

# The Missing Link: Teaching the Dispositions to Lead

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*In this article the authors contend that the element that is typically missing or underdeveloped in the education and development of most leaders is the intentional integration of the research and practices for assessing and developing the deeply held core beliefs, attitudes, and values (what we will call leadership dispositions) that play a primary role in leadership effectiveness. To develop the best educational leaders, preparation programs must intentionally include the enhancement of leadership dispositions among its top priorities. For great leaders, their dispositions are the foundation upon which their leadership skills, characteristics, and abilities are expressed and magnified. In this article, the authors discuss how the Perceptual Dispositions Model (Wasicsko, 2007) has been used as a framework for developing educational leaders in an Ed.D. program. Specifically, the focus is on a 360° process and tool--Individual Leadership Self-Assessment Instrument (ILSA)—through which leaders receive authentic feedback about perceived dispositions and from which leadership growth plans are developed. Additionally, they provide insights about how the process has helped transform leaders in their program and they illustrate an example of how one doctoral student used the feedback to develop and implement a dispositional growth plan. The information presented in this article has tremendous implications for educational leadership programs as well as school and district level leaders.*

## Introduction

Effective educational leaders are in high demand these days. As baby-boomers continue to step out, and with accelerated turnover that happens in the increasingly stressful and demanding educational environment, there is ample opportunity for energetic and talented people to fill the breach. With all this potential for new blood coming into play, there is great opportunity for instigating significant positive transformational change IF we find the right future leaders, help develop them, and then assist them in growing their leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

In general, educational leadership programs have done an admirable job teaching the knowledge and skills needed to be a leader. We have good research on the strategies and techniques that seem to be associated with effective leadership and yet leaders who are able to foster transformative change still remain the outliers rather than the rule (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

In this article the authors contend that the element that is typically missing or underdeveloped in the education and development of most leaders is the intentional integration of the research and practices for assessing and developing the deeply held core beliefs, attitudes, and values (what we will call ***leadership dispositions***) that play a primary role in leadership effectiveness. Too often leadership programs shy away from dealing with issues such as attitudes and beliefs because of their potential social, political, and/or religious connotations, due to the nebulous nature of their definition and measurement. They are assumed to be too personal and individual and therefore inappropriate for inclusion or, the biggest reason, that attitudes and beliefs change slowly if at all anyway (Combs, 1988). As we shall contend, the intentional inclusion of leadership dispositions are necessary conditions for preparing leaders to foster transformational change through their efforts.

Essentially, the authors argue that effective leaders are first and foremost effective people or, said another way, the person you are determines the leader you become. To develop the best educational leaders, preparation programs must intentionally include the enhancement of leadership dispositions among its top priorities (King, Altman, & Lee, 2011).

This article provides the theoretical framework and definitions of leadership dispositions, the tools by which one assesses dispositions, and examples of how they can be applied in leadership education programs.

## Dispositions Framework

Necessary leadership dispositions include: believing in oneself and one's ability to positively impact others, valuing the people you lead—knowing that reasonable colleagues provided with reasonable information and flexibility will make reasonable decisions; a keen predilection for listening to diverse viewpoints, finding common ground on most issues, and seeing the big picture; and the understanding that relationships, effective teams, and sharing responsibilities and rewards are the pathways to important accomplishments. Some leaders can fake such dispositions over the short haul, however, when much of what leaders confront requires immediate reactions, the masks quickly fall away and the dispositions of the leaders are exposed. In our opinion, core dispositions are at the heart of good leadership and are *a priori* conditions for transformational leadership.

For more than a decade the authors have asked leaders and aspiring leaders, "What is the first thing you remember about the most effective leader with whom you worked?" The overwhelming number of responses spoke about the human elements (dispositions) of the leader and the kinds of working and personal relationships that these dispositions fostered. Among the most common responses were:

"She really enjoyed her work and cared about people."

"He looked for the good in each of us."

"He could get things done and make it fun."

"She motivated us with her lively, humorous manner and her thorough knowledge of the work."

"He believed in me."

"She challenged us."

"She saw us as unique and treated us with respect."

