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## The Nature of the Beast

### Setting the Scene

Adams School on Chicago's South Side is something of a success story. Serving students from homes well below the poverty line, Adams was in crisis in the late 1980s; only 16 percent of its students scored at or above national norms on standardized tests in reading. A decade later, administrators, teachers, and students at Adams had reason to celebrate. Students had made impressive gains on achievement tests, and attendance rates had improved considerably. Adams had developed a reputation as a success and as a place where teachers wanted to work.

As teachers and administrators at Adams tell the story, things began to change in 1988 when Brenda Williams took over the position of school principal. An assistant principal vividly recalled, "I could remember the very first day that she came in and we had a meeting . . . and it was a meeting that set forth her goal to come here and to make sure that academically we were growing . . . and she set before us the challenge that we have." Williams, an energetic African American woman, worked diligently during the 1990s to improve teaching and learning at Adams School. In local commentators', scholars', and teachers' telling of the Adams story, Williams gets much of the credit.

## **The Lure of Leaders in the “Heroics of Leadership” Genre**

The Adams story will ring true for consumers of education literature the world over. It is a familiar tale: a charismatic principal takes the helm in a failing school, setting new expectations for students and staff alike and establishing new organizational routines and structures in an effort to make over the school culture. Over time, the principal's actions contribute to greater teacher satisfaction, higher and shared expectations for student learning among staff, and improved student achievement. Evidence of success begins to accumulate as teachers report greater job satisfaction and higher expectations for student learning.

Deservedly, principals like Williams become the stars of the education world, and their heroic acts become blueprints for “successful” school leadership. The success of these heroes and heroines becomes the subject of academic publications, popular media accounts, education folklore, and even an occasional documentary or movie. In the “heroics of leadership” genre, or the “heroic leader paradigm” (Yukl, 1999, p. 292), charismatic leaders and their gallant acts are center stage; everyone and everything else are at best cast in minor, supporting roles. Even when others are cast in prominent roles, the focus is on the heroic actions of each individual, and by adding together their individual efforts, one gets an account of leadership. Letting go of the myth of individualism is difficult even when leadership tales venture beyond the single hero or heroine to acknowledge the part played by two or more supporting players.

## **A Distributed Perspective on Leadership: Essential Elements**

In this book, I develop a distributed perspective on leadership as an alternative to accounts that equate leadership with the gallant acts of one or more leaders in an organization. My question is this: What

does it mean to take a distributed perspective on school leadership? A distributed leadership perspective moves beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership. It is about more than accounting for all the leaders in a school and counting up their various actions to arrive at some more comprehensive account of leadership. Moving beyond the principal or head teacher to include other potential leaders is just the tip of the iceberg, from a distributed perspective.

A distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice (see Figure 1.1). This practice is framed in a very particular way, as a product of the joint interactions of school *leaders*, *followers*, and aspects of their *situation* such as tools and routines. This distributed view of leadership shifts focus from school principals like Brenda Williams and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice.

Distributed leadership means more than shared leadership. Too frequently, discussions of distributed leadership end prematurely with an acknowledgment that multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership: that there is a leader *plus* other leaders at work in the school. Though essential, this *leader-plus* aspect is not sufficient to



Figure 1.1. Leadership Practice from a Distributed Perspective.

capture the complexity of the practice of leadership. From a distributed perspective, it is the collective *interactions* among leaders, followers, and their situation that are paramount. The situation of leadership isn't just the context within which leadership practice unfolds; it is a defining element of leadership practice. Aspects of a situation—such as the Breakfast Club or the Five-Week Assessment routine at Adams School or a tool like student test data—don't simply affect or influence what school leaders do, enabling them to practice more or less effectively. These routines and tools are also produced by leadership practice. They mutually constitute leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers.

In a distributed perspective on leadership, three elements are essential:

- Leadership *practice* is the central and anchoring concern.
- Leadership practice is generated in the *interactions* of leaders, followers, and their situation; each element is essential for leadership practice.
- The *situation* both defines leadership practice and is defined through leadership practice.

From a distributed perspective, leadership involves mortals as well as heroes. It involves the many and not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes.

### Problems with the Heroics of Leadership

The heroics of leadership genre is problematic for four reasons. First, heroic epics typically equate school leadership with school principals and their valiant actions. While other leaders are sometimes featured in these accounts, they are usually cast in minor, supporting

roles. Vital though the school principal is, school leadership does not begin and end with the person in the principal's office.

