How to Thrive as a Teacher Leader

by John G. Gabriel

Chapter 1. Organizational Leadership: Nurturing Leadership in Your School

For nearly a century, schools have functioned in the autocratic style of the line-staff model: principals are managers and teachers are their employees, often voiceless and powerless to influence their superiors' quest to improve student achievement. But with the growing emphasis on high-stakes testing and the advent of No Child Left Behind, many school leaders are seeking more effective organizational behavior by drawing on the leadership potential of all stakeholders, especially teachers.

Schools making this change are creating and expanding teachers' roles as leaders. For principals, this trend is a shift from "relying on the power of the system" to "seeking to empower others"—or, more specifically, a shift from "seeking to be in control" to "letting go of control and building a community of relationships that tends to be self-organizing" (Caine & Caine, 2000, p. 8). Lending support to the need for transformation, Buchen (2000) argues that "the only leadership that will make a difference is that of teachers. They alone are positioned where all the fulcrums are for change. They alone know what the day-to-day problems are and what it takes to solve them. They, not the principals, should be the ones to hire new teachers. They know what is needed."

A task force report from the School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative (2001) echoes these sentiments. It states: "Mischaracterized though they often are as incompetent know-nothings, teachers are, paradoxically, also widely viewed as . . . indispensable but unappreciated leaders in the truest meaning of the word. . . . It would be difficult to find a more authentic but unacknowledged example of leadership in modern life" (p. 1). The report claims that teachers are essential to reform and that they possess a body of knowledge yet to be exploited.

But we already knew that. That's common sense.

We educators also knew that the role ripest for this kind of metamorphosis is that of the department chair in high schools or the team leader in elementary and middle schools.

Department chairs and team leaders walk a fine line: they are neither teacher nor administrator. They nurture colleagues and teach alongside them, but they also must retain allegiance to their administrators. They lack line authority. Considering how essential teacher leaders are to improving achievement, this is perhaps the most curious aspect of their roles. They are constantly reminded, by both administrators and teachers, of all they cannot do—regardless of their potential for positive change, which is often greater than that of all other leaders in a school because of their broad sphere of influence.

Teacher leaders possess a semblance of authority but no formal power—only the illusion of power. For example, a department chair cannot complete teacher evaluations. She cannot place a memo or letter in someone's personnel file, nor can she dismiss a teacher. As a result, she must
find other ways to motivate, mobilize, and lead teachers. She must rely on intrinsic leadership abilities, knowledge of group dynamics, influence, respect, and leadership by example to boost the productivity of her department.

In myopic schools, the role of department chair is limited to that of a paper pusher. These schools view the teacher leader as someone who will complete the master schedule, order supplies, maintain inventory, and pass along administrative directives to the department. These schools either don’t know how else to capitalize on the strengths of their teacher leaders or are uncomfortable doing so. True, these traditional responsibilities are critical to maintaining the wellness of a school, but in terms of improving the health of an organization, forward-thinking schools have moved beyond this.

In schools where transformational leadership is present, administrators recognize that the leadership of a department chair or team leader can make a significant difference to the climate and culture of the school. They are not threatened by a teacher’s influence or exercise of leadership, nor by giving up some control. These administrators strive to encourage and cultivate leadership and “make better use of the unique strengths and contributions [that] department heads can bring to school management and improvement” (Weller, 2001, p. 80). At these schools, teacher leaders act as coaches and mentors, observe classrooms so that instruction can be refined and best practices implemented, and attempt to realize a vision or to “reculture” the environment. With the pressure of high-stakes testing and the need to meet state and federal benchmarks, administrators rely on these leaders to improve achievement and even defer to them in certain instances.

Roles for Teacher Leaders

Although the traditional teacher leader is still important in a school, other leadership positions can have as much influence in ensuring student achievement. These roles offer teachers a greater voice in shaping programs, supporting the mission, and guiding a team toward its goal, which will ultimately help the students and the school achieve.

Not all leadership positions are formal in nature. Every school has teacher leaders who do not serve—and may never have served—as official leaders, which is one of the most unique components of teacher leadership. In any kind of organization, informal leaders command a great deal of respect; they have much say and sway in determining a team’s climate or the chances of a proposal's adoption, and they are often sought after for advice.

