

LEADING IN SYNC

Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning

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Introduction

The term *teacher leadership* has a nice ring to it. Teachers hear the term and imagine ways they could make a bigger difference beyond their own classrooms. Principals hear the term and hope they might be able to improve teachers' engagement and retention while getting some welcome help. Both imagine that this new partnership will be good for teacher satisfaction, school improvement, and reduction of principal burnout. Most significantly, they recognize that teacher leadership holds tremendous promise for improving the quality of teaching and raising student learning to new heights. The ugly truth is that although these important outcomes are possible, they are not at all likely without a commitment from both teachers and principals to work together on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work in concert. They must learn to co-perform leadership.

Effective co-performance of leadership requires teachers and principals to be on the same page about the vision they are trying to create, their understanding of the complementary roles each will play to reach that vision, and the trust required to make it work. Without such alignment, they will inadvertently work against each other, make each other frustrated, stymie school improvement progress, and lose precious energy that could be channeled into greater student success.

Maybe one of the following scenarios is familiar:

You're a teacher

Your principal asks you to be the team leader for your common planning team. You're excited about the opportunity and take time throughout the week crafting an agenda that will engage your colleagues. The night before the first team meeting, your principal e-mails you an agenda with a supportive note and thanks you for agreeing to implement it.

- You're a principal Committed to supporting your novice teachers, you observe them regularly and provide them with growth-oriented feedback in each of your district's Four Domains of Effective Teaching. The mentor you assign structures his support around the Six Dimensions of Quality Teaching from his coach training program. You later learn that the novice teacher is creating two sets of lesson plans before each observation.
- You're a teacher As your school's appointed math facilitator, you attend district meetings where you learn about useful resources you can bring back to your school. With no protected time to meet with math teachers, you decide to prepare a monthly e-mail to provide colleagues with key information and linked articles. At year-end, you ask some colleagues about the utility of your e-mails. They honestly explain, "We can't take on more that is not mandated by the administration."
- You're a principal You are happy to be named the new principal of a school with many formal teacher leader roles in place. The individuals holding those roles take great pride in them and count on the stipend they have received for many years. As you get to know the teachers and the important functions of each role, you see other teachers whose expertise would be a better match for those roles and who desire teacher leadership opportunities. Those teachers leave the building as soon as school dismisses in order to participate in external teacher leadership opportunities: a local policy fellowship, a district curriculum-writing project, and a university-based action-research project.

There is no "bad guy" in any of these scenarios, but it likely didn't feel that way to these educators at the time. One can imagine feelings of frustration, confusion, betrayal, and even anger that can lead teachers and principals alike to decide it may not be worth the extra effort. It would be much easier for the principal to avoid the hassle and just call the shots. It would be much more comfortable for a teacher to just keep their head down and mouth closed. But why the disconnect when both are well-intentioned?

The disconnect is not surprising when we consider how easy it is for teachers and administrators to be out of touch with what the other's job requires them to know and

do. Most school and district administrators acquire the knowledge base on leadership in departments of educational administration within institutions of higher education, far removed from schools and the teachers with whom they will be expected to work. Then, once they are in schools, the structure of their work, isolated from peers with similar roles, means that they are drawn away from their teachers when it is time to engage in professional learning about leadership. Meanwhile, due to the rapid pace of change in the education context, any prior knowledge they may have had about the daily demands of being a classroom teacher rapidly becomes outdated.

Teachers, for their part, are largely on their own to pursue the knowledge base on leadership. Although teachers are leaders of their classrooms every day and stand to have a powerful leadership influence on their colleagues, the knowledge base on leadership is not traditionally considered part of the teacher education curriculum. Increasingly, institutions of higher education are offering graduate programs in teacher leadership, although they don't tend to integrate teachers with other school leaders. While the proliferation of these programs is tied to the introduction of teacher leadership endorsements offered today in dozens of states, such degrees and endorsements are neither a requirement nor a guarantee that the bearer will hold a formal teacher leader role at the school or district level. Participants, then, gain no particular advantage over other teachers in understanding what a school principal actually does all day, and how their unique skills and experiences might complement it.

