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## How Teachers Lead Teachers

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When teachers lead instructional change, these seven strategies help them engage their colleagues and get everyone on board.

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There is growing agreement among education researchers and practitioners that teacher leadership can be a powerful engine of school reform (see Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007). We know less, though, about the subtle dynamics through which teachers can successfully lead the learning of other teachers. How can teacher leaders work most effectively with their fellow teachers to encourage change? Which leadership approaches work, and which ones lead to collegial disengagement?

Some colleagues and I addressed these questions as we studied a grant-funded professional development effort in the Pacific Northwest, which was designed to promote content-area reading strategies at the secondary level (Margolis & Foster, in press; Margolis, 2008). Participants in the project received a total of 80 hours of professional development focused on strategies and approaches to help middle and high school students become more expert readers and thinkers within specific disciplines (such as math, science, and social studies) The participants then shared what they had learned with colleagues at their home schools by leading four hours of professional development sessions during the year. By observing these follow-up sessions in 15 of the 18 schools involved in the grant and then debriefing the presenters afterwards, I gained insight into effective strategies for teachers leading teacher learning.

The observations and discussions focused on the relative success of different techniques the emerging teacher leaders used as they sought to change instructional practices within their schools. Teachers are often resistant to outsiders telling them to change what and how they teach (Cuban, 1993; Evans, 1996). I was curious to see whether teachers would be less resistant to calls for change that came from their own colleagues.
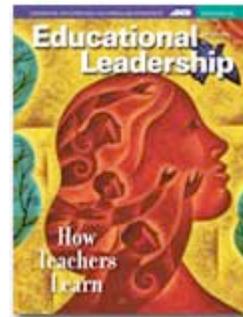
What Worked

We defined effective strategies as those that produced observable teacher engagement, including active participation, attentiveness, and demonstrated or verbalized willingness to consider new approaches. Seven leadership strategies stood out as particularly effective:

1. *Use humor*. Teacher leaders repeatedly used levity strategically to reduce tensions associated with the power dynamics of leading, facilitate a relaxed environment, and introduce more serious topics. For example, one teacher used self-effacing humor before leading her colleagues in a serious discussion of the cultural gaps between themselves and their students, highlighting the need to use texts more interesting to kids.

2. *Include all teachers and content areas*. Although the focus of the presentations was literacy development, the most successful teacher leaders made sure teachers in all content areas could apply ideas to their own classrooms. Several made extra efforts to include math, music, and physical education. One middle school teacher leader, for example, connected the strategy of *reading around the text* (exploring when a text was written, by whom, and within what context) to helping students understand sheet music. The music teacher immediately responded, "Yes—and it could help with music vocabulary too."

3. *Explain strategies briefly and then give participants a chance to practice or observe them*. As is often the case with lessons for K-12 students, the most successful learning events with teachers involved brief periods of direct instruction (5–15 minutes) followed by longer periods of practice and application (20–30 minutes) and debriefing (10–15 minutes).

4. *Frame new approaches as easy and adaptable*. When teacher leaders used such language as "It takes no prep time" or "It actually helps us to go faster," they increased teacher buy-in. The teacher leaders further increased collegial engagement when they framed the pedagogical approach as "adaptable" and "flexible" to each teacher's own situation.

5. *Build from teachers' existing work*. A related successful teacher leader strategy was first asking teachers to share the work they were currently engaging in with students, validating that work, and then asking them to consider how the new ideas might fit in with the excellent repertoire they were already using. For example, one team of teacher leaders approached an activity in the following format, with much success: (1) Teachers discussed content-area texts they brought with them, identifying where students have difficulties; (2) Teachers discussed how they already helped students navigate these difficulties; (3) Teachers considered the three new strategies they had learned that day and picked the one they thought would be most helpful in addressing additional student struggles; and (4) Teachers then presented that strategy to the rest of the group.

6. *Present yourself as a continual learner*. When teacher leaders explained how they themselves worked through using a new approach with their students (rather than just embracing it after reading or hearing about it in the abstract), the teacher learners admitted their own struggles more openly and displayed more hunger for new approaches to address classroom dilemmas.

7. *Include samples of student work*. Sharing recent student work from the teacher leader's classroom was quite compelling to teachers considering the relative value of

a new teaching strategy. Several colleagues commented during and after the sessions that seeing student work convinced them that the new approach might be worth trying. This phenomenon was particularly notable in one session where a teacher leader, in presenting the *summarizing through drawing* strategy, shared a range of student work she had obtained earlier that day. Immediately after, several teachers sought out an article on the strategy she referenced for their future use.

What Didn't Work

As successful as many of the emerging teacher leaders were in engaging their colleagues, some approaches didn't work as well in inspiring collegial engagement. Four ineffective approaches were

1. *Talking too much*. After about 7–10 minutes of continual talking by the teacher-presenter, collegial attention tended to plummet.

2. *Talking and then asking, "Any questions?"* Whether the teacher leader talked for 3 minutes or 30, when he or she closed with "Any questions?" the answer was always silence. This response often compounded itself, with the teacher leader then talking more to fill the void, leading to further staff disengagement.

3. *Presenting too many strategies*. If the teacher leader tried to present too many ideas at once without giving colleagues time to work with a single idea for a meaningful period of time, his or her fellow teachers often felt overloaded.

4. *Focusing solely on the leader's own classroom*. The most engaging presentations invited teachers to connect new approaches with their own classrooms. The least engaging usually included too many details about the teacher leader's own classroom content. For example, one social studies teacher read long historical documents he used with students rather than quickly explaining his classroom context and then working with teachers to explore the applicability of the reading strategy he used.

Teachers as Adult Learners

The successful leadership strategies identified in this study suggest that teachers learn best in the same ways that most students learn best: actively, drawing from prior knowledge, and in a comfortable environment. Beyond that, teachers appear to learn best from another teacher when that teacher leader considers the emotional state of the teacher-audience (including feelings of being overworked, overwhelmed, and underappreciated) and grounds theoretical presentations in concrete examples of classroom practice and student work. Teachers learned less effectively when the teacher leaders centered their presentations on themselves, drowning their colleagues in information instead of inspiring them.

If teacher leaders work intentionally to help their colleagues build bridges from existing approaches to new ones, they may be uniquely positioned to get local buy-in for reforms in ways that education officials, even principals, cannot. In this study, we observed a growing willingness of teachers to be led by their colleagues. Following the teacher-led sessions, we received frequent reports of whole staffs collaborating around the issue of literacy development. In the subsequent year, several participating schools continued the literacy improvement efforts through book study groups and collaborative action research.

Looking at teacher leadership within this grant, a shift appears to be underway. Whether because the complexity of today's schools requires teacher collaboration and leadership or because teacher professionalism is overtaking teacher individualism, educators today seem to value teacher knowledge,

innovation, and leadership.

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