Similarly, not all leadership roles are fixed—meaning assigned, specific positions. Someone might act as a mentor one week and then assume the role of innovator with a unique proposal the following week. These fluid and spontaneous roles are just as essential as the leader to the success of the team. Ideally, these people are the supporters whom the leader can trust and turn to for help in a variety of matters.

It is also expected that leadership roles will change, shift, and evolve over time. If someone was a team leader for the past five years, it does not guarantee him that role for a sixth year. Leadership roles should not be determined by seniority. Therefore, if standardized results are marginal or a teacher’s leadership is questionable, a change is warranted. Don't be afraid to make changes; change, along with its potential for struggle and conflict, is often an essential ingredient of success.

If you are a department chair or team leader, you probably have already realized how difficult it is to accomplish everything that your job entails. Effective teacher leaders are usually given more responsibility, whether they want it or not, so you need to learn how not to overburden your teachers and how to say no (and that there is nothing wrong in doing so) to avoid burnout. Although the following leadership positions can enhance teachers' professional self-worth, these roles are equally significant to you: delegating (not avoiding) responsibility is critical if you hope to succeed as a leader.
Moreover, these roles can be vehicles for grooming future leaders. Aside from becoming a
department chair, counselor, or administrator, a teacher has very little opportunity for career
advancement within a school building. Not only can the leadership possibilities below benefit a
school or a program, they can also spark interest in pursuing a position at the central office or
collegiate level, where teachers can have an even greater influence on education.

**Grade Level/Subject Area Leader**
The grade level leader coordinates specific organizational needs (whether the 5th grade will take
its annual class trip to Philadelphia, what supplies to order, and so on), and he runs meetings
that address concerns and strategies regarding specific students.

This leadership position is often further broken down by content area or instructional concerns.
Through horizontal alignment, the subject area specialist coordinates curriculum across the grade
level, providing instructional leadership and support to teachers of a common subject. For
instance, the subject leader might call a meeting to discuss why some 6th graders are having
more success than others in comprehending photosynthesis, and which strategies have been
effective in conveying the concept.

Monitoring the instruction and assessments of the teachers on the grade level is paramount since
every student in each subject area is expected to possess the same set of skills and body of
knowledge at the end of the year. These leaders initiate curriculum mapping and scrutinize the
assessments used. Analyzing data also plays a large role in improving student achievement, so
leaders should be aware of the most recent data about the team and its progress toward certain
benchmarks. Finally, these leaders create staff development opportunities for their teams,
because they best know the challenges that the teams face.

**Vertical Leader**
This role is similar to the above, except that the leader is in charge of seeing that curriculum is
aligned up and down the grade levels. For example, the 6th grade vertical team leader ensures
that students have acquired the knowledge and skills in their previous math classes that they
need for success at the benchmark level. If not, leaders find ways to tighten the instruction and
the curriculum. They also promote collaboration and share pertinent content literature.

**Backup Leader**
Train future leaders by rotating teachers as the backup to your position. Invest time to sit down
with them and explain the nature of your job, or to discuss situations that arise during the course
of your day. You might have them proofread one of your e-mail messages so they can learn
about the issues you deal with (plus, it is always a good idea to have an extra set of eyes look
over something you wrote).

Let them join you in interviews. Afterward, meet with them immediately to explain your line of
questioning or to see what characteristics of the applicant they picked up on. Send them in your
place to meetings where they will learn how time-consuming, and at times frustrating, a
leadership position can be and how to cope with that. Have them assume your responsibilities
when you are absent.

Basically, let them experience your experience, similar to an informal internship where they can
get an overview of your position and its nuances. While you are equipping them with essential
skills and knowledge, you may be creating your successor for when you move on. Even if you
don’t leave in the near future, your backup will have been trained to take a leadership position
elsewhere. As one of my administrators used to preach, begin the cycle anew and help reform
education from within.

**Mentor**
This person takes on the responsibility of coaching and advising novice teachers and teachers who are new to the school system. With more and more novice teachers leaving the field within the first few years of teaching, the mentor is not only concerned with instructional and organizational needs; he also lends emotional and moral support to alleviate the stress that the job creates.