Thus, today's teachers and principals largely learn about leadership while separate from each other and separate from their school contexts. This makes no sense. Principals and teacher leaders who are committed to improving schools together should invest in learning to lead together. Their shared commitment to leadership learning will model the learning culture that schools need, it will support them to develop shared understandings and language for their leadership practice, and it will facilitate their ability to co-perform leadership skillfully and stay in sync.

Most important, teachers and principals each bring to the table distinct and complementary knowledge, skills, and job functions. Schools serve students better when the strengths of both are maximized. To be sure, school and district administrators have a higher level of responsibility due to the positional authority of their roles. They are in control of more of the factors that influence this system than teachers are, and their role in evaluating teachers creates a power dynamic that cannot be overlooked. However, teachers and principals each have different perspectives on the school and they have different skill sets. They have distinct relationships with colleagues and distinct roles in supporting teaching and learning, the school's core work. These complementary differences create potential for better, more well-informed decision making, but they also suggest that co-performing leadership might take some practice and coordination.

The fact is, it takes two to tango. This book is a dancing lesson.

The ideas in this book were informed by over 25 years of teacher leadership research and practice and, principally, my role as founding director of the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate (BTLC) Program. In 2010, I was offered a design challenge: to think about how teachers in the Boston Public Schools might have access to more powerful professional learning experiences. At that time, many Boston teachers reported that job-embedded professional time was frequently used for meetings, not learning, and the opportunities offered by the district were not as timely, sustained, or relevant to their immediate practice as they would like. At the same time, there was significant variation in student success across Boston's 130 schools. As a strategic partner of the Boston Public Schools, the Boston Plan for Excellence received a grant to respond to this concern. If teachers were tapped as professional learning leaders, could they be supported to share their expertise and grow their collective knowledge base in ways that would benefit student learning across all schools?

In fact, teachers were already at work as leaders in many job-embedded ways within the Boston Public Schools. In 2010, I documented over two dozen formal and informal roles that positioned teachers to influence the quality of teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms. Some teachers held a formally designated role such as mentor, team leader, or content specialist (e.g., literacy coach, math facilitator), while others influenced their colleagues' teaching without a designated role, such as by informally creating book study groups, participating in schoolwide teams, or stepping forward to offer professional development for colleagues. Yet, there was great variation in the presence of these roles across schools, and possibly even greater variation in teachers' effectiveness in these roles. These teachers had few, if any, opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills, share the tools and strategies they had developed with others holding the same role, or grow their collective knowledge base on how to perform these roles skillfully. Support from administrators was also rare, as they often were unaware of what teachers were actually doing in these roles.

I convened a group of teachers with diverse teacher leadership experience and supported them to create the BTLC Program, a series of teacher-led, graduate-credit-bearing courses designed to help teachers strengthen the leadership skills they need for teacher leader roles. We started small and embedded data routines into the work that could support the program to evolve in a way that was responsive to teachers' and schools' needs. The program's governing board of teachers met regularly to review the data, collaborate on program improvement, and identify obstacles.

As more and more teachers participated in the courses, we saw that many participating teacher leaders thrived in their work, felt renewed as professionals, and attributed specific student and school improvement gains to their learning. However, other teacher leaders became increasingly disgruntled and left their teacher

leader roles, their schools, or even the profession. We realized we had been preparing teachers to be leaders of schools where somebody was already serving as leader. These other leaders (that is, principals)—whether thrilled or threatened by teachers' strengthened leadership skills—were often unsure how to respond.