Second, most accounts of school leadership pay scant attention to the *practice* of leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). They dwell mostly on people, structures, functions, routines, and roles. And they focus on the "what" rather than the "how" of leadership, short-changing how leadership gets done through the ordinary, everyday practices involved in leadership routines and functions. While knowing *what* leaders do is important, knowing *how* they do it is also essential in understanding the practice of leadership. For example, recent scholarship implies that school leaders cultivate collaborative culture among teachers (an organizational function that is thought to be critical for school improvement) by setting tasks that involve teachers' working together (Goldring and Rallis, 1993; Liberman, Falk, and Alexander, 1994; Louis, Marks, and Kruse, 1996). Understanding *how* leadership practice creates these tasks in the day-to-day work of schools is as important as understanding what strategies help address which functions.

Third, when leadership practice does make it onto the radar screen, it is depicted mostly in terms of the actions, great or otherwise, of one or more leaders. Concentrating on individual actions fails to capture the significance of interactions.

Fourth, in the heroic leadership tradition, leadership is defined chiefly in terms of its outcome. This is problematic because leadership can occur without evidence of its outcome.

### **Fixating on the Heroic Leader**

In many accounts of school leadership, the heroic leadership genre persists, with the school principal or head teacher as the protagonist, sometimes accompanied by assistant principals and others in formal leadership positions. Describing improvements at Adams School in this way is problematic because Brenda Williams did not turn the school around single-handedly. An array of other individuals—other

administrators, specialists, and classroom teachers—with tools and routines of various hues were also critical in Adams makeover.

Williams is no slouch; she deserves to be the central character in the story of Adams's transformation. Yet, as in any good epic, what she did and how she did it depended in good measure on many others, who, by virtue of their formal roles or informal responsibilities, helped lead improvement efforts. Williams acknowledged the crucial role of others when she said, "I just couldn't do it all." She explained that she had put in place a group of leaders to help her transform Adams School. She reported, for example, that hiring an assistant to handle student disciplinary matters was critical: "I couldn't get involved in that day-to-day discipline and focus in on the instruction program too." A teacher at Adams also points to the importance of others in leading the transformation, remarking, "Starting with Dr. Williams . . . we have a very good team here. If they weren't who they are, we wouldn't be who we are. If the administration had not set the tone, we would not have adopted this tone." It was a team of people, albeit with Williams at the helm, that was critical in Adams School's transformation. Other administrators and classroom teachers took pivotal roles in leading efforts to improve instruction, transform school culture, and change the expectations that staff had for students. Some of these individuals simply did what they were told when Williams delegated responsibilities to them. Others rose to the occasion afforded by a new organizational culture and new organizational arrangements at Adams and took on leadership responsibilities. While Williams figures prominently in any account of leadership at Adams, she doesn't figure alone. Acknowledging that leadership practice extends beyond the school principal in no way undermines the vital role of the principal in school leadership but instead shows that leadership is often a collective rather than individualistic endeavor.

This first problem with the heroic leadership genre is addressed relatively easily by attending to the work of multiple leaders. I refer to this strategy as a *leader-plus* approach.

At Adams, for example, over a ten-year period, Williams and her staff worked on various organizational functions: constructing an instructional vision, developing teacher knowledge, procuring resources, and building a professional community. Further, Williams and her staff also constructed and institutionalized at Adams a number of leadership routines and structures in order to execute key organizational functions. These routines and structures included the School Improvement Planning Process, the Breakfast Club, and the Five-Week Assessment process. The Breakfast Club routine, a monthly meeting of teachers designed by school leaders to provide opportunities for teacher professional development, evolved over time as an opportunity to build professional community among teachers. A leader-plus approach recognizes that such routines and structures play an integral role in leadership.

### **Inattention to Leadership Practice**

A few years ago, when I was describing leadership functions and arguing their importance for school improvement to a school principal, the principal retorted, "I know all that. Tell me how!" Understanding how leadership actually gets done in schools is imperative if research is to generate usable knowledge for school leaders. Describing the "what" is necessary but not sufficient to capture leadership practice.

Accounts of leadership often dwell exclusively on the structures and roles that schools should put in place and the leadership functions that need attention. The result is that day-to-day practice falls through the cracks. Studying the "how" as well as the "what" of leadership is essential.