If peoples' primary memories about their best leaders are accurate, enhancing dispositions may in fact be the most important thing leaders can do to be more effective. What differentiated the most effective leaders from the rest was that they were successful not only because of what they *knew and did* but because of *who they were* that shined through their skills and leadership abilities. We call these human qualities *dispositions*—a person's core attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as one interacts with oneself, others, one's purpose, and frames of reference.

The framework used for dispositions relies on the theory and research pioneered by Arthur W. Combs (Combs, 1974), psychologist/educator (1935-1999). Combs spent his professional career investigating the dispositions (he used the term "perceptions") of effective helping professionals--people who were able to significantly and positively affect others' lives (Richards, 2010). The Perceptual Dispositions Model

drills down into the essence of the person to the attitudes, values, beliefs, or perceptions level of the personality. This allows for a more manageable number of variables to define and measure [four in all], and more predictive value, but with the trade-off of requiring the use of more qualitative assessment measures. (Wasicsko, Wirtz, & Resor, 2009, p. 20)

The Perceptual Dispositions Model was chosen because it is straightforward and intuitive, easily understood, built upon a strong theoretical and research base, and has proven qualitative measurement tools by which to gauge effects.

As a result of the research by Combs and colleagues (Combs & Snygg, 1949; Combs, Soper, Gooding, Benton, Dickman, & Usher, 1969), Wasicsko (2007) classified dispositions into four general areas that differentiate effective from ineffective leaders: (1) perception about self; (2) perceptions about other people; (3) perceptions of purpose; and (4) perceptions of one's frame of reference.

*Perception of Self*, as the name implies, focuses on the personhood of the leader. Leaders who have positive perceptions of self are confident without being overbearing, identify more readily with others, they can see diverse points of view, and they display a positive attitude toward life and work. Because of a positive sense of self, they tend to be more self-trusting and,

thus, less threatened by others, they have less difficulty accepting constructive criticism, and can provide others with feedback that is more likely to be non-threatening and thus heard.

Leaders who have high *Perception of Others* see people with whom they work as having the capacity to face up to challenges and be successful when given the opportunity and resources. They demonstrate a belief in others' ability to find adequate solutions to events in their own lives; display a general belief that all people are valuable, able, and worthy of respect; share responsibility with others; and share or give away credit for accomplishments.

Leaders who have high *Perception of Purpose* have goals that extend beyond the immediate to broad implications and contexts. They tend to see the big picture and are committed to life-long learning and mentoring. They treat everyone equitably and fairly; they avoid being sidetracked by trivia or petty issues; and see work in the larger context of life. They realize that what they do as leaders is more than a mere job but less than a life.

Leaders who are people oriented have a *Frame of Reference* that recognizes that people, with all their human strengths and frailties, are the valuable human resources through which goals get met rather than cogs in a complex mechanical machine. They understand that, while order, management, mechanics, and details of things and events are necessary, long-term success must be concerned with the human aspects of affairs--the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and welfare of persons. They understand the importance of maintaining positive relationships with colleagues and they focus on the human dimensions rather than, or at least in addition to, the "things" associated with the work.

These dispositions, the authors contend, are essential elements in effective leadership that, when present in a leader, provide an opportunity for greater transformational change as well as personal growth in individuals and organizations. For great leaders their dispositions are the foundation upon which their leadership skills, characteristics, and abilities are expressed and magnified. Yet, as important as dispositions are, they are frequently included in leadership programs and assessments only as an afterthought, if at all.

### **Using Dispositions in the Ed.D. Program**

Six years ago, when presented with the opportunity to build a practitioner's educational leadership doctoral program from the ground up, it was decided to make dispositions a cornerstone element of the new program. Dispositions theory, research, and tools are embedded into all aspects of the Ed.D. program beginning with the selection of candidates [and faculty], moving through integration into courses, assessing candidate leadership and growth, and developing Individual Leadership Dispositional Growth Plans (ILDGP). The focus of this article is on a **360°** process and tool--Individual Leadership Self-Assessment Instrument (ILSA)—through which leaders can receive authentic feedback about perceived dispositions and from which leadership growth plans can be developed.

