

I CAN HANDLE IT – UNDERSTANDING CAPACITY

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The strong work ethic embedded in our culture delivers a direct message to each of us regarding capacity and the ability to carry out responsibilities that rest on our shoulders. The message is clear: If you have it (capacity), you should give it (contribute). Further, you have a responsibility to discover your gifts in order to contribute to the world. That's what gifts are for. Contribution is the key and people with capacity are able to contribute much.

What is this gift called capacity? We know that people with incredible capacities contribute to carrying out duties in very predictable ways, reliable ways that can be counted on. We have all known people who are able to hold much on their strong shoulders (large somatic muscles are not required for this kind of carrying). What's another pack? Load it on with all the others. Like that old saying, "If you need something done, give it to a busy person. They will get it done." Couple capacity with kindness and the desire to contribute and you end up with the ideal contributor. These "givers" not only have capacity but also a strong desire to make a difference in peoples lives, in their workplaces, and in the world. The ability to 'handle it' is an incredible gift that needs to be well taken care of and it requires a kind of wisdom that few people with this strength have been encouraged to cultivate.

Capacity is a double-edged sword. Society calls for its contribution but does not necessarily deliver the corollary message that is hidden in the fine print that reads something like this:

- You have been given this gift called capacity
- With it comes great responsibility
- Vigilantly attend to the direction to which you channel this gift
- Otherwise you'll use yourself up and "crash"

The double-edged sword of capacity becomes clearly evident when the conflict between soul and duty arise, between vocation and job, between whom I have been to myself and others and who I want to be now. Capacity is an awesome trait to be born with. Yet it is overwhelming in its set of contradictions and confusing in how one is to attend to its care. And: if capacity is accompanied in a human being by a deep sense of caring for and commitment to others, great harm can come to the one who has the incredible ability to hold much. The desire to give and give coupled with the capacity to move to effective action, to take on some new responsibility, some new duty, can be a strong predictor for burnout down the road. Bodies will ultimately speak. Loudly. You can count on it. It will show up in resentment, anger, depression, physical ailments, illness, or a broken spirit. Harm is done.

In our culture we do not speak about capacity in ways that respect the double-edged nature of this sword. Our culture values giving to others, discovering and sharing your gifts, and making a contribution. What we do not cultivate or possess is an accompanying deep understanding of how to attend the care of capacity. We do not develop the wisdom to direct capacity in ways that do not harm the person doing the giving. This wisdom would include knowing when to hold back, knowing when to say 'no' even if inside we believe we could handle

it, or knowing when to stop before the well is empty, before our bucket is scraping the cement. Many of these actions would be called selfish. If you have more to give, somehow you should give it until there is nothing left. Period. It can tend to feel black and white from within our cultural norms. The strength of this can be felt while considering the following two responses to the same question:

Question:

I could really use your contribution here, Leslie. Could you stay late and help out?

Answer 1:

Honestly, I am so exhausted, I really can't stay late. I have been working night and day for the last few weeks and I just can't see straight anymore. I need to head home before I collapse.

Answer 2:

Honestly, I only have so much energy and tonight I am heading off to play squash and have dinner with some friends. And I want to get to bed early.

Notice your own response to these answers. Did any part of you find Answer 2 to be 'selfish'? The strength of our cultural narrative supports Answer 1 and that is evidenced in our work environments. And so, we find ways to contribute and give, even if it means the capacity well runs out of water and the bucket hits rock bottom. Being called selfish would be one of the worst things we could be called by friends, family, and colleagues.

Or imagine getting into the elevator after lunch with a few colleagues. The usual conversation tends to occur where people complain to each other about how much has to be done in such little time and how overworked we all are in our day to day lives. Imagine you were to say, "Actually I have just the right amount of work for today. I've been really attending to the amount of work that I can do without completely taxing myself because I can tend to just keep giving. So, my workload is perfect right now." The stares that would result let us know how weird this is and yet, if we were all taking care of our well-being, these conversations would be the norm.

Why have we not gained the wisdom needed to take care of our own capacity? We have a society where there is more mental breakdown than we have ever previously seen. Depression or mental illness is now ranked only second to heart disease in terms of doctor care or prescribed medicine. Our body crashes and then we are forced to attend to the repercussions. We spin out of control, crash over the sides of the cliffs or swerve quickly, noticing we are too tired to really pay attention to this road we are on. Perhaps before these consequences arise from overextending our capacity, we could have learned about building dependable well-marked guardrails and about discerning the right speed to travel on this life of twisting and winding roads, sharp bends, tight corners, and slippery conditions that stand between us and the deep cliffs below.