### **An Incomplete Conception of Practice**

Leadership practice is often equated with the actions of individuals. Practice writ large is thought about mostly in terms of the actions of the individual doing the practice. Hence, good or not-so-good practice is attributed almost entirely to the knowledge and skill of

the individual practitioner. The elegance of the armoire is put down to the carpenter's skill and experience; the carpenter's tools rarely figure in the equation. But any skilled carpenter will tell you that the tools make a lot of difference in putting the armoire together. When it comes to practices of human improvement—teaching, leadership, psychotherapy—the situations are even more complex because practitioners often work in collectives and more often than not depend on their clients—students, followers, patients—to accomplish a task or implement some vision or goal. Hence, the practice of constructing and selling a vision for instructional improvement in a school cannot be understood by focusing solely on the actions of the school principal. For example, the practice of building and selling a new vision for instruction at Adams School had to do with more than the actions of Williams; this practice unfolded in the interactions among Williams and other leaders—assistant principals, literacy coordinators, teacher leaders—and in the interactions between leaders and followers. Further, the practice was enabled and constrained by an array of committees, routines, and tools, including student assessment instruments, regular staff get-togethers, and scheduling arrangements. These aspects of the situation often are ignored in attempts to account for leadership practice that fixate on the individual who is thought to be doing the practice. When tools and other aspects of the situation do figure in, they are seen as accessories to practice rather than essential, defining elements of it. Thinking about leadership in terms of interactions rather than actions offers a distinctly different perspective on leadership practice. Actions are still important, but they must be understood as part of interactions.

### **A Normative Definition of Leadership**

One can point to Williams as a case of leadership because there is evidence that what she did influenced teachers' motivation, knowledge, and behavior, which in turn contributed to improvement in student outcomes at Adams School. Defining leadership like this is



problematic because the existence of leadership is only acknowledged when there is evidence of its effects or effectiveness.

By way of illustration, consider Kosten School on Chicago's Northwest Side. At Kosten, a new principal and assistant principal worked to initiate routines designed to transform business as usual at the school, where teachers basically closed their doors and taught as they saw fit, with no oversight. The principal's and assistant principal's efforts to lead improvement in classroom instruction included regular reviews of teachers' grade books, monitoring of classroom instruction, and attention to following lesson plans. For some teachers, these efforts didn't influence their knowledge, motivation, or practice. But the motivation and practice of some teachers at Kosten were influenced by these collective endeavors, even if the effect was not universal. Even those teachers who openly resisted the improvement efforts understood them as leadership—practices designed to influence their work practices. Thus, relying on leadership outcomes—in particular, positive leadership outcomes—to infer the existence of leadership is problematic.

Defining leadership by relying on evidence of its outcomes or effects is not satisfactory because such definitions concentrate on a subset of what is considered to be leadership in organizations. Moreover, when leadership is defined chiefly in terms of its outcomes, efforts to study relationships between leadership and the effects of leadership end up as circular arguments. The distributed perspective addresses these shortcomings of the heroic leadership genre.

### **Prescription or Perspective?**

Distributed leadership is frequently talked about as a cure-all for schools, a way that leadership ought to be carried out. But a distributed perspective on leadership should first be just that—a perspective or lens for thinking about leadership before rushing to normative action. In this view, distributed leadership is not a blueprint for doing school leadership more effectively. It is a way to

generate insights into how leadership can be practiced more or less effectively.

A distributed perspective on leadership is best thought of as a framework for thinking about and analyzing leadership. It's a tool for helping us think about leadership in new and unfamiliar ways. It can be used as a frame to help researchers decide what to look at when they investigate leadership. A distributed perspective can be used as a diagnostic instrument that draws practitioners' and interventionists' attention to hidden dimensions of school leadership and helps practitioners approach their work in new ways. And it can be a way to acknowledge and perhaps even celebrate the many kinds of unglamorous and unheroic leadership that often go unnoticed in schools.

A distributed perspective on leadership is neither friend nor foe. It is not a prescription for better leadership but a description of how leadership already is. A distributed perspective might be a means to prescription, but it is not a prescription in itself.

### **What Is Leadership?**

Over time, leadership has been defined in numerous ways. Perspectives on leadership have focused on group processes, personality and its effects, the exercise of influence; leadership has been seen as an act or behavior, a form of persuasion, and a power relation (Bass, 1990, p. 11). Bass (1990) defines leadership as "the interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change—persons whose acts affect other people more than other people's acts affect them. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group" (pp. 19–20). Leadership thus is defined as a relationship of social influence.

One problem with definitions of this sort is that there is a tendency to define leadership in terms of its effectiveness or outcome; it is evident only when someone has been influenced, when someone's competency or motivation has been modified. However, as evidenced at Kosten School, teachers are not always influenced by the efforts of their principals and assistant principals to transform the status quo. Yet even teachers who ignore the guidance and motivation offered through leadership practice can see that these leadership practices are designed to influence their work. People can perceive activities as leadership even if they are not influenced by the activities. They do not rely on evidence of student learning to define the existence of teaching practice. Teaching practice sometimes fails to produce student learning; nonetheless it is still teaching.

