This book is the result of three independent learning journeys that intersected some years ago at a point of shared passion: the urgent imperative for change within American schools, given the vital role that good education plays in the future well-being of our children and our nation. We joined forces to speak from our collective experience as leader-educators about a different approach to leadership—one that we believe is urgently needed in our schools and school communities. Experience has taught each of us that this kind of leadership—generative leadership—unleashes energy, intelligence, and creativity from within the entire school and so opens new avenues for action. A vibrant, positive culture emerges, one in which deep learning and high achievement become norms for everybody. Imagine going to a school like that!

On the surface, we may seem an unlikely trio—a principal, a former assistant superintendent, a retired astronaut—and our professional paths are certainly quite different. But we have some important things in common. We all love teaching and learning, and we care deeply about the state of education today. Each of us has served in a variety of leadership roles, including teacher, pilot, school principal, military officer, orchestra conductor, and CEO. In organizations large and small, we have faced complex challenges, fierce scrutiny, multitudes of stakeholders, and severe consequences. We have watched the leaders who preceded us and have been given the usual leadership development opportunities offered by our universities and professional organizations. More often than not, we found that these didn’t really help us make sense of or resolve the complex challenges...
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confronting us. How come? Being curious types, we wondered if there weren’t other ways to go about this. Maybe people confronting complex challenges in other realms of human endeavor had learned some lessons that could be imported or adapted to our world of education.

Propelled by these and other questions, each of us began our own journey of research and personal growth, largely in domains outside education. Every new bit of learning was tested in the crucible of our school or agency, our professional association or family. We discovered important knowledge and powerful principles in neurophysiology, social science, cognitive psychology, management consulting, and the natural and physical sciences. Through books, courses, and seminars, we enjoyed a rich discourse with theorists and practitioners who were seeking answers to the same questions on behalf of leaders in large corporations and national governments. Many of these provided gratifying confirmation of ideas and methods, even of the vocabulary that had already emerged through our own practice; all of them guided us to yet further inquiry.

Through all this exploration, we each arrived independently at some common conclusions. Leadership for these times—for today’s schools—must go beyond the old methods, anchored as they are in simplistic machinelike representations of our world, our workplaces, and ourselves. Effective leadership for the 21st century needs to be more multidimensional. It must focus on relationships and interdependencies within every organization and work from a mental model of organizations as systems rather than as structures. Leadership must set creativity and intelligence free, not just control time and materials. It must welcome the involvement of many and tap the intelligence of all. Leaders must pose powerful questions rather than just impose directives. Powerful questions generate energy, focus inquiry, reveal hidden assumptions, and so open new possibilities for action. We need leaders who are proud to be continual learners and who see their main job as leading the collective learning of their organization. Our times call for leaders who give up some control in order to get collaboration, creativity, and the collective intelligence surrounding them. We need generative leaders.
Although many of these insights came from studies of corporations, they are not particular to one certain kind of organization or another. They are rooted in our human nature and in principles common to all living systems. This makes them transferable: Fundamental insights demonstrated in one setting can be applied in other human social settings, from a family to a corporation, from a nation to a school.

We were saddened to find that there hasn’t been much transfer of these insights to school leadership. Thus arose the idea for a book tailored to active school leaders. We thought of it as a blend of basic primer and introductory field guide: a small, easy-to-read volume that gives school leaders a concise initial grounding in the foundational elements of generative leadership plus some basic tools to help them jump-start or expand their practice of it. That is the book you now hold in your hands.

This book is for anybody who touches the education of a child. From a generative perspective, this includes everybody in a school community—whether teacher, parent, relative, principal, janitor, stakeholder, or superintendent. All are individual elements of the living system of learning that our children depend on; each and every one shapes the system and affects all outcomes. We hope these pages help you see your school with new eyes and begin to work from that new view. We hope this book inspires you to start new conversations that transform how the people in your school come together to achieve deep learning for the entire school community.