A mentor need not always be the strongest instructional leader, but he should have a solid grounding in best practices and his content area. He should be able to suggest ideas and strategies to assist in classroom instruction. And he must be astute enough to read people (that is, he must be perceptive and have a high emotional intelligence). Because of the importance of retaining teachers, new employees should be carefully placed and matched with mentors, either by a lead mentor, who oversees mentors in the entire building, or by the team or department leader. (See Resource 1.)

**Peer Coach**

Not a new concept, peer coaching has received much attention in recent years and is embraced and advanced in some school districts. A peer coach is similar to a mentor except that with this pair, both teachers—not necessarily novices—function as mentor and as protégé. In this relationship, the word "peer" is key. Because peer denotes equality, these teachers' classroom visits are nontargeting. They are not evaluative and prescriptive; they are diagnostic and constructive, allowing teachers to experiment and take risks without fear of judgment.

After each has observed the other in class, peer coaches discuss observed instructional behaviors, actions, and practices, which can include giving feedback on plans, lessons, instruction, classroom presence, and classroom management. There is a safe environment among these volunteers that enables them to converse in a candid manner and learn from each other. This ultimately benefits the teachers' growth, the team's growth, and the students' growth.

**Note-Taker/Recorder**

It is imperative to keep a record of every meeting because we tend to have selective memories, especially when we are passionate about an issue. An accurate record of what was discussed and what was decided can be helpful in case of future disagreement, as well as in bringing people who missed the meeting up to speed.

Minutes should document who was present, who was absent, and who was late. Working from an agenda, the note-taker keeps a record of issues and questions raised and the resulting dialogue, outcomes, and resolutions. In circumstances where there may be rancor over what the minutes reflect, it might be prudent to have two people record them and compare notes to ensure their accuracy.

Although it might be interpreted that the note-taker is in cahoots with you if she sits next to you, proximity can be helpful. It enables her to look over your shoulder at your own notes in case she misses something and to stay on top of every issue. It is also a good idea to keep the minutes in a central place so all teachers, regardless of what team they are serving on, have access to them.

**Parliamentarian/Timekeeper**

This person alleviates the team leader's responsibilities by keeping the group on task with the agenda. After a stressful day of work, it is natural for a meeting to degenerate into a complaint session or, in worse cases, a complete digression into the social lives of the group's members. This leader keeps the group plowing ahead and reminds members when they are nearing the cutoff or have exceeded the time limit for a topic. Meetings should be productive, and the main reason they often are not is that someone has been allowed to derail the group and pursue his own topics of discussion while everyone waits for someone else to intervene.
**Presenter**

Too often schools are obsessed with spending money to send teachers to conferences outside the system when the answers, knowledge, and resources are right there within their own walls. Both weak and strong school systems tend to underuse the extraordinary wealth of talent they possess.

Target one of your teacher’s strengths and ask him to give a presentation. Or ask someone, or a team, to read a professional article and report back to the group on it. This role is by no means fixed. For example, the team leader can begin by selecting someone to present. Then the role should rotate through the team, perhaps in a “popcorn” fashion (often used during reading activities), where the last person to present picks the next person to present. This kind of staff development should be the focus for most of your team meetings.

**Conference Attendee**

After you have exhausted your team’s resources, try to send your teachers to seminars, depending on your budget. They should also attend local, state, and national conferences. However, this should not be a free vacation. The attendee should clearly understand that she is responsible for bringing information back to the team at the next meeting. This sharing can lead to further meeting topics and action research.

**Speaker/Writer**

Have your teachers identify something that they do extremely well and encourage them to polish, organize, and market it by submitting proposals to present at conferences. Or encourage them to share their experiences and successes by writing articles for various educational journals. These are great opportunities for them to grow professionally and to network—and it brings your school good publicity. Moreover, if they impress someone with their presentation or article, then that could turn into a speaking engagement—a chance to make a few extra dollars with little additional preparation. As one colleague explained, a strong presentation is like an annuity because it keeps on paying.

**School Plan Chair**

Contrary to how it is viewed and used (or not used) in some schools, the school plan is a vital, fluid document that should guide your team toward improving student achievement. The role of school plan chair usually does not rotate because consistency and continuity are extremely important. The school plan chair has an integral position in coordinating and guiding the school toward achieving its vision.

