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# Trailblazers stand at the edge

I've been thinking about mentoring lately — primarily because I'm just not the mentoring type! I'm rough around the edges and impatient, which is a quick two strikes against me. On top of that, I often get lost in my own thoughts and overlook others easily.

Definitely strike three.

Feeling a bit like an outsider (shouldn't every accomplished teacher support novice peers?), I've been struggling to redefine mentoring. "I support mid-career teachers," I explain. "They need advice and guidance too! And what about all the writing I do. Doesn't that count as mentoring? Someone out there has to be learning from me!"

After fumbling around for a few weeks, I turned to my Teacher Leaders Network colleagues for help in determining whether I could call myself a mentor. David Cohen — a peer in California — answered first:

"No, Bill, I don't see you as one of my mentors ... yet. When I start coming to you with my problems and challenges and we get personal, then you're a mentor. When you know what's happening in my teaching and you start proactively guiding, supporting, questioning, then you're a mentor. Likewise, I don't think you're mentoring any non-teachers unless you're supporting them in overall practice and improvement.

"Are you a leader? Yes."

David left me thinking because I've never seen "leading" and "mentoring" as unique forms of professional expression before. I've always been trapped by the idea that mentoring and leadership are synonymous.

The line between leading and mentoring seems to be delineated by relationships. The best

mentors value shared experiences with protégés as a tangible product and a source of satisfaction. Most of my leadership, on the other hand, stands independent of relationships. I'm driven by ideas — and willing to make my thinking transparent to others — but I'm not concerned about whether people follow me.

So which role is more important?

According to noted educational leader Phil Schlechty, neither!

To Schlechty (1993), I'm a "trailblazer," standing on the cutting edge of education and willing to move forward despite the lack of convincing evidence that I will succeed.

Trailblazers operate on personal convictions. Their passion and purpose creates cognitive dissonance in a schoolhouse, forcing others to rethink what works best for students.

But trailblazers are often isolated individuals disconnected from the group. The work of trailblazers, Schlechty argues, must be supported

by pioneers. Pioneers are teachers who recognize a need to move forward, but remain motivated by supporting peers. A willingness to invest in others and a belief that the progress of the group is the greatest determinant of success make pioneers natural mentors.

I'd guess that most people drawn to teaching are pioneers. After all, mentoring is a part of what we do with students each day. But it's equally important for a school to celebrate the work of trailblazers. To do otherwise is to undervalue the work of motivated — yet often isolated — agents of change.

Who are the pioneers and trailblazers in your building? ♦



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## Reference

Slechty, P.C. (1993). On the frontier of school reform with trailblazers, pioneers, and settlers. *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 1993.