Another problem with many definitions of leadership is that they focus on positive outcomes. However, leadership needn't necessarily involve outcomes or processes that are positive or beneficial. Leadership can influence people and organizations—indeed, entire societies—in directions that are not at all beneficial. Notorious figures such as Adolf Hitler practiced leadership effectively, but few would agree with the direction of his leadership. Teaching sometimes contributes to learning that most of us would not deem desirable—for example, when a dealer teaches teenagers how to traffic drugs. Nonetheless, it is still teaching. If leadership was determined only in terms of its outcomes and the desirability of such outcomes, why would one need to use qualifiers like *effective* and *ineffective* in discussing leadership?

Questions of effectiveness and direction of influence must be separated from leadership itself. *Leadership* refers to activities tied to the core work of the organization that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members or that are understood by organizational members as intended to influence their motivation,

knowledge, affect, or practices. Influence relationships that are not tied to the core work of the organization, such as one teacher influencing another to join Weight Watchers, would not count as leadership in this definition. Not all influence relations are ones of leadership; to denote leadership, the object of influence needs to be tied to the core work of the organization. The term *leadership* is reserved either for activities that administrators and teachers design to influence others or for activities that administrators, teachers, or students understand as influencing them, all in the service of the organization's core work. While leadership is frequently designed to initiate change, it can also be about preserving the status quo (Cuban, 1988) or even resisting change efforts.

### **Building a Framework for Seeing Things Anew**

A distributed perspective on leadership involves two aspects: the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect. While the leader-plus aspect is vital, it is insufficient on its own. The leadership practice aspect moves the focus from aggregating the actions of individual leaders to the interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation.

#### **The Leader-Plus Aspect**

A distributed perspective on leadership suggests that leadership doesn't reside in the principal's office any more than it does in the chief executive or the corner office of a multinational corporation. While corporate giants such as Bill Gates at Microsoft are often credited with building or turning around their companies, David Heenan and Warren Bennis show that these corporate giants rely on co-leaders—for instance, Steve Ballmer, in the case of Microsoft (Heenan and Bennis, 1999). Throughout history, from corporate boardrooms to Chairman Mao's China, those at the helm relied on partnerships with a trusted other to execute leadership; co-leadership was the *modus operandi* (Heenan and Bennis, 1999).

A distributed view of leadership also recognizes that leading schools requires multiple leaders. Occasionally, this may involve co-principals who share or divide up responsibility for running a school (Gronn, 2003; Grubb, Flessa, Tredway, and Stern, 2003). Moreover, from a distributed perspective, leadership is more than what individuals in formal leadership positions do. People in formal and informal roles take responsibility for leadership activities.

In addition to the principal, other potential school leaders include assistant principals, curriculum or subject specialists, and reading or Title 1 teachers. Individually or collectively, teachers take on leadership responsibilities, including mentoring peers and providing professional development. At Adams School, four teachers, all of whom have full-time teaching duties, take responsibility for many of the leadership tasks related to mathematics instruction.

Distribution of school leadership responsibilities across leaders does not arise solely through public decrees or private decisions of school administrators. Distributed leadership isn't just delegated leadership. Others, such as teachers and parents, take on leadership responsibility in schools on their own initiative. At one level, then, a distributed leadership perspective attempts to acknowledge and incorporate the work of all the individuals who have a hand in leadership practice. It presses us to examine who does what in the work of leadership. One strategy here might be to examine who is responsible for the functions that are thought to be essential for school improvement, including constructing and selling an instructional vision, building norms of trust and collaboration among staff, and supporting teacher development (Heller and Firestone, 1995).

The leader-plus perspective is an important component of a distributed framework, but it provides only part of what it means to take a distributed perspective on leadership. Adding in and adding up those responsible for leadership functions and activities in a school, while essential, is insufficient from a distributed perspective.

### The Leadership Practice Aspect

The distributed leadership framework developed in this book pushes one step further than the leader-plus approach: it focuses attention on leadership practice, not just on leadership roles and functions and those who take responsibility for them. Leadership practice that takes shape in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation is central (see Figure 1.1).

Arguing that an “action perspective sees the reality of management as a matter of actions,” Eccles and Nohria (1992, p. 13) encourage an approach to studying leadership that focuses on action rather than exclusively on structures, states, and designs. Defining leadership as activity allows for leadership from various positions in an organization (Heifetz, 1994) and puts the activity at the forefront, which is critical because “the strength of leadership as an influencing relation rests upon its effectiveness as activity” (Tucker, 1981, p. 25). In education, Heck and Hallinger (1999) argue that in-depth analysis of leadership practice is rare but essential if we are to make progress in understanding school leadership.