### **The 360° Process: From Theory to Practice**

The 360° process has been used for some time in a variety of leadership settings. The essential premise of the process is that increasing self-knowledge can lead to greater personal development and maturity as leader (Blum, 2009). Belief in a 360° process is based on four assumptions: (a) feedback is important for personal and professional growth; (b) most organizations provide poor environments for authentic feedback; (c) there is frequently a gap

between a leader's self-perception and how others see her/him; and (d) empirical research and anecdotal evidence has shown that 360° feedback can lead to improved performance in the areas that are being evaluated (Lepsinger & Lucia, 2009). If many people participate in the 360° process within an organization or team, it can also be used to strengthen the collective leadership capacity of the organization and facilitate the development of a culture that values leadership more as a *process* than a *position* (Chirichello, 2003, 2010). Leadership then becomes a collective and collaborative activity to set direction, build commitment, and create alignment in a process called *collective leadership* (Martin, 2007). A 360° process was designed as an assessment and growth protocol for candidates (we call them *learning associates*) enrolled in the practitioner Ed.D. program.

The Individual Leadership Self-Assessment® (ILSA)—the major tool used in the process—was designed after an extensive review of the research on the traits/characteristics, skills, and dispositions associated with effective leaders. It was designed to serve three major functions: (1) to collect authentic, usable data from a variety of sources regarding a person's leadership effectiveness; (2) to serve as a self-assessment baseline from which leadership growth plans can be designed; and (3) to measure leadership growth over time. Because these functions are or should be critical to all leadership situations, the instrument can and has been used by aspiring and practicing leaders across professions.

The ILSA includes two major sections with seven subsections. Section one, *Capacity to Lead*, consists of traits/characteristics and skills. Traits/Characteristics are distinguishing attributes or qualities of an individual such as creativity and self-confidence. Skills are the ability to do some things well, usually gained through training or experience such as problem solving.

Section two, *Dispositions* (Table 1), includes questions related to the attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as one interacts with self, others, one's purpose, and frames of reference. Since dispositions are the focus of this article, only these elements are presented here.

Table 1  
*Dispositions Section of the ILSA*

<i>Perceptions of Self</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I identify positively with others even those who are different than I am.							
I always try to see the other person's point of view.							
I display a generally positive attitude toward life and work.							
I am accepting of others whose ideas and opinions differ from mine.							
I accept constructive criticism.							
<i>Perceptions of Others</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I display a general belief that all people are valuable, able, and worthy.							
I collaborate positively with others.							
I share responsibility with others.							
I find positive things about almost everyone I meet.							
I share credit for accomplishments with others.							
<i>Perceptions of Purpose</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I see the <i>big picture</i> in most situations.							
I treat everyone equitably and fairly.							
I see work in the larger context of a person's life.							
I avoid being sidetracked by trivia or petty issues.							
I am committed to life-long learning for myself and others.							
<i>Frame of Reference</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My primary focus is on the success of the people with whom I interact.							
I balance work and life.							
I build and maintain positive relationships with colleagues.							
I build and maintain positive relationships with clients.							
I focus on the human aspects (rather than things) in most situations.							

Learning associates in the Ed.D. program complete a self-assessment using the ILSA during the first semester of the 3-year program. Each learning associate selects a minimum of ten *critical friends* to assess their leadership using the same instrument. (Critical friends are personal acquaintances or professional colleagues who have regular contact with, are trusted by, and have working knowledge of the leadership style of the person using the instrument.) During the second year of the program, when the cohort members have become familiar with each other, learning associates complete the ILSA for each member of her/his cohort.

The ratings provided by the critical friends and cohort members are aggregated into composite scores for each element so as to increase validity and protect the anonymity of individual respondents. Subsequently, individual learning associates receive their aggregated information to compare her/his own ratings with that of critical friends and colleagues in the program. Here is where the learning about self really begins.

As seen in Table 1, the ILSA uses a 7-point Likert scale upon which each element is rated by the leader, critical friends and cohort members using the descriptors in Table 2. The scales for critical friends and cohort members are identical with the exception of changing the "I" to "y colleague/friend."

