I don’t know how you do it, nor why sometimes. But because you do, it makes a difference in what I do.

This has been one of the busiest weeks I have had since starting here three years ago. I wasn’t exactly the model of “eager teacher” arriving first in the a.m., but I stayed late three days and went on to something school-related at 7:00 every evening.

I was telling C. yesterday that the week was catching up to me; how I was ready to just do nothing over the break. Then I started joking with him that we’ve done quite a lot. We ought to just sit back for a year and rest and start working hard again next year.

Three years ago that would have been easy. Then you had to come here. Your example is quietly powerful. I am aware of how many things you are involved with and all of the things you do around here. You don’t dictate. You just lead. It is the greatest management style I have been exposed to.

It is a little gift that you give to me, daily. So Merry Christmas to me, from you. All I can try to do is mimic it to a fraction of a degree. I won’t succeed in emulating it 100 percent, but I’ll try.

—Holiday note from a teacher to a principal, 2003
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What if this note had been in your mailbox? Wouldn’t it have made your day? What kind of leadership moved one of your teachers to write so warmly about “your quiet example” and to be so grateful that “you just lead”?

We see in this letter vivid testimony to some of the essential qualities of a generative leader. This is a principal who taps and guides the creative energies of the entire school team. Her bearing and actions as a leader have fostered an environment of appreciation, respect, and personal reflection in the entire school. This leader recognizes that everybody in the school is being shaped in new ways by every experience, from the students learning in a classroom to the teachers and staff coming together to develop new curriculum or plan professional development. This awareness permeates every aspect of how she leads.

WHY GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP?

What are the benefits of this kind of leadership, specifically for our schools? This short holiday note highlights a very important one: the positive effects for everyone of working in a constructive and supportive management environment. This principal’s example, her very way of being, draws forth commitment and energy from the staff and sustains them through their tough or tired periods.

There are other benefits as well. Generative leaders are intent on bringing to light new possibilities for action and growth. They bring to their work a powerful blend of knowledge, personal mastery, high energy, creative thinking, and willingness to take action. These individual qualities, plus the skill at tapping the intelligence and creativity that resides in everybody around them, combine to allow generative leaders to fulfill this intention for their schools.

This principal has the responsibilities and authority typical of any principal and faces the same deliverables and array of challenges. The way she enacts them is usually quite different from that of a stereotypical authoritarian leader. More often than not, her approach is one of guiding rather than giving orders or directions. Her aim is to release the initiative of her staff and students rather than to dictate their actions or
control their time. They collaborate with her in setting goals and objectives and defining their approach to realizing them. The principal is open to allowing their individual knowledge and creativity to govern the final product. In other words, she allows control of the final details to reside with the team and to emerge from its collective work.

This is not to say that this principal handles every problem or decision she faces in a generative fashion. Her experience as a leader gives her sound judgment about which circumstances she should direct, in the fashion typical of command-and-control leadership modalities, and which ones she can guide in a generative fashion. For skilled leaders, this is not an “either-or” choice but a “both-and” option.

Leading in this way is sometimes likened to an improvisational dance: The starting point on the dance floor is clear, but how the dance will go and where it will end up depend completely on what the musician plays and how the dancer responds to that music. With true improvisation, neither the musician nor the dancer is in command. Neither has planned his or her actions in advance, and the precise outcome cannot be predicted ahead of time. Musician and dancer co-create the performance in real time, guided by shared knowledge, values, and intention.

Many of the problems facing today’s school leaders will clearly not yield to repetitive and more intensive command-and-control efforts. Generative leadership will give school leaders powerful new understanding of the dynamic systems they are guiding and help them tackle more effectively the complex challenges of their environment. A good place to begin building an understanding of generative leadership is with the concept of generativity itself. The context from which generativity emerged is also important to this understanding, and, for that, we need to make a brief detour into history.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

The dominant framework of our culture is one of machines, one in which we function as engineers, diagnosing what’s
wrong with a machine and fixing the part that isn’t working right. “What is that pinging noise? What parts do I need to oil, replace, or repair?” Engineering problems can be solved through careful observations of the physical system and logical, analytical reasoning that links the symptom we observe to one or more individual parts or components. Whether the problem involves a car engine, an air conditioner, or a spacecraft, it can be understood in this way—by breaking it down into its separate parts. The same model is reflected clearly in our approach to organizations. When an organization is not performing as desired, we look for flaws in its parts (the unit or division, function or process) and consider how to “fix” it (by reengineering, aligning, or reconfiguring the parts). Is this vocabulary common in your school or district?