Most work that addresses leadership practice tends to equate it with the acts or actions of leaders. Frameworks for studying leadership practice are scarce, and they tend to privilege individual actions. Instead, from a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2001, 2004). It is stretched over individuals who have responsibility for leadership routines. Further, these three elements in interaction mutually constitute leadership practice. Hence, in Figure 1.1, leadership practice is represented by a triangle, with each angle representing one of the three essential elements. While a single triangle represents the interactions among leaders, followers, and situation at a particular moment in time, the performance of a leadership routine involves multiple interactions. The multiple triangles in Figure 1.1 represent these interactions and underscore the importance of time. The broken lines connecting the triangles denote that over

time (be it over the course of a twenty-minute faculty meeting or faculty meetings throughout a year), interactions can be more or less connected with one another.

The critical issue, then, is not whether leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed. In this way, a distributed perspective presses us to investigate how leadership practice is stretched over two or more leaders and to examine how followers and the situation mutually constitute this practice.

I consider how leadership is stretched over leaders and then look at followers and the situation. My account is based on a multiyear study of school leadership that was carried out by me and my colleagues at Northwestern University, beginning in 1999, and that involved fifteen K–5 and K–8 schools in the Chicago area (The Distributed Leadership Study). This theory-building study employed mixed methods, including ethnography, structured observations, structured and semistructured interviews, teacher and principal questionnaires, social network surveys, and videos of leadership activities in schools. We used these methods over five years to build an understanding of leadership as a distributed practice.

### ***Leaders and Leadership Practice***

In a distributed leadership perspective, leadership practice is stretched over multiple leaders. Many of the leadership activities that my colleagues and I have observed in the Distributed Leadership Study are co-enacted. Both their design or initiation and their execution over time depend on the practices of two or more leaders. The design and initiation of the Breakfast Club at Adams involved multiple leaders. Its execution over time involved some of these same leaders as well as others, especially teacher leaders. Supporting teacher development through regular in-house professional development meetings is a common leadership activity in many of the schools we studied. Professional development in literacy education, for example, typically involves at least the principal, a literacy coordinator, and one or more teacher leaders working together. Sometimes the leaders' roles differ; at other times, their

roles overlap. These leaders practice together, co-facilitating the professional development meetings. One leader steers the discussion, moderating input from participants, while another leader records participants' ideas. Another leader probes participants in an effort to clarify ideas and also works to build consensus in the group. Still another leader works on consensus building by restating core ideas and asking participants whether they agree while simultaneously reminding participants to focus on the big picture.

The leadership practice in these situations is stretched over all of the leaders that were described. Indeed, it might be best described as "in between" them.<sup>1</sup> The leadership practice takes form in the interactions among them. Leaders play off of and play into one another. What a leader does influences and in turn is influenced by other leaders. In this situation, leadership practice is a system of interacting practices that is more than the sum of the actions of individual leaders. A distributed perspective involves examining how leadership practice takes shape in the interactions among the practices of these leaders. Leadership is a system of practice made up of a collection of interacting component parts in relationships of interdependence in which the group has distinct properties over and above the individuals who make it up. I will return to these issues in Chapter Three.

Consider the performance of a dance such as a two-step. While the individual actions of partner 1 and partner 2 are essential, the performance of the two-step takes place in the interactions of the partners. Hence, the practice of the two-step is *in between* the two partners. An account of the actions of each partner fails to capture the practice; it is essential to analyze the interactions. Moreover, the music—an important aspect of the situation—is essential in defining the practice, providing the rhythm for four steps to six beats. Indeed, one could also argue that the practice of the two-step is in between the two partners and the music.

Working together is sufficient but not necessary: while school leaders sometimes work together, at other times, they work sepa-



rately yet interdependently. At Ellis School on Chicago's West Side, for example, the principal and assistant principal both monitor and evaluate classroom teaching, a core leadership function in their efforts to improve instruction. Thus, monitoring instruction at Ellis is stretched over the separate practices of the two leaders, and it is in the interaction of these two component parts that leadership practice takes shape over the course of a school year. I will return to this example in Chapter Three.

### ***Followers and Leadership Practice***

The follower dimension is another essential component of leadership practice. Classroom teachers, administrators, specialists, and others can, depending on the leadership activity, find themselves in the follower role. In using the term *follower*, I merely wish to distinguish those in leader roles from others involved in a leadership routine. Leaders not only influence followers but are also influenced by them (Dahl, 1961; Cuban, 1988). A distributed perspective on leadership not only acknowledges the centrality of followers to leadership but also casts followers in a new light, as an essential element that mutually constitutes leadership practice. Thus, leadership is not simply something that is done to followers; followers in interaction with leaders and the situation contribute to defining leadership practice. Observing leadership practice in schools, I am struck by the role that followers play in defining the nature of that practice.