Table 2

*Rating Scale Instructions for the ILSA*

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Instructions: On the scale below, choose the number that best matches your current perception of the trait/characteristic or skill indicated on this survey.

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- 1 - I do not exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 2 - I infrequently exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 3 - I occasionally exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 4 - I usually exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 5 - I frequently exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 6 - I frequently exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill and many other people have told me that I exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
  - 7 - I frequently exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill and most other people have told me that I exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition told me that I exhibit this trait/characteristic/skill/disposition
-

Note that, unlike many such opinion scales, selecting a score of six (6) or seven (7) requires a higher test of evidence by deciding if “many” or “most” people would agree with the opinion. This criterion is supported by the research of Hoy and Miskel (2013) who stated that the perception of the majority is more apt to be accurate. Using this criterion can also inhibit *self-perception anomalies* or the tendency to rate people or oneself artificially high.

### **Learning Associates’ Perspectives**

Closing the loop on a 360° assessment process entails participants reflecting on the areas in which there is agreement and differences among critical friends, and cohort members, analyzing the information, and then developing a growth plan to enhance leadership effectiveness using insights from the analysis. Learning associates are encouraged, but not required, to share their findings and solicit input for their growth plans to increase its effectiveness and impact. Through this process, learning associates develop a clearer sense of how they can improve their leadership capacity.

Reflective questions and conversations in formal and informal settings about the skills, characteristics, and dispositions assessed on the ILSA are intentionally embedded throughout our Ed.D. program. This provides learning associates with opportunities to reflect on their strengths and areas that need development. Special attention is focused on those ILSA elements that were rated highest and lowest or in which there was the greatest disparity between one’s self-assessment and the assessment of others.

One of the most interesting and impactful events in the Ed.D. program occurs when the results of the ISLAs are returned to the individual learning associates and they get their first glimpse into areas in which they see themselves differently from the inside than others do from the outside.

In a typical session, a palpable hush fills the room as people begin to digest the information. After a few minutes, a participation-by-choice sharing takes place. Common themes emerge such as “Gosh, I didn’t know I seem so serious.” “I always thought I was a good storyteller” or “I always saw myself as a big picture kind of leader.” It is clear that something significant has taken place.

To gain deeper insight into what transpired, the authors asked the learning associates to share their impressions about the ILSA after receiving their feedback on the instrument. Here is a representative sampling from their replies:

1. The 360° assessment was a crucial element in developing my leadership capacity. I am not sure I would be able to recognize some of the areas without the critical feedback from the assessment process. I am grateful for this experience, and the friends involved in the process. I am beginning to understand the value of close friends and the wisdom of others. At this point, I can sum up this self-reflection in one sentence; “I learned things I never knew; I never knew!”
2. I remember reviewing the material and was surprised by how intense my feelings were. I appreciated all the feedback and realized I have demonstrated leadership skills for years, but did not always get the credit or pay that I deserved. It made me realize how unhealthy my work situation had become and that I was tired of being taken advantage of. I had allowed it to occur and

it was up to me to make a change. That moment I realized I needed to take charge of using my leadership skills in a more purposeful way so that my work setting and I benefited. The process of the 360° assessment gave me the momentum to move ahead with confidence in my skills as a leader.

During informal and formal discussions, the learning associates have shared how the 360° process has given them insights into their traits/characteristics, skills, and dispositions that they were not able to uncover on their own. The process provided the learning associates with new insights for growing their leadership capacity.

### **Use of ILSA Results – A Case Study**

After receiving and reflecting upon the ILSA results each learning associate builds a growth plan. In this section, we highlight the ILSA data from one learning associate along with an overview of the growth plan she developed after receiving her scores. This case typifies the kind of feedback our learning associates receive (data from the self-assessment, feedback from critical friends, and feedback from cohort members) and the resulting professional growth plans that are generated.