People should not feel penalized for holding this position in spite of the work it might entail. If your school functions in a collegial and cooperative manner, a team leader or department chair will not have to bear the brunt of this responsibility. The school plan chair should be charismatic, compassionate, and organized. She will be working with all the teachers in the building; a group effort is needed to create or enhance this document.

**Faculty Representative**

Some school systems have faculty councils where teacher leaders bring team, department, and faculty issues to the administration. If teachers are concerned that a tardy policy is not being enforced, for example, then the faculty representative would bring this issue to the council. Other school systems have a council where teachers can bring issues directly to the superintendent. If teachers are concerned about the number of inservice days that the county is mandating, this would be the forum to bring such a concern. And, finally, some schools have instructional councils that teachers sit on, where leaders discuss issues pertaining to classroom and buildingwide instruction.
A faculty representative seeks out the questions, concerns, and issues of his colleagues and brings them, verbatim when possible, to a more powerful body. He could set up a drop-box in the building or, with the aid of the building’s technology specialist, establish an e-mail account that would protect the anonymity of teachers posting or sending messages. This leader brings back minutes to the team or school so people know what has been decided and can confirm that their concerns have been accurately represented.

A union representative is a similar position. A strong teacher advocate, the union rep listens to faculty concerns and works closely with the administration and external bodies. This leader, who in many ways is a watchdog, protects and ensures teacher interests, advises teachers who believe their rights have been infringed, and, in some states, plays a role in negotiating contracts.

**Host Teacher**

A host teacher is someone who is willing to sponsor a practicum student or a student teacher from the local college or university. Finding the right match is crucial; you want the visiting student to have the best and most realistic experience possible. Some host teachers might view this role as a vacation because someone else will be responsible for teaching their classes. It should be stressed that hosting a student teacher involves much time and can even be quite burdensome, especially if the person is not as well prepared as he should be.

This leader models exemplary instructional practices, techniques, and strategies for the student teacher to observe during his stay. After the student teacher has observed the host teacher’s classes for a couple of weeks, the bulk of the teaching load is turned over to him. The host teacher assists with unit and lesson planning and helps him create assessments. Although it would seem that the host teacher has fewer responsibilities because she is teaching fewer classes, she has the responsibility of coaching and mentoring the aspiring teacher. She observes classes, provides timely and meaningful feedback and constructive criticism to her student teacher, and conferences with both him and the college supervisor regarding his progress.

If a team leader or department chair isn't the host teacher, he should meet with the student teacher to provide an overview of the program and its policies. Meeting again at the end of the student’s stay to answer lingering questions will provide closure to the experience.

**Instructional Audit Leader**

Every public school must go through some kind of an accreditation cycle. This leader serves on the school’s accreditation committee by gathering evidence to demonstrate that the school is meeting certain standards; he meets with the visiting committee, and then reports its recommendations to the school or relevant team and assists in making any necessary changes. A variation of this role is for a teacher to serve on the committee that visits schools on the cycle. In doing so, the leader can learn more about the functioning of the total school and its programs and can bring back information about successful programs and ideas.

**Search Committee Panelist**

In schools where administrative applicants must interview with a panel—a team usually consisting of the principal or her designee, teachers, and, in some cases, even parents and students—a teacher might enjoy having a hand in finding the best fit for the school and community by sitting on such a panel. Although he might not have a voice in creating the panel questions, he can, with the principal's permission, canvass the school to determine the characteristics and qualities the faculty is looking for in their new administrator. If he has the principal's trust, he might even be the one to organize and coordinate the panel; he could review résumés or tap other teachers to serve with him on the team.

**Community Leader**
All teachers should be involved in their communities not just because of the obvious reasons but also because of the political ramifications. At a time when budgets are slashed because community members do not have children attending the local school and are loath to pass a tax increase, and when a significant portion of the public believes that teachers work only “9:00 to 3:00 and have summers free,” PR work is needed to demonstrate the many services that a school provides and the good things that occur there.

Teachers can reach out to the surrounding community by volunteering to teach courses in their areas of specialty, by attending community functions to show their support, or by attending community meetings to keep abreast of concerns. Attending PTSA meetings or serving as a liaison between the PTSA and the faculty is another way to build connections.