Program data began to reveal patterns in the conditions that support or limit the promise of teacher leadership for student learning, and led me to develop a collection of tools and resources that could help principals and teacher leaders learn to lead together. The collection began to grow, and in 2013, after moving with the BTLC Program to Teachers21, an education nonprofit outside Boston, I began to experiment with these tools throughout Massachusetts and beyond. From New York to Kentucky to Iowa to New Mexico, these ideas, tools, and resources resonated with teachers and principals who were committed to the idea of teacher leadership but struggled to get the dance steps right. They are presented in this book.

Who is this book for? It is for all of the educators who influence teaching and learning in a school. This includes the principal, assistant principals, coaches, department leaders, grade-level and content team leaders, mentors, professional development leaders, and, in fact, all teachers. Each of these educators interacts with other educators in the school, and in doing so, each deliberately or unwittingly influences others' professional practice. They are all part of a school's leadership system, and they must learn to co-perform leadership together.

Since from a distributed perspective all teachers are leaders, and since in a learning organization all leaders are teachers (of adults), I've adopted the term *teacher/leaders* to refer to this wide array of educators throughout this book. Admittedly the slash is awkward at first, but it serves as a constant reminder throughout the book of the truly hybrid nature of today's education roles and of the need to start thinking collectively about the leadership development of teachers and principals. The term *teacher leader* (sans slash) is used occasionally in this book to refer specifically to teachers who intend or are perceived to influence their colleagues' instruction.

Although district and state leaders, school partners, higher education faculty, and students of educational leadership will also benefit from the vision of shared leadership this book provides, it is intended primarily to provide teams of teacher/leaders with the ideas and tools they need to practice co-performance of leadership with skill.

Chapter 1 explores how and why teacher leadership is so essential in schools that aim for all students to succeed. Schools committed to equity simply cannot justify being organized in ways that allow each student's experience to be informed only by the professional expertise of the few teachers to whom they are assigned. This chapter guides readers to recognize the ways in which leadership is already distributed in their contexts and to consider how they might maximize

the differentiated and complementary expertise of teacher/leaders for accelerating student learning throughout the school by working in sync.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the role of a shared vision in synchronizing teacher/leaders' efforts. Often teacher/leaders are challenged to articulate their vision or to communicate about it effectively across roles. In this chapter, readers will encounter tools and strategies that teacher/leaders can experiment with together to help them come to a shared vision and communicate about it.

Chapter 3 invites readers to consider their shared vision in the context of current reality. Teacher/leaders are already influencing teaching and learning throughout their schools in intentional and unintentional ways. Thinking about these influences with regard to key leadership functions and essential priorities allows us to identify the gaps and redundancies, the needs and opportunities. It challenges teacher/leaders to think critically about the differentiated expertise teacher/leaders bring, who should be doing what, and how they might be supported to strengthen needed leadership skills.

Chapter 4 focuses on coordinating teacher/leaders' efforts. It offers key ideas and resources teacher/leaders can use to create a culture of teacher leadership throughout a school, as well as to create teams and roles designed to function in sync. The planning maps and communication routines provided here will support teacher/leaders' efforts to complement each other and to result in stronger organizational learning.

Chapter 5 discusses trust, the critical foundation required for this work. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 introduce ideas that may represent major changes to the way teacher/leaders work and communicate, requiring them to make compromises and possibly think differently about who they are as leaders. Teacher/leaders will be unwilling to do any of this without trust. Chapter 5 provides background research on how trust is built so that readers can understand the deliberate steps they can take toward strengthening and safeguarding trust.

Chapter 6 contains vignettes from four schools that have used the ideas and tools in this book to significant success. It is meant to illustrate what these ideas look like in action and to inspire leaders in their shared commitment to try some of these ideas together.

Each chapter begins with questions teacher/leaders can use to reflect individually and together about their context before engaging in the chapter content. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5, which each begin with a school-based scenario, conclude with reflection questions designed to support readers to envision the application of chapter themes in their own setting. My aim is to launch a conversation among teacher/leaders that, with the help of these resources, can extend far beyond this book.