In preparing the learning associates for receiving and reviewing their scores, they are asked to engage in critical self-reflection as they note patterns or trends in their data. For example, are their self-assessment scores higher or lower than their critical friends or cohort members? On which questions are their self-assessment scores most closely in agreement with their critical friends or cohort members? Is there a large spread or difference between their self-assessment scores and the ratings they received from their critical friends and cohort members? On which questions? Why is this the case? Are they prepared to receive potential negative feedback on any questions or in any areas? Critical self-reflection helps learning associates better interpret the data. In cases where scores of critical friends or cohort members are significantly lower than their self-assessment, we ask them to suspend judgment and, for at least the time being, “assume the data are true” so that they are less likely to be dismissive of negative feedback and can see how it might inform them personally and in their leadership.

In order to better understand the ILSA data, learning associates receive feedback disaggregated by each question on each of the four scales (Perceptions of Self, Perceptions of Others, Perceptions of Purpose, and Frame of Reference). For example, on the Perceptions of Others scale (see Figure 1), this learning associate’s largest spread can be seen on “I collaborate positively with others” and “I share credit for accomplishments with others.” On both questions, the Learning Associate rated herself as 7.0 and her cohort members rated her a 5.9. This kind of gap or difference is one that should rise to the level of concern as they try to interpret and make meaning of the data.

Her critical friends and cohort members closely agree with “I find positive things about almost everyone I meet” rating her a 6.18 and 6.10 respectively. The closest agreement was on “I share responsibility with others,” even though her critical friends rated her higher than she did on the item.



