



WHY I WANT TO BE A TEACHER LEADER

By LaNaye Reid

If someone had asked me five years ago whether I would ever envision myself as a teacher leader, my answer would have been an emphatic “no.” My passion is for teaching and learning! I did not have the desire or the temperament to administer others. I had been in too many meetings in which the team leader began, “Now, let’s not shoot the messenger ...,” and I quite frankly believed that

a small stipend would never begin to make up for the extra hours and stress.

However, as educational transformation began in our district and on my campus, I began to see the role of teacher leader transform as well. This role was no longer an extension of a larger bureaucracy, but was becoming that of a facilitator among a group of professionals who held a shared vision. My campus principal began to make available learning opportunities designed to build capacity among teachers who were passionate about their work and

were open to a new mindset for how we conduct school business in the 21st century and beyond. These changes may have been incremental, but over time they have been powerful.

When I talk about educational change, I'm not talking about bureaucratic reform mandated and legislated through such acts as No Child Left Behind, but a groundswell of transformation that is slowly taking root and flourishing in pockets across the nation. Standard bearers such as Schlechty, DuFour, and Marzano have conceptualized this change in transforming schools from bureaucratic organizations to learning organizations. According to Schlechty (2006), "The bureaucratic model has outlived its usefulness. The model of a learning organization is much more apt for the challenges that now face public education and American society" (p.62). As a result, those in such learning organizations are transforming the roles of administrators and teacher leaders.

In the old, bureaucratic system of school, the teacher leader was a spokesperson for the principal, who was in turn a spokesperson for the district administration. This was trickle-down leadership, and the roles were typically assigned to the most tenured — those who had done their time and were now teachers of the highly coveted advanced and honors classes. Under this model, few ever achieved the role of team leader, which was an often-thankless job and was compensated with only a token stipend. The real value of the role was intrinsic. Unless one aspired to become a principal or district administrator, there was really no other way of moving up or gaining status as a professional educator.

What I've learned from my experience as part of this journey to work as a leader and learner in one of today's learning organizations is that today's teacher leader must develop a new skill set — and a new mindset that has as its core a passion for learning, a commitment to collaboration, and a shared vision of the organization.

PASSION FOR LEARNING

As members of a learning community, teacher leaders must be lifelong learners. As John Gabriel (2005) concisely states, "Leaders are both teachers and learners" (p. 4). Traditionally, knowledge was viewed as a relatively finite body of information that students needed to learn to be "educated." Therefore, a college degree and a teaching certificate were considered to be sufficient. After that, professional development was often limited to a few teacher workdays a year. Today, as we travel in the fast lane of the global information superhighway, that body of knowledge is growing exponentially. No matter what the content area, new discoveries and innovations are being made, and last year's knowledge is becoming as obsolete as last year's cell

phones. Our passion and enthusiasm regarding our respective areas of expertise give us an incentive to keep pace with current and emerging trends.

Continued growth and professional development are also critical because teaching is more than an art — it is a pedagogical science. At one time, teachers were disseminators of content knowledge to a somewhat captive audience. Progressive teachers introduced group work and made sure that the students stayed on task. However, 21st-century learners are not the traditional students of the days of "Leave It to Beaver." Today's teachers must be facilitators of learning with collaboration and engagement as the gold standard of best practices. Transformation from a more traditional teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom can only take place with intentional professional development. It takes committed learning leaders to keep current with cutting-edge research in the methods to most effectively teach and reach today's digital natives.

One area of professional development that is similarly neglected is the intentional study of leadership, perhaps because some consider leadership an intuitive process that springs from natural ability. Also, we still hold on to vestiges of the idea that only administrators are leaders, not teachers. On the contrary, all teachers are instructional leaders. The classroom is a learning community led by the teacher, which in turn is a microcosm of the school as a larger learning community led by administrators and other teacher leaders. Not only do teacher leaders need to study leadership to hone their own skills, but to also develop leadership capacity among their team members. The resources for leadership development are endless. Educators can learn leadership principles not only from other educational leaders, but also from those in the private and public sectors who have developed valuable insight through their experiences.