Teachers can also exhibit leadership by actively engaging the community. A leader I know initiated a “community and texts” program, a kind of book club where every student, parent, and community member was invited to read the same book and meet at the school for book talks. This leader had incredible success in uniting property owners and businesses and showcasing the innovative things the school was doing.

Other kinds of community outreach can be targeted solely at parents. I hosted two events, one on the SAT and one on our AP program, so parents could become better informed. Securing guest speakers, sending letters home in multiple languages, and using the PTSA to promote the events drew some of the largest audiences the school had seen and did wonders in involving parents in their children’s education.

**Student Activities Coordinator**

Often an administrator is the one to oversee the placement of sponsors and coaches to the groups needing sponsorship. But a teacher might be able to forge a tighter bond between students and organization sponsors by finding the best match. A good match could have a direct influence on student achievement because, as some literature suggests, extracurriculars and achievement are related. In addition to overseeing student groups, this leader might encourage teachers to become sponsors or encourage groups to plan joint events.

**Technology Leader**

This person does not initially need to be the technology guru of the team. She should have an interest in technology, but she can be trained in this area. The leader coordinates the team’s technological needs and serves as a troubleshooter when glitches arise. If your building has a technology committee, she serves as a liaison to that group and assists in making buildingwide decisions concerning technology.

**Web Page Curator**

This position is best suited for a technophile. Many teachers love technology and crave the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of it—and will jump at the chance to use it. Tap these feelings and abilities by making someone responsible for creating or monitoring a department or team Web page. This can be a vital resource for parents and students in addition to being a great PR vehicle. This person might create links to other helpful Web sites, post bios of your teachers, write an online newsletter, or work on anything else that would be beneficial to the learning community.

**Supplies Coordinator**

A supplies coordinator may not be necessary on all grade levels or in all subject areas. For example, a high school history department may be concerned only with books and traditional supplies, but a 7th grade science team might need someone to coordinate the use, inventory, and ordering of lab equipment and supplies. This leader’s responsibility is to determine what the team
needs and ensure it has the materials for success.

**Leadership Qualities**

Although the options for leadership are varied, there are a number of qualities that leaders have in common. Many of these characteristics are seen in effective teachers, which might be why people gravitate toward them and why they seek leadership positions. Look for the following traits in the teachers in your department and in your school, and steer your potential teacher leaders toward growth opportunities.

**Principled**

One of the problems with U.S. politics today is that few representatives are willing to take a stand and fight for what they truly believe in. It’s not surprising that people are apathetic and voter turnout is consistently low. People want someone to believe in, someone who will “fight the good fight” and risk the consequences of doing so, and teachers are no different.

It would seem that tenured teachers have little to lose because they have job security, but repercussions can take the form of having their schedules changed, being forced to “float” between rooms, not receiving administrative support, or being unable to advance in their careers. A teacher who weighs these risks and still wants his voice heard over the din is a leader whom people want to work with and to follow. These teachers are student centered and not motivated by stipends or how being a leader makes them feel.

A principled person is also trustworthy. Earning the trust of colleagues is no small feat, and maintaining confidentiality can be difficult sometimes. Those who confide in you expect you to keep information to yourself, and if you do, you can be rewarded in a variety of ways.

**Honest and Ethical**

By choice or not, people will generally follow their leaders. If a leader is honest and ethical, however, he will be respected, which is more important. An elementary school team leader was asked not to tell one of his teachers that she would be inheriting a very disruptive student midway through the marking period. If he withheld this information and was later asked if he had previous knowledge of it, he would either have to lie, which he was uncomfortable doing, or admit the truth, which he believed would diminish his leadership.

The day he learned of the news, he decided it was best to tell the teacher after school what was going to happen the next day. Consequently, the teacher respected him for being forthright and treating her as a professional. He was able to prevent her emotional outburst, which would have occurred the following day when the disruptive student walked into her classroom—and which would have affected the teacher, her students, the leader, the guidance department, and the administration. And his leadership was strengthened as a result.

**Organized**

A disorganized teacher leader would be hard-pressed to handle all her responsibilities inside and outside of the classroom while holding a leadership position. Organized, though, does not mean that every paper is tucked neatly away in a manila folder or that a workstation is spotless. Being organized means having some kind of system in place, however foreign it may appear to others, to stay focused and on track, which facilitates being able to handle the myriad responsibilities necessary for teaching and leading.