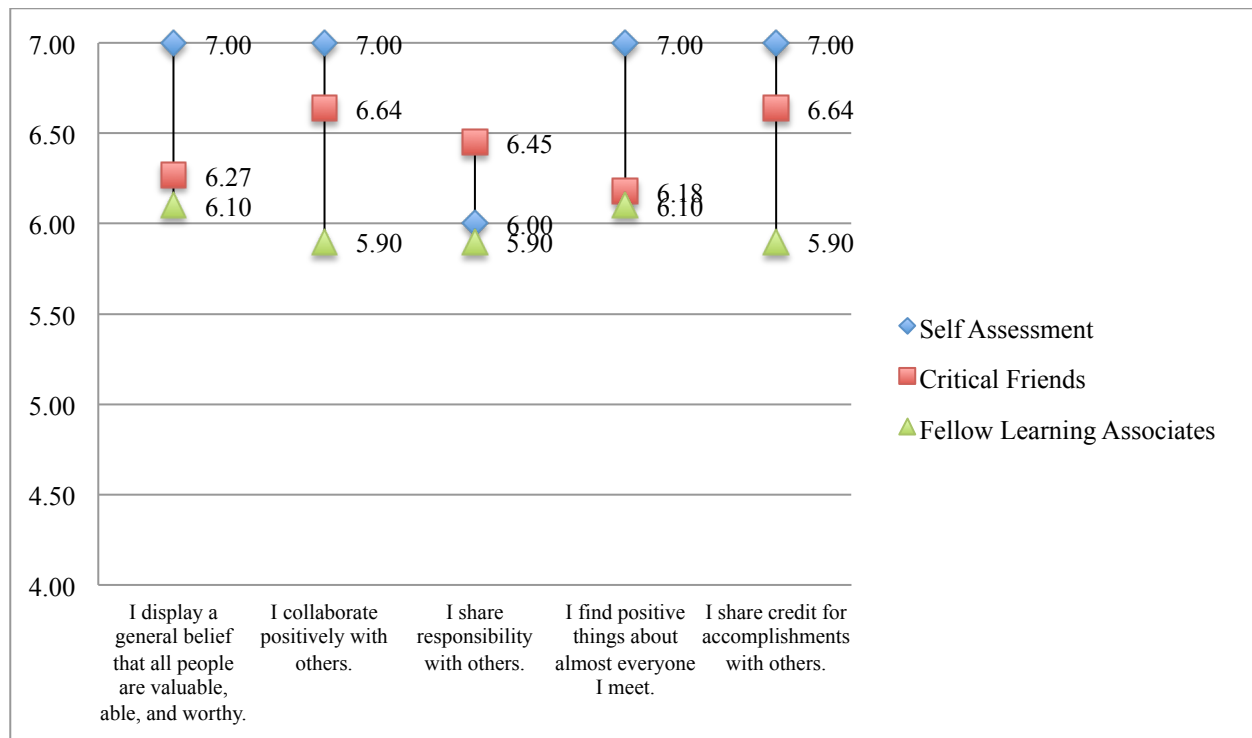


Figure 1: *Perceptions of Others*

In the Frame of Reference scale, this Learning Associate rated herself a 6.0 on “I balance work and life.” Her cohort members closely agreed and rated her a 5.6, her lowest score on the assessment (see Figure 2). The learning associate rated herself a 7.0 on the other four items. Her critical friends agreed on “I build and maintain positive relationships with clients” but rated her lower on the other items.

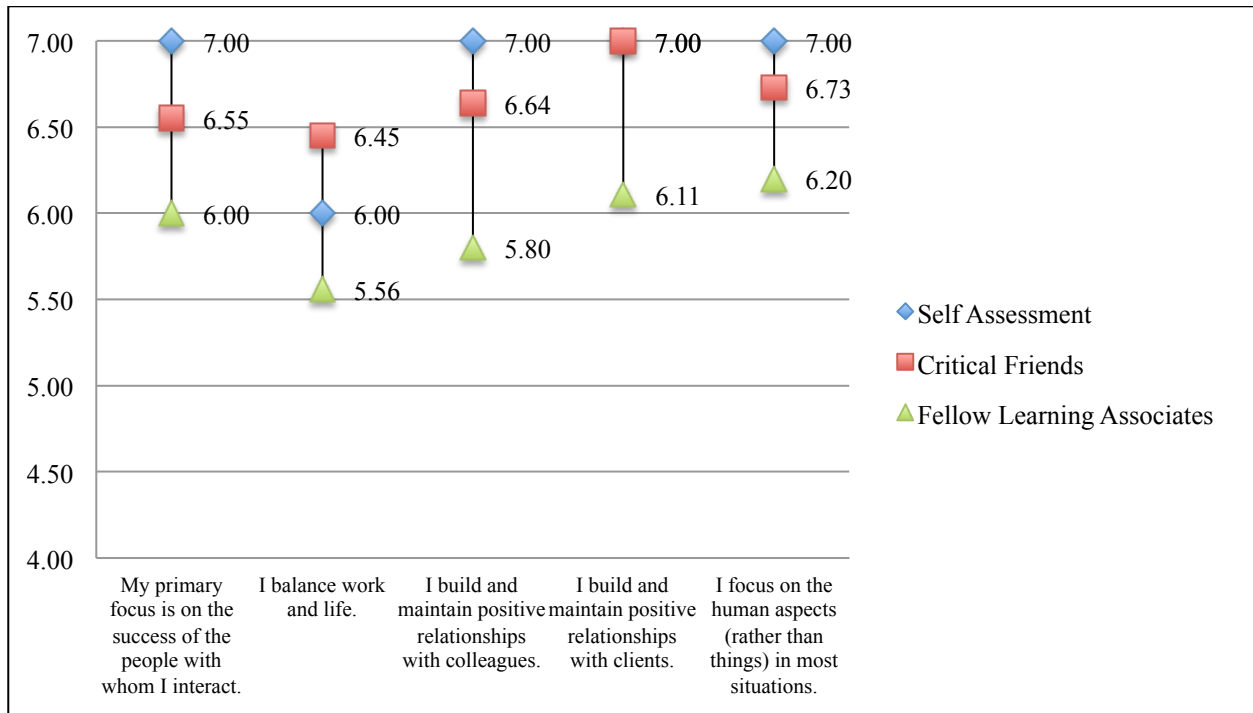


Figure 2: *Frame of Reference*

Once this learning associate had a chance to review her data, she was asked to write an Individual Leadership/Dispositional Growth Plan (ILDGP). The plan requires each Learning Associate to set a “strength area goal” and a “growth opportunity goal.” They are first asked to describe why each goal is important to them. In this section, many note how the ILSA data helped them strategize and prioritize their strength areas and opportunities for growth. Next, they are asked to detail the strategies they will use to meet their goals. In this section, they typically lay out plans for working on the goals for the following semester. Finally, they are asked to describe how they will know if they are successful in meeting their goals and how they will measure their progress over time (see Figure 3).