The technological advances that we use for 21st-century learning in the classroom are also effective tools for leadership. Online professional development conducted through blogging, webinars, and more expand collaborative opportunities not only with teacher leaders on our campuses or in our district, but also with leaders in other parts of the nation and even internationally. Learning communities are indeed without boundary.

COMMITMENT TO COLLABORATION

As teachers, we no longer leave our department meet-



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ings to return to our rooms and close the doors behind us. We no longer communicate in terms of “my students” and “your students,” “my lesson plans” and “your lesson plans,” or “my tests” and “your tests.” Rather we collectively plan, with each teacher having a role and bringing something of value to the table. Together we disaggregate student data, looking for trends and asking, “What is working, and what is not?” When we share

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teams of students, we create a culture of mutual accountability and success. As John Gabriel (2005) states, “Collaborators evolve into learning partners, equally invested in each other and in improving achievement” (p. 110).

This paradigm shift from top-down, authoritative administration to a learning organization is built on the concept of interdependence and collaboration. As the teacher has become a facilitator in the classroom, so the teacher leader has become a facilitator in the professional learning community. Even though it is clear that col-

laboration enhances the effectiveness of a learning organization, changing the culture of isolation and independence is not a task for the fainthearted. It takes tenacity and wisdom to confront these entrenched practices. In his work *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy*, Michael Fullan (2010) speaks of the importance of building relationships over a period of time in order to affect this type of cultural change. He adds, “The idea is to maximize trust and effectiveness in order to reduce resistance to a minimum” (pp. 67-68). When we approach our team members as partners, when we learn their strengths, when we listen to their frustrations, we become mentors and coaches instead of supervisors. Just as teachers learn from students, we as leaders continue to learn and grow from our peers.

SHARED VISION

Finally, teacher leaders must know and be committed to the learning organization’s beliefs and vision. It sounds simple: Collaborate, formulate a vision statement, and bring everyone onboard. The challenge, though, is to communicate that vision clearly so that all stakeholders perceive it in the same way. My campus principal led our leadership team and staff through an exercise that illustrates this point. She read us a scenario of an adult handing a child a snack, and instructed us to sketch our mental picture. Even though the “vision” was the same, each person had a unique interpretation of its meaning. Some saw the “adult” as a caregiver, some as a parent, and others as a teacher. For some, the snack was an ice cream cone, while for others it was an apple, and so on.

As teacher leaders, we must clarify that our perceptions of the campus vision align with one another, and with the campus administration. It is similar to a political administration

in which all spokespersons must stay on message. If we do not get the message, or even worse, do not believe in the message, we run the risk of becoming “energy vampires,” as Jon Gordon (2007, p. 73) puts it, rather than creating energy that moves the organization forward.

Our staff followed up our visioning activity by creating paired statements in the form of concrete actions that define the culture of our school as a learning community. One such statement was, “We provide students with quality work that is engaging. We do not fill a child’s day with busywork.” Now when we meet in our professional learning communities, the guiding question becomes, “Does this support the campus vision?” This ensures that our team goals align with the campus vision and goals, which become the standard by which priorities are set and conflicts are resolved. Rather than having competing programs and departments, there is a unity of purpose. It is crucial that teacher leaders facilitate their peers’ capacity to see this larger picture.

A FUTURE DIRECTION

This is an incredibly exciting time to be a teacher leader. Transformation is beginning to take hold and flourish, even in the face of sometimes daunting challenges. Although teacher leaders have made tremendous strides professionally, the journey has only really begun. As district and campus administrators begin to see the untapped potential of teacher leadership and build capacity in their teacher leaders, there will be a renewed sense of professionalism and passion. As Schlechty (2001) describes, “Shared leadership . . . is less like an orchestra, where the conductor is always in charge, and more like a jazz band, where leadership is passed around . . . depending on what the music demands at the moment and who feels the most spirit to express the music” (p. 178). Teachers, pick up your instruments and join the music.

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