### ***Situation and Leadership Practice***

Leaders work in interaction not just with followers but also with aspects of the situation, including routines and tools. School leaders, like the rest of us, do not work directly on the world; they work with various aspects of their situation.

Routines are taken for granted as a part of daily life. They involve everything from getting to work in the morning to teaching a reading lesson. Routines involve two or more actors in "a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions" (Feldman and

Pentland, 2003, p. 96). Consider the Five-Week Assessment routine at Adams School, an activity that is repeated every five weeks and that everyone at Adams recognizes. The routine involves seven interdependent steps, including creating the student assessment instrument, scoring and analyzing students' responses, and determining instructional strategies to address problems identified by the assessment. This routine engages multiple parties, from the literacy coordinator to the school principal. Routines are part and parcel of life in schools.

Tools are externalized representations of ideas that are used by people in their practice (Norman, 1988; Wertsch, 1998). Tools include student assessment data, observation protocols for evaluating teachers, lesson plans, and student academic work. These tools mediate how people practice, shaping interactions among leaders and followers in particular ways.

In my research in schools, I find it impossible to describe leadership practice without referring to all sorts of tools, including observation protocols, students' work, student test score data, and various organizational structures. Yet tools do not figure prominently in most accounts of school leadership, in part because leadership practice has not been a central focus in such work. When they do, they are usually treated as accessories to leadership practice, things that allow individuals to practice more efficiently, and leadership practice is considered to be entirely a result of the skill and knowledge of the practitioner. Thinking of tools as accessories that simply allow leaders to practice more or less efficiently misses the fact that tools in interaction with leaders and followers fundamentally shape the practice. For example, the Internet as a tool fundamentally transforms how most of us do a lot of common chores—for instance, shopping for books, finding telephone numbers, making airline reservations, or checking in for flights. In some respects, the Internet enables us to perform some of these tasks more efficiently. But the Internet also fundamentally changes the practice of checking in for a flight or purchasing a book. In the Internet age, pur-

chasing a book does not require direct interaction with another individual; with the click of a mouse, one can see what other customers thought about the book under consideration or access a host of related titles. The Internet doesn't just make buying a book more or less efficient; it changes how that purchasing practice is performed.

From a distributed perspective, tools and routines are an integral element that constitutes leadership practice. Other aspects of the situation—for instance, committee structures and organizational culture—are also important but are beyond the scope of this book. I confine my discussion to tools and routines. Relationships between tools and routines and leadership practice are likely to hold for other aspects of the situation.

Taking a distributed perspective involves more than simply acknowledging the importance of tools, routines, and structures to the leadership enterprise and then identifying which tools figure in which leadership practices. A distributed perspective necessitates understanding *how* aspects of the situation enable and constrain that practice and thereby contribute to defining it. Brenda Williams related that when she took over as principal at Adams School, one of her initial tasks was to build an infrastructure that would enable a new sort of leadership practice for teaching and learning. To build professional community among her staff and promote teacher development, Williams and her colleagues created the Breakfast Club routine, a regular morning meeting in which teachers discussed research about teaching and learning. To monitor teaching and learning and identify areas for improvement, Williams and her colleagues created the Five-Week Assessment routine. She explained, "We felt it was important to have a structure within our school so that we would know on a regular basis, on an ongoing basis, if our students were mastering the concepts." These routines, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, contributed to defining leadership practice at Adams School.

While tools and other aspects of a situation contribute to defining leadership practice, they can also be redefined through that

practice. Tools and routines do not straitjacket leadership practice. Instead, tools and routines are made and remade in and through leadership practice; their genesis is in leadership practice. For example, Williams and her leadership team at Adams inherited a school in which the organizational infrastructure privatized classroom practice and did not encourage dialogue among teachers. Together with her colleagues, Williams worked to change this infrastructure, breaking down the school's "egg carton" structure (Lortie, 1975) and creating opportunities for teachers to talk about their teaching. This new infrastructure in turn shaped leadership practice at Adams. Organizational routines and tools are bundles of possibilities that shape leadership practice but can also be reshaped by that practice. Tools and routines can be made, remade, and reappropriated for purposes for which they were not originally intended.

### **Distributed Leadership: A Case of Old Wine in New Bottles?**

Some people wonder what is new about a distributed leadership perspective. Does the emperor have any new clothes? This depends on the particular definition of distributed leadership to which one subscribes. Some people see distributed leadership as a replica rather than a relative of other leadership constructs and approaches.