	Strength Area Goal	Growth Opportunity Goal
What are your goals and why are they important to you?		
What strategies will you use to meet your goals? What is your plan?		
How will you know if you are successful meeting your goals?		
How will you track your progress and determine if you are meeting your goals?		

Figure 3: *Individual Leadership/Dispositional Growth Plan Template*

In her Individual Leadership/Dispositional Growth Plan, this learning associate set out on goals to “share responsibility with others” and to “balance work and life.” She noted that as an assistant principal, she regularly gives teachers advice and/or answers to problems about school issues without engaging them in a problem solving process. She noted the following about her new goal:

When teachers approach me with problems, I will not always give them the quick easy answer as I have done in the past. I will in turn ask them questions that make them reflect and come to conclusions based on their own reflections. I will also ask tough questions in certain instances in order to facilitate and guide teachers in the direction that will have the best outcome for the student first and then for the teacher in the classroom. This goal fits within the Perceptions of Others scale, and is closely aligned with the item.

“I share responsibilities with others,” an area that she rated herself as a 6.0 and her critical friends and cohort members rated her a 6.45 and 5.90 respectively. Her measurement plan included the development of a simple survey in order to determine if she was making progress on this goal after one semester.

A year after her plan was written and enacted, this learning associate was asked to reflect on how this process helped her improve personally and professionally. She noted that over the course of a year, her conscious attention to giving teachers control in certain situations (instead

of solving the problems for them) has fostered better teacher problem-solving and in turn improved relationships with their students and parents.

Her other goal, balancing family, job, and doctoral work, is aligned closely with the Frame of Reference scale. In fact, the item “I balance work and life” was her lowest item according to her self-assessment (6.0), critical friends (6.45), and cohort members (5.56). The rating from her cohort members was actually her lowest score on the assessment. She noted that “in order to maintain happiness and direction I must continually evaluate my life in order to find a balance between all of the things that matter to me.”

In reflecting on this area, she stated that her goal was to be finished with course work and the dissertation in three years. In order to make this happen, she deliberately set out to “let go” of work at the end of each school day, take care of her young family, and keep a regimented calendar for the doctoral work. Being self-aware that “work and family would need to be a focus in order to be successful” (Learning Associate #60, personal communication, January 16, 2014) has given her the drive to make this goal a reality as she is on course to finish the dissertation at the end of the third year. When asked if she has changed as a result, she believes the process helped her prioritize growth areas and hone leadership dispositions that are needed to be successful personally and professionally.

### **Lessons Learned**

The 360 process using the ILSA has now been completed with six Ed.D. cohorts and has proven beneficial to learning associates. In addition to use in the program, it has also been used to provide feedback to new school superintendents and other school administrators, college deans and department chairs and, in a modified, dispositions-only version, to other helping professionals.

The authors are beginning to assess the impact of the growth plans developed through this process on perceived and actual leadership abilities. Another potentially fruitful line of research is to investigate the “spread or differences” among the users and respondents. Do the transformational leaders have the most accurate perceptions of how others see them? Is there a relationship (direct or inverse) between self and others’ perceptions and leadership effectiveness?

Applying dispositions theory and research to leadership development may be one of the most significant areas for further investigation. The ISLA or derivatives of it can be applied to a variety of organizations including school districts, non-profits, and business environments in a non-evaluative, self-appraisal process. Currently, several school districts and universities are using the ILSA with their leadership teams to develop individual leadership capacity and increase collective leadership in their organizations. A discerning insight into one northern Kentucky school district’s focus on dispositions is accessible on the Kentucky Association of School Administrators website (<http://connect.kasa.org/personnelessentials2/welcomevideo>). Superintendents have requested that their leadership teams for both the schools and the school site councils receive professional development in the use of dispositional protocols.

For additional information on dispositions go to the webpage for the National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions located at Northern Kentucky University (<http://coehs.nku.edu/content/coehs/centers/educatordispositions.html>).

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