This vocabulary of machines and engineering reflects the conceptual model that has dominated our society’s collective thinking and actions for centuries. The roots of this influence go back to the philosopher–scientists of the 17th century, especially to Sir Isaac Newton. His famous Principia, written in 1687, described a wonderful and orderly universe, made up of objects whose actions followed simple laws, rather like the mechanism of a grand mechanical clock. Newton’s physics gave people a powerful, predictive understanding of the world around them. For the first time, it seemed possible that mere mortals might be able to understand the workings of the universe and control their physical environment.

Though Newton warned against making too much of the machinelike orderliness of his universe, the clockwork image was irresistibly simple and powerful. Over the next three centuries, it permeated Western science and culture, becoming the predominant metaphor or mental model by which we make sense of, talk about, and relate to both our physical and our social worlds. It shapes some of Western society’s most deeply embedded expectations of reality, and these expectations determine how our society engages with the world. As organizational development expert and author Meg Wheatley (1992) puts it, “For three centuries we’ve been planning, predicting and analyzing the world . . . we grew assured of the role of determinism and prediction. We absorbed expectations of regularity into our very beings. And we organized work and knowledge based on our beliefs about this predictable universe” (p. 26).
Unfortunately, many countries and cultures are employing a late twentieth-century political process in an attempt to perfect an early twentieth-century model of schools, based on seventeenth-century beliefs about how people learn, in order to prepare children for the twenty-first century. (Caine & Caine, 2001, p. iv)

Our schools were organized based on this universe, too. Today’s schools, designed to meet societal and labor needs of more than a century ago, borrowed directly from the machine-based organization model of factories. This heritage is clear in the hierarchical structure of authority, the division of knowledge into small units, and the dividing of the day into manageable blocks of time. Content strands, standards and benchmarks, Carnegie units and class schedules all reflect our desire for orderliness and the Newtonian presumptions of regularity and predictability in the universe.

**ATOMS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

Newton’s elegant model of an orderly, clockwork universe dominated scientific inquiry until the early 20th century. When scientists began to study the atom, however, it soon became clear that Sir Isaac’s laws were not universal after all. The motions observed inside the nucleus of the atom did not obey Newton’s laws of motion, which were hypothesized to be true everywhere and for all things. Other research turned up further problems. For example, physicists discovered that light behaved both like a wave and like a particle, and that it’s not possible to know both the precise position and the velocity of an electron: Only a probability of these can be measured. A new theory called quantum mechanics soon emerged to account for these non-Newtonian phenomena. The very names of some of quantum theory’s cornerstones—“Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle” and the “wave-particle duality,” for example—suggest how utterly different this new world of randomness and probability is from Sir Isaac’s neatly ordered clockwork universe.
As it went with atoms, so it soon came to be with organizations. Starting in the 1950s and accelerating in the late 1980s, theorists and consultants began to think there had to be a better way to tackle the tough and increasingly complex problems faced by human organizations. They probed deeply into just how the Newtonian model affected the behaviors and decisions of organizations and turned to fields such as systems dynamics, quantum mechanics, and complexity theory for new insight. Generativity is one of the important new concepts that came from this work. Let’s look more closely at some of the key events in its emergence and trace how it eventually began to transform ideas about leadership.

SOCIAL SCIENCE ROOTS

Psychologist Ken Gergen was one of the first people to use the word *generative* in print (Gergen, 1978), in a paper about social science theory. Gergen felt that most social science theory lacked “generative potency,” meaning “the capacity to challenge prevailing assumptions . . . and to offer fresh alternatives to contemporary patterns of conduct” (p. 1344). The reason for this, he believed, was that most social scientists had come to accept one overarching worldview—he called it a “meta-theory”—so deeply that the fundamental assumptions it rested on were no longer questioned or tested. The most critical of these presumptions were empiricism and reductionism: the ideas that only observable, material phenomena were meaningful and that complex behaviors can be understood by understanding in detail the smaller building blocks of which they were made. As a result, most of the research in the field consisted of amassing greater quantities of data, improving measurement precision, or searching for the organizing principles or computer methods that might transform the vast volumes of data into meaningful knowledge. Any proposed experiment that didn’t fit this mold would be rejected rather than celebrated as potentially transformative.

This bothered Gergen because of something the history of his field revealed. The important, innovative ideas of social
science in the prior century had not come about from ever-more precise analysis of what was already accepted as “known.” Instead, they were departures from the “common-sense assumptions” of the day. They were generative theories that threw the commonly shared assumptions into question, fostering sharp debate, incisive inquiry and conversation across the lines of academic disciplines. Ultimately, profound new understandings of the social world and new options for action emerged from this ferment. Gergen felt the field of social sciences would stagnate intellectually and lose its relevance to society without the creativity and new learning that generative theory could provide.