Scholars of leadership have long argued for the need to move beyond those at the top of organizations in order to examine leadership (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Barnard, 1938). Savvy critics have argued for paying attention to the shifting coalitions of decision makers in organizations in order to understand leadership (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Olsen, 1984). Research on schools has generated evidence that the school principal does not have a monopoly on school leadership; teachers, administrators, and other professionals also play important leadership roles (Smylie and Denny, 1990). In light of this literature, the leader-plus aspect of a

distributed framework is in some respects a case of old wine in new bottles: it involves relabeling a familiar phenomenon.

Still, recent work has generated some important and new insights into the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership, and I will consider these in Chapter Two. Moreover, while scholars may have long argued that leadership extends beyond those at the top of an organization, often their teachings appear to fall on deaf ears; both empirical research and development work on school leadership continue to focus chiefly on the school principal. Indeed, the effective schools literature has helped to continue the tradition of equating school leadership with the principal. School principals are very important to school leadership, but their importance is not such that school principals and school leadership are one and the same. Hence, while the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership may not represent a radical extension of the existing knowledge base, it is a crucial aspect nonetheless.

One response to the prevalence of the “view from the top” has been to focus attention on teacher leadership. However, the tendency to compartmentalize school leadership by creating pigeonholes for principal leadership and teacher leadership also has its problems—for instance, a disjointed portrayal of leadership resulting from the fact that interrelationships between teacher leadership and administrator leadership are rarely discussed. Relatively little is known about how leadership practice is stretched over formal leaders and teacher leaders. A distributed perspective urges us to take leadership practice as the unit of interest and attend to both teachers as leaders and administrators as leaders simultaneously. By placing investigations of teacher leadership in the context of leadership practice, a distributed perspective recognizes something old and adds something new.

In its treatment of both the situation of leadership and the role of followers in leadership, distributed leadership blends old ideas with new ones. Like prior leadership research, the distributed perspective

takes the situation seriously. Contingency theorists have long argued that aspects of the situation, such as school size, influence what leaders do and mediate their effects on teachers (Fiedler, 1973; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee, 1982; Murphy, 1991). While still acknowledging the importance of the situation, a distributed perspective treats the situation differently from prior work. From a distributed view, the situation is not simply a context within which school leaders practice; it is a defining element of practice. The situation—tools and routines of various sorts—shapes leadership from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Distributed leadership views the situation in interaction with leaders and followers as an element that mutually constitutes leadership practice. In this view, the situation does not simply affect what school leaders do; in interaction with leaders and followers, the situation defines leadership practice.

The distributed perspective also affords followers a prominent place in discussions of leadership practice. In this respect, the distributed leadership perspective concurs with research that suggests that leaders depend on followers to lead (Dahl, 1961; Hollander, 1978; Cuban, 1988). A distributed perspective on leadership extends this work by casting followers as an essential constituting element in defining leadership activity. Like the situation, followers are seen as a defining element of leadership activity, shaping it from the inside out rather than from the outside in. In this way, the distributed perspective positions followers differently with respect to leadership practice and thus departs from prior scholarship.

### Replica or Relative?

People frequently use the terms *collaborative leadership*, *shared leadership*, *co-leadership*, *democratic leadership*, *situational leadership*, and *distributed leadership* interchangeably. Sometimes distributed leadership is discussed as though it were the same as or a type of transformational leadership. From my point of view, this is wrong; they are not

synonyms. A distributed perspective on leadership is a relative, not a replica of these constructs or approaches.

While collaborative leadership is by definition distributed, all distributed leadership is not necessarily collaborative. Indeed, a distributed perspective allows for leadership that can be more collaborative or less collaborative, depending on the situation. At Kosten School, where the principal and assistant principal worked to transform classroom teaching, a group of veteran teachers worked to preserve the status quo. Although the leadership in this situation can be understood from a distributed perspective, it is not collaborative; school administrators tugged in one direction, while veteran teachers pulled in the opposite direction. Similarly, a distributed perspective on leadership allows for democratic leadership or autocratic leadership. From a distributed perspective, leadership can be stretched over leaders in a school but not necessarily democratically (Wood, 2004). For example, the leadership practice in mathematics at Adams is rather autocratic compared with that in language arts. Leadership practice for mathematics typically involves the teacher leaders doing most of the talking, telling teachers about resources and teaching strategies. In contrast, leadership practice for literacy involves much more back-and-forth between leaders and teachers as they work together to construct teaching strategies. However, even though it is more autocratic, mathematics leadership practice at Adams is still distributed in that it is defined in the interactions of leaders, followers, and situation. Similarly, studying team leadership does not necessarily involve taking a distributed perspective. One can adopt a team leadership approach without ever attending to leadership practice. Moreover, practice can be viewed simply as a function of the team rather than as a function of the interaction of leaders, followers, and the situation.