We truly need a different kind of intelligence in order to be with our capacity to navigate these roads so filled with peril and opportunity. Unless we want to end up dealing with a crash (body or car), it is necessary. In this really perverse, yet obviously clear logic, I have worked with clients living with their incredible gifts of capacity who secretly long to get really sick or have some kind of mental breakdown so that they can rest. A doctor's diagnosis of illness is the answer and yet, their strength keeps them showing up every day. They look at those who have less vigour and watch them break and wonder, 'Why not me? Why can't I break too? Why couldn't I have a breakdown and have someone care for me the way that I care for others? When will I get to rest?'

If these words feel remotely familiar, know there is a vigilance being called for to support your capacity. Know that there is a set of capabilities that include wisdom regarding your capacity in the equation. Know that if you are waiting for the well to be empty before you rest, that rest will never come. You have gotten used to scraping the bottom. You will not rest. Not until you are lying on your death bed wondering why life never broke you. Don't you see? This gift that has been bestowed on you requires your attention, requires your care, requires your vigilance, and requires your capacity to give your capacity to yourself.

Capacity is held as a one way street. Having capacity is about giving to whomever or whatever needs it in this moment. But what if this double-edged sword has another edge to consider? What if capacity has to do not just with our ability to give but with our ability to receive?

Random House defines capacity as:

CAPACITY (noun)

1. The ability to receive or contain:

This hotel has a large capacity.

2. The maximum amount or number that can be received or contained; cubic contents; volume:

The inn is filled to capacity. The gasoline tank has a capacity of 20 gallons.

3. The power of receiving impressions, knowledge, etc.; mental ability:

The capacity to learn calculus.

4. The actual or potential ability to perform, yield, or withstand:

He has a capacity for hard work. She has the capacity to go two days without sleep.

5. The quality or state of being susceptible to a given treatment or action:

Steel has a high capacity to withstand pressure.

I think that we generally hold capacity (as it applies to human beings) as #4 in the definitions above: the ability to get much done, be productive, and perform. In the definitions, #5 also feels applicable: withstand pressure. What we tend to ignore is that capacity is also about the ability to receive, to hold, to contain, the power to receive knowledge, perceptions, impressions, perspectives, mental abilities, and I think, wisdom. Only in this way can capacity become a two way street: capacity is not simply the ability to give but equally the ability to receive. It is inherent in the nature of capacity to be spacious, open and receptive. And somehow, we have lost sight of this aspect in our world of closed systems, productive measures and giving everything that we have. It has been a one-way outgoing flow. Do it for the team. The incoming flow has been ignored at our peril.

I don't believe that, as human beings, we want to treat ourselves like steel, mirroring its high capacity to withstand pressure. And yet, we do just that, holding ourselves to steel-like standards, ever increasing the tensile pressure as we train our bodies to keep giving. And then, like steel, when the fire finally gets hot enough, we melt. And some of us pray for the melting so that we can have a reason to change, a reason to receive. And some of us are surprised when it knocks us flat because we had always felt so invincible. We are not steel.

Capacity is sustainable only if we attend to its care and the often difficult work of receiving. Maintaining the sharpness of the double-edged sword of capacity requires its holder's wisdom and care. When working with clients (and work-life balance is often a topic) attending to capacity is a critical competency. How do you start building this capability?

WORKING WITH CAPACITY

Observation Exercise:

Notice throughout the day when you were in 'receiving' mode versus 'giving' mode:

- When was I open to receiving? What were the conditions for receiving?
- Who am I really willing to receive from? And who am I not willing to receive from?
- When was I in the mode of giving? What were the conditions for giving?
- Who am I willing to give to? Who do I not want to give to?

Coaching Journal Questions:

What is my relationship to capacity?

- How do I 'use' my capacity? (ie. to produce, accomplish or withstand something)
- When today did I hold my capacity as a gift to be tenderly cared for? How did I care for it?
- What narrative (or story) do I hold about myself and capacity?
- What view would I have to drop in order to hold my capacity as a gift to be supported vigilantly in my day to day life?

Practice:

1. Twice a day, attend to your capacity as though it were a container to be filled. A container to become familiar and intimate with. Attend to it in a way that is not about filling the container in order to empty it again by giving it away. Instead, attend to it in a way that is about acknowledging that capacity also exists to receive, to be receptive, to be inspired, to be a reservoir for wisdom. What would you like your capacity to receive today?
2. Feel the spacious capacity in your body that is waiting to receive wisdom, kindness, generosity and care. What does spacious feel like in your body? Can you locate the spacious reservoirs? What is flowing through your body's reservoirs?
3. Provide your spacious body with some sort of physical movement that fills your reservoirs with your own capacity to give to yourself. Feel your capacity dance with itself.



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