AN APPRECIATIVE EYE

This concept of generative theory had a profound influence on a young doctoral student at Ohio’s Case Western Reserve University in the mid-1980s (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). David Cooperrider was working on an organizational analysis of the Cleveland Clinic, a premier medical facility in Ohio. His assignment was to find out what was wrong with the human side of the organization. Setting out on a series of staff interviews to gather the data for this analysis he was surprised to find that a tremendous amount of positive cooperation, egalitarianism, and innovation existed within the clinic. Then he came across Gergen’s work on generative theory. This pointed him toward an entirely new way of thinking about the clinic and his task.

Cooperrider saw in Gergen’s generative theory an “anticipatory theory that has the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary life, to foster reconsideration of that which is taken for granted, and thereby furnish new alternatives for social action” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 16). Armed with this insight, and having secured his advisor’s blessing, he persuaded the clinic’s chairman to change the project from an assessment of what was wrong to a study of what was right, an assessment of the positive factors that contributed to the clinic’s highly effective functioning.

This approach led Cooperrider to formulate a new strategy for organizational change known as appreciative inquiry


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(Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987). Chapter 5 provides more information on the principles and methods of appreciative inquiry. For now, it’s enough to note its central argument, which is that deficit-based or problem-solving approaches to organizational development are not sufficient to the complex challenges confronting modern leaders.

Generative approaches

- Challenge commonsense assumptions
- Raise fundamental questions
- Foster reconsideration of that which is taken for granted
- Furnish new alternatives for action and new prospects for the future

LESSONS FROM SCIENCE

Cooperrider was neither the first nor the only researcher to find powerful insights about organizations in fields outside business and management. Meg Wheatley (1992), quoted previously, studied advances in the physical sciences, looking for new insights to give managers and leaders. She describes her learning journey through fields such as quantum physics, biology and ecology, complexity and chaos in *Leadership and the New Science*, one of the seminal books of this time.

Peter Senge, an engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is another noteworthy researcher in this arena. Senge was part of a group that had been applying engineering insights to the study of organizations since the late 1950s. His research with corporations showed that the machine-oriented vocabulary used by people in many companies reflects a deeply rooted mental model that drives the behavior and actions of workers and leaders alike. In this model, the organization is a structure. When something is wrong (with the company’s products or employee turnover or profits), the solution is believed implicitly to lie in fixing the structure. In companies guided by these mental models, Senge also found that the primary approach to solving problems was reductionist, based on the presumption that solutions to complex problems
could always be found by breaking them down into simpler
elements that one could understand in great detail. The lead-
ers and managers Senge worked with considered the ideas of
organization-as-structure and reductionism to be factual,
commonsense statements about reality and so never ques-
tioned them deeply. Senge, however, recognized that they
were really just widely shared assumptions that were
engrained deeply within the organization (Senge, 1990).

Senge, Wheatley, and Cooperrider all recognized that
organizations were increasingly facing challenges more com-
plex than the company’s existing mental models (more on
these in Chapter 2) and management methods could handle.
Some of these challenges were external, perhaps in the form
of new competitors or accelerating business cycles, while oth-
ers came from the increasing complexity of the company
itself. This new class of challenges often had many factors
changing simultaneously and involved complex interactions
with stakeholders across the company and in the outside
world. It was not possible for any single person anywhere
within the organizational structure to know all the information
relevant to an effective solution or to be aware of all the inter-
actions that would make a solution either fail or succeed in
implementation. Many companies struggled in the face of
such challenges, and some failed. Others, however, managed
to solve the tough, complex problems they faced and over-
come the challenges. In simple terms, both Senge and
Wheatley concluded that companies holding rigidly to mecha-
nistic mental models and rigid leadership modes were the
ones that stumbled or failed. Companies that were able to
question their most deeply held assumptions and find ways to
tap the knowledge and creativity of all their associates were
the ones that survived and thrived.

The nature of the company’s
leadership was the key factor deter-
mining which path they took. Leaders
in the flexible, resilient, successful
companies did not see their organi-
ization as a structure or as a set of
boxes and lines on an organizational
chart. Instead, they saw it as a web
of interconnections and interdependencies linking myriad nodes
of energy (expertise and information) inside the company and

These leaders saw that
they were responding to
and living in a dynamic
ecosystem, not a
mechanical structure.
interacting continually with the world around it. Leading with this view is very different from attempting to control a machine. These leaders saw that they were responding to and living in a dynamic ecosystem, not a mechanical structure. Their role was not to control the assignments of time and energy to elements of activity, as in the outworn industrial model. It was, instead, to release and guide the initiative, talent, and energy within their organization. This alone could create the solutions and new possibilities the company would need to overcome the challenges of the day and have the resilience needed to respond to the utterly unpredictable challenges of the future.

