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Women in Leadership Corner

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The Leadership Capacity Conversation Women Need to Have

As women in educational leadership, we are often recognized for our competence, resilience, and ability to manage what can feel like an endless list of responsibilities. We are problem-solvers, nurturers, strategists, communicators, crisis managers, and visionaries, and sometimes all before lunchtime. Many of us have spent years developing the knowledge, professional expertise, and leadership skills necessary to effectively serve our schools and communities. Capability is the measure of what we can do (Bandura, 1997), cultivated through experience, preparation, perseverance, and ongoing professional growth.

Yet capability alone does not determine sustainability or success. Equally important but too often overlooked is capacity: the mental, emotional, physical, and relational energy we have available at any given moment to effectively apply our capability (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Leadership is not measured solely by how much we can carry but by how sustainably and meaningfully we can lead over time.

For women in leadership especially, the distinction between capability and capacity matters. Many of us have been conditioned to equate strength with endurance and effectiveness with constant availability. We say yes because we care deeply. We overprepare because we want to prove ourselves. We shoulder additional emotional labor because it feels expected of us. And while these traits may stem from commitment and compassion, they can also quietly push us toward exhaustion.

In education, where the demands are constant and the stakes are deeply personal, capability without sufficient capacity can eventually lead to diminished effectiveness, chronic stress, burnout, and a sense of perpetual overwhelm (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Understanding the difference between these two concepts is not simply important for professional success; it is essential for personal well-being, authentic leadership, and long-term sustainability.

The Reciprocity of Capability and Capacity

Educational leaders are, by nature, highly capable individuals. Women leaders, in particular, often bring exceptional emotional intelligence, collaboration skills, adaptability, and relationship-centered leadership to their organizations. We are frequently the people others rely on to steady difficult situations, support struggling staff, solve complex problems, and maintain a sense of calm amidst uncertainty. However, even the most capable leaders are not immune to overload. When professional responsibilities collide with personal obligations, our capacity to transform capability into effective action can become compromised (McEwen & Stellar, 1993). The outcome may look familiar: delayed projects, difficulty concentrating, emotional fatigue, decision paralysis, or diminished creativity.

When capacity is depleted, even highly skilled leaders may struggle to leverage their full strengths effectively (Sweller, 1988). Recognizing the boundary between what we can do and what we realistically have the energy and resources to sustain is not a weakness; it is an act of professional insight, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness (Schön, 1983).

The Invisible Weight Women Leaders Often Carry

Women in educational leadership frequently navigate dual and sometimes competing worlds of responsibility. At work, we are instructional leaders, personnel managers, budget overseers, policy interpreters, communicators, and culture-builders. Outside of work, many of us continue managing households, caregiving responsibilities, emotional support roles, family logistics, finances, appointments, and countless unseen tasks that rarely make it onto formal calendars. These overlapping expectations create a level of cognitive and emotional load that is often invisible to others, yet deeply impactful. Even seemingly small stressors such as interrupted sleep, late-night meetings, caregiving demands, emotional labor, or the pressure to “hold it all together” can gradually erode our mental bandwidth and emotional reserves (Walker, 2017). Research consistently demonstrates that decision-making, focus, communication, and creative problem-solving are highly sensitive to fatigue and chronic stress (Newport, 2016; Ratey, 2008).

This means that capability alone cannot compensate for depleted capacity. No matter how talented or dedicated we may be, there comes a point when constantly operating in survival mode limits our ability to lead with clarity, innovation, and presence.

Building Capacity with Intention and Grace

The good news is that capacity is not fixed. It can be managed, restored, protected, and expanded. But doing so requires intentional self-awareness and honesty. Women leaders are often exceptionally skilled at recognizing the needs of others while minimizing their own. As a result, we may continue functioning at unsustainable levels long after our internal warning signs appear. Building capacity begins with asking ourselves difficult but necessary questions:

- What is currently draining my energy?
- What restores and recharges me?
- Where am I overcommitted?
- Am I carrying responsibilities that could be delegated or shared?
- Have I normalized exhaustion in the name of dedication?
- Am I offering myself the same compassion and flexibility I extend to others?

It is equally important to identify the true root of capacity challenges. Sometimes the strain is primarily professional; other times, it is deeply personal. In either case, naming it matters. Seeking support matters. Creating a path forward matters.

Too often, women leaders pride themselves on simply “handling it” rather than truly addressing what is causing the strain. We push through because others depend on us, because we do not want to disappoint people, or because we fear appearing incapable. But unresolved capacity challenges eventually affect not only our well-being, but also our ability to lead effectively and joyfully.

Capability Without Capacity is Unsustainable

While capability and capacity are distinct, they are profoundly interconnected. Capability without sufficient capacity can lead to burnout, frustration, diminished effectiveness, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001). Conversely, capacity without capability may result in misaligned effort or limited impact. Effective leadership requires continual recalibration between the two.

The strongest leaders are not necessarily the ones who carry the most; they are the ones who understand when to pause, reassess, reprioritize, and protect the energy needed to lead well over time. Acknowledging limits is not an act of weakness or concession. For many women leaders, it is an act of courage, wisdom, and authenticity.

As the 2025–2026 school year comes to a close, this is an opportunity to reflect honestly on your own balance between capability and capacity. Are you relying solely on capability while ignoring the realities of your emotional and mental reserves? Are there commitments that need to be reconsidered, boundaries that need strengthening, or responsibilities that could be shared?

When women leaders intentionally protect and manage their capacity, something powerful happens: our capability no longer operates in survival mode. Instead, it has the space to flourish. And when that occurs, we lead not only more effectively, but more authentically with greater clarity, greater sustainability, and greater impact on the students, staff, families, and communities we serve every day.

Citations

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