Co-leadership reflects a distribution of leadership, but the distributed perspective involves more, urging us to move beyond the leader-plus aspect to consider how leadership practice takes shape in the interaction of leaders, followers, and aspects of the situation.

Co-leadership, according to Heenan and Bennis (1999), happens when “power and responsibility are dispersed [among] . . . co-leaders with shared values and aspirations, all of whom work together toward common goals” (p. 5). The distributed perspective developed in this book differs from this view by focusing on practice and taking followers and the situation into account. Furthermore, co-leadership relies on the leaders having shared values, aspirations, and goals. From a distributed perspective, however, instances of practice in which the leaders do not have shared values and may be working on goals that are not identical are still distributed. Hence, not all distributed leadership is co-leadership.

Finally, let us consider the relationship between transformational leadership and distributed leadership.<sup>2</sup> While the literature provides no agreed-on definition of transformational leadership, it is typically contrasted with transactional leadership. Transformational leadership is usually defined as the “ability to empower others” with the purpose of bringing about a “major change in the form, nature, and function of some phenomenon” (Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins, 1992, p. 25; also Burns, 1978). Similarly, Bennis’s (1959) notion of transformative leadership centers on the ability of a person to reach others in a fashion that raises their consciousness and inspires them to greatness. Understanding the needs of individual staff members is more important than trying to coordinate and control them. A transactional approach, in contrast, casts leader-follower interactions as a social exchange relationship: “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” In addition, in many accounts of transformational leadership, the heroics of leadership genre flourishes, with the school principal as the creator of all things good.

A distributed perspective on leadership differs conceptually from transformational leadership in at least two respects. First, a distributed perspective on leadership does not privilege a transformational perspective over a transactional one; from a distributed perspective, leadership can be either transformational or transactional. A dis-



tributed perspective on leadership is agnostic on the mechanisms of social influence used in leadership practice. Second, a distributed perspective on leadership puts leadership practice center stage rather than the chief executive or the principal; it allows for others—for instance, administrators or teachers—as key players in leadership practice either by design or by default.

### Leadership Practice and Instruction

How does school leadership practice connect with its object—the core of schooling, teaching and learning? While teaching is typically thought of as a function of an individual teacher's knowledge, skills, and actions, teaching is actually a co-production, something that teachers and students do together with particular material (Cohen and Ball, 1998). Any experienced teacher will tell you that the same lesson can play out very differently from one year to the next, depending on the group of students involved. Students matter to teaching practice because teachers construct teaching in interaction with students. Teachers, students, and materials mutually constitute classroom instruction.

Thinking about instruction in this way has implications for understanding relationships between leadership practice and instructional practice. In exploring relationships between school leadership and teaching and learning, scholars often focus too narrowly on the connections between school leaders' work and teachers' classroom work. Leadership practice, however, might connect with teaching and learning practice through a variety of different activities that are linked directly to students, teachers, materials, or some combination of the three. So, in thinking about the relationship between leadership practice as a distributed practice and teaching and learning, one must examine how leadership activities connect with teachers and also how leadership activities connect with students and the materials that teachers and students work

with. My research on distributed leadership suggests that some leadership activities connect with teaching and learning directly through students rather than exclusively or chiefly through teachers.

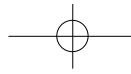
## Conclusion

Leadership practice typically involves more than one person—if not by design, then by default and by necessity. It is difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise. Expecting one person to single-handedly lead efforts to improve instruction in a complex organization such as a school is impractical. Leadership is too often portrayed as a synonym for what the school principal or some other formal or informal leader does. Other sources of leadership in schools are ignored or treated as supplementary and important but almost always secondary to the real leadership that comes from the principal's office. A distributed perspective offers an alternative way of thinking about leadership in schools by foregrounding leadership practice and by suggesting that leadership practice is constructed in the interactions between leaders, followers, and their situations. While not a prescription for how to practice school leadership, distributed leadership offers a framework for thinking about leadership differently. As such, it enables us to think about a familiar phenomenon in new ways that come closer to approximating leadership on the ground than many of the conventional and popular recipes for school leadership.

In Chapter Two, I consider what is known about the leader-plus aspect of a distributed perspective, while in Chapter Three I consider what is known about the practice aspect of a distributed perspective. Chapter Four examines the strategic implications of a distributed perspective for leadership practice, policy, and school leader preparation and development.

## Notes

1. I borrow the notion of “in between” from Salomon and Perkins (1998), who use it to discuss the notion of distributed expertise.



2. In my original articulation of the distributed leadership framework, I argued that my working definition of leadership was consistent with a transformational perspective on leadership. Based on my ongoing data analysis, however, I have modified this view considerably.