DEFINING GENERATIVITY

Generativity is what let the company leaders that Senge and Wheatley studied get their companies “unstuck” when they came up against the tough problems of their times. The leadership of these successful companies moved beyond the reductionist, hierarchical patterns of the past. As they fostered generativity throughout the organization, they found that finding solutions was no longer the exclusive domain of formal leaders, nor was merely following instructions from on high the role of associates. Instead, new approaches were co-created and carried out by many people throughout the system. Generative learning is the type of organizational learning that emphasizes systemic thinking, a willingness to question the supposed limits of an issue, to think creatively outside the assumed constraints and continuous experimentation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003).

If you do an Internet search, you’ll find the words generativity and generative cropping up in a variety of circles, with different meanings in each one. For example, in the elder care arena, “generative care” describes an approach grounded in a strong sense of moral obligation that unites generations. In social and cognitive sciences, it connotes the generating of shared meaning within a group of people.

The essential meaning of generativity as we use it in this book closely follows the dictionary definition of the word generative:

*Generativity is the capacity or ability to create, produce, or give rise to new constructs, new possibilities.*
The challenges confronting school leaders today have much in common with those faced by the companies studied by Wheatley, Senge, and others: many stakeholders, competing priorities, scarce resources, external scrutiny, complex regulations, high expectations, and high stakes. Our experiences as leader–educators taught us that these common points outweigh the differences when it comes to judging whether the insights gained from the business sphere can be adapted for application to our schools. Unfortunately, it seems that few school leaders realize this or apply this thinking to their daily efforts. Like the struggling leaders Senge studied, most school leaders under high stress resort to comfortable and known methods, too often settling for doing just what's needed to survive each day as successfully as possible. Focusing on creativity and collaborating to generate new possibilities seems impossible under such duress.

Generative leadership is not just another management device or vocabulary set for leaders to add to their toolkit, however. It involves a fundamental shift in the mental models by which leaders and their followers perceive, respond to, and interact with the world around them, both the world inside their school and the external environment. In a real sense, then, generative leadership becomes a way of being rather than just a new set of techniques for doing the work of the leader. Some key traits of generative leaders are easily observed in words and actions:

- They see their school as a dynamic system and every individual as an integral element of that system, affecting its present behavior and future conditions.
- Their leadership is more collaborative than authoritarian and is intent on realizing the potential and possibilities inherent in their students, their staff, and the entire school.
- They recognize the pervasive influence of individual and collective mental models and constantly question the assumptions embedded in them.
- They see the future as very shapeable but neither precisely predictable nor controllable to the last detail.
- A focus on initiative, ideas, and innovation dominates their working style, with strong directive action reserved for moments that truly require it.
- A constructive spirit of collaboration in envisioning and achieving an outstanding future is genuinely present in every interaction, from meetings and presentations to individual encounters.
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Today’s school leaders must meet great demands and tackle complex challenges. We emphasize again that the old machine- or factory-based model of managing will not provide them with the full range of insights needed to meet these challenges and lead their schools effectively in difficult times. Generative leadership—leadership that understands the organization as a dynamic system possessing much more capacity than mechanistic mental models recognize—brings forward important new perspectives and capacities for school leaders. It gives them a new way to understand and engage with the complex environment within and around their school. It doesn’t dilute their authority, nor does it rule out directives or eliminate the management of projects by tasks and assignments. Think of it as a multiplier, drawing out the combined insight, creativity, and capacity of everyone in the school and enabling everybody to continue thinking and acting constructively even without the leader’s presence or direction. Most important, generative leadership furnishes new alternatives for action and so offers new prospects for our schools.

RECAP

Shared assumptions govern a group’s choices, behaviors, and sense of what is possible. These shared assumptions are usually invisible and unspoken, so they escape questioning and testing.

The machine-like Newtonian mental model prevalent in Western society has a strong effect on how we view organizations and tackle the problems confronting us.

Generativity is the capacity or ability to create, produce, or give rise to new constructs, new possibilities.

GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP

• Challenges the commonsense assumptions

• Raises fundamental questions

• Fosters reconsideration of that which is taken for granted

• Thinks creatively outside the supposed limits of a problem to identify new alternatives for action and new prospects for the future.
REFLECTIONS

- How are problems talked about in your school? What evidence do you have that machine-like metaphors are common? Do they affect the range of actions considered?

- Can you identify one or two of the shared assumptions in your school that are commonly taken as absolute fact but that might be worth testing? How would you test these?

- What blend of authoritarian and collaborative leadership is common in your school? How much does the blend you observe depend on circumstances and how much on the individual approach of specific leaders?

- When have you been vividly aware of the dynamic interactions that link a group of individuals into a system? How did you feel? What circumstances brought this about?

- What possible futures do you see for your school and/or district? How might you begin to think in a generative way about designing and implementing those futures?

- What is working for you as a leader? For your school? How can you generate more of what is working? Who needs to participate in that conversation?