engage in to achieve enhanced school success and to sustain that success. COSMIC C-B details the six process dynamics that school leaders can employ to ascertain the quality of their school improvement processes and, if necessary, adjust in the interests of achieving sustained school success. There exists no other educational resource, to my knowledge, that interprets and explains capacity building in this way. In essence, if the COSMIC C-B model is applied in a school’s improvement process, then enhancing school quality need not be the hit-and-miss business that it has been far too often in recent decades.

Second, this book develops the emerging concept of parallel leadership to a new level of understanding by demonstrating its distinct meanings at different stages of the capacity-building process. Almost without exception, school-based leadership has been regarded over the past 30 years as one-dimensional, with little or no allowance for the developmental phase of a school’s improvement process. This book not only elevates parallel leadership to a new level of understanding; it also outlines the various functions of

principals and teacher leadership that are pertinent to each of the six capacity-building dynamics. In this regard, this book can be said to break very important new ground.

Third, Chapters 2 through 7, which are devoted to the COSMIC C-B dynamics, contain an unconventional feature. That is, each chapter contains two case studies—one being a snapshot that illustrates the meaning of the respective dynamic in a school setting and the other being a description of the dynamic in the workings of another human service institution. Readers will find that the six noneducational case studies relate clearly to the education snapshots and to the theme of the chapter. School capacity building, it becomes apparent, is not dissimilar from capacity building in other sectors of community life.

Fourth, each chapter concludes with a simulation that has been developed specifically to enable school leaders to develop advanced understanding of, and expertise in working with, the six COSMIC C-B dynamics. By completing the full sequence of six simulations, school leaders can have confidence in their ability to apply comprehensive capacity-building criteria in school improvement processes that they may have in train and in leading school workshops relating to the various dynamics.

Each of these four features makes this book distinctive. Taken together, the four features make it unique, a “book with a real difference.” In summary, my associates and I undertake in this book to provide school leaders with three specific means of professional assistance:

- A research-based, capacity-building model—COSMIC C-B—that shows what must be done in a school if school outcomes are to be improved and those improved outcomes sustained
- New insights into a particular form of distributed leadership—parallel leadership—that has been demonstrated as fundamental to sustained school capacity building
- Professional learning experiences, in the way of original simulations, that can be experienced as a means of internalizing the essence of the six COSMIC C-B dynamics

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST PRODUCTIVE USE OF THIS BOOK

There are three ways that you might use this book productively. But where to start?

Before addressing this question, examine the COSMIC C-B diagram (Figure 1.1) with the following questions in mind:

1. Which of the six dynamics do you think you probably understand reasonably well already? Which do you probably understand least well?
2. Why do you think the dynamics expand and deepen as the C-B process unfolds?
3. Why do you think the arrows that link the dynamics, and that represent parallel leadership processes, expand as the six-dynamic C-B process unfolds?

As an experienced—or, equally important, aspirational—educational leader, you have no doubt drawn on a wealth of background understanding in answering the three questions. What you have undoubtedly seen for yourself is that you already have at least a cursory understanding of what this book is about. That being the case, you can proceed with confidence to determine how to use the book in any of three important ways.

The first use you might make of the book is needs based. For example, your need may be for increased understanding of how to create energy and excitement for what your school's improvement process might achieve. If that is the case, then Chapters 2 and 4—the first and third COSMIC C-B dynamics—would be your immediate reference point. You will find that the combination of case studies, relevant literature, leadership analyses, and simulation exercises relating to *committing to revitalization* and *seeking new heights* go a long way toward showing how you can enthuse your school and community for your personal goals and convictions.

But you may want more from this book. You may feel the need for understanding capacity-building as a holistic process and also for the leadership underpinnings of the six constituent C-B dynamics. If that is the case, then the Introduction and Chapter 1 provide a brief overview of school improvement and school capacity-building models, Chapters 2 through 7 provide detailed analyses of the six individual dynamics, and Chapter 8 provides a reflective summation of the COSMIC C-B model and of new insights into parallel leadership. The eight chapters, taken together, contain what we regard as the essential insights for 21st-century school leaders regarding holistic capacity building.

But you may want more than understanding. You may feel the need to become an expert practitioner in capacity building as a schoolwide developmental process. If that is the case, the simulations that are outlined in the final

section of each chapter are intended to serve your purposes. Having read the chapters, find several colleagues with needs similar to your own and work your way through the simulations. That task completed, not only will you have acquired important practice-based insights into the six dynamics, but you will also be ready to lead capacity building with school or cluster colleagues. Given the fundamental importance of capacity building as a 21st-century educational process, that is an exciting and important day to look forward to.

How to use this book? Decide which of these purposes, or combination of purposes, suits your needs and proceed from there.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book follows a straightforward organizational format.

The Introduction sets the scene by providing an up-to-date analysis of international developments in both school capacity building and distributed leadership. In Chapter 1, the COSMIC C-B model is introduced along with a description of the research design that was used to assess the IDEAS School Improvement Project, and that led to the creation of the COSMIC C-B model.

A uniform format is used to organize each of Chapters 2 through 7. That is, following a brief introduction, a real-life snapshot description of the workings of the dynamic is presented. The meaning of the dynamic is then explored, drawing on material from the snapshot as well as authoritative literature. This analysis is followed by examination of school leadership principles in relation to the dynamic, once again using a combination of material from the snapshot and recent authoritative literature. That done, a noneducation case study of the dynamic is presented, along with a series of reflective questions. To conclude the chapter, an original simulation activity is outlined, incorporating comprehensive guidelines for use by school leadership teams, school staffs, or cluster members.

Two resources are contained in the final section of the book. The first outlines the IDEAS Project core concepts. The second outlines the research design and methodology for the evaluation of the IDEAS Project. It was this examination that provided the stimulus for development of the COSMIC C-B model.

CONCLUSION

The past decade has posed immense challenges for educators. One challenge in particular may be regarded as standing above all others—the school

improvement movement, where so many doubts have been raised about sustainability that many committed principals and teacher leaders have been left wondering whether their energy-consuming efforts are justified.

The next decade should be much better. For while current challenges will no doubt continue—and new challenges will no doubt emerge—we finally have within our grasp a detailed understanding of school capacity building—what it means, its constituent parts, and its underpinning leadership principles. In the chapters that follow, we endeavor to bring the capacity-building process alive and to illuminate how you, as a “parallel” school leader, can use it to enhance the success of your school and sustain that success into the long-term future.

—*Frank Crowther*
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