**Perceptive**

Nowadays, too few people listen carefully to what others are saying, and too many ignore facial expressions, gestures, and other clues. Being sensitive to people’s needs and concerns is crucial. It is essential to be able to discern when your team is overwhelmed, when a meeting ceases to
be productive, and when your teachers need assistance or direction but are reluctant to ask for it.

Sensing what people need and when they need it is a key leadership quality. Successful leaders are able to read people. They mentally note people's reactions and remember certain situations, and they are able to connect the dots along the way. They perceive differences between what people say and what they do. They are observant, as they note the school politics, identify potential threats, and adjust accordingly so that their actions are not damaging. Trusting their instincts is another way that these leaders are effective: they know when to go with their gut.

**Empathetic and Supportive**

People are more inclined to follow someone who understands what they are going through. It is not good enough for a leader to imagine what it is like to have a class of 35 freshmen; she needs to have had such a large group herself. This is why administrators who had only a brief tenure in the classroom, or who never taught, have a tough time leading: they are unable to convince their constituency that they have "been there, done that." A lack of direct experience makes it difficult for them to provide viable and valuable suggestions to teachers, or for teachers to trust and act on recommendations they receive.

An empathetic and supportive leader assists others emotionally, socially, and instructionally, and forges connections with them. Without being judgmental, she finds ways to help people recognize and learn from their mistakes. She is not intent on punishing people but instead on helping them.

**Altruistic**

Much as a mother feeds her children first when there is not enough to go around, those who put the needs of others ahead of their own have a solid understanding of what true leadership entails. The sacrifice may involve waiting until everyone else receives supplies or taking on an unappealing task. Leaders sacrifice their planning periods, their free time, and sometimes even their personal lives for the benefit of others. A leader understands that the health of the family depends on letting others eat before she does.

**Accessible**

The concept of having an "open-door policy" has lost almost all its cachet. Some profess it but don't practice it, whereas some preach it but make others feel awkward for taking advantage of it. We obviously should be accessible during contract hours. But because the nature of the job demands that we often take our work home, we should be accessible after hours as well.

An administrator made himself accessible to me by giving me both his home phone number and his cell phone number, and when I called, he never made me feel that I was intruding on his time. He understood that for us to be successful, these kinds of sacrifices were necessary. In turn, all my teachers have my contact information. When a new hire needed to reach me, he was astonished when a colleague gave him my cell phone number, exclaiming, "You mean he doesn't mind if you call him during the weekend?"

Of course, you need to set limits. I know a department chair who would receive phone calls from one of her teachers several times a week simply to talk about his day. This chair was going beyond being accessible; she was unable to set and communicate boundaries.

**Resourceful**

Obstacles do not slow down a good leader; they are opportunities for him to flex his problem-solving muscles. People are inspired to work with a leader who can circumvent roadblocks, devise creative solutions, and use the network. For example, a resourceful teacher does not accept a shortage of funds as the bottom line; he knows whose pockets to pick or finds people to subsidize the team's needs.
Fair
Being professional means putting aside personal prejudices for the good of the students. A fair leader hears all voices, does not play favorites (although she may have them), and is not self-serving. Treating everyone fairly is more important than treating everyone equally, and a fair leader is an impartial leader. She does not allow friendships or rivalries to impede the group’s progress, especially when moving toward improved achievement. She understands that she walks a fine line, expresses that to her teachers, and practices fairness toward all whenever possible.

Accepting
Accepting people for who and what they are shows leadership. Although placing blame may make a leader feel more secure, it is better for the group if he accepts people’s flaws and shortcomings and learns how to work with them (or around them). Also, rather than passing the buck, accepting the blame for a problem demonstrates responsibility. Teachers respect and want to work with leaders who are willing to be accountable, a rare quality indeed in our current age of abdication of responsibility.

Vulnerable
Leaders who own up to mistakes or share their errors with their colleagues, with an explanation of what they learned from the experience, are valued. Leaders who admit mistakes show a willingness to grow. They are perceived as human, not as unapproachable academics in an ivory tower or arrogant know-it-alls. Not afraid to admit when they do not know an answer, they are willing to learn and ask others for the answers. And humility can be refreshingly disarming.

Forward-Thinking
Some people have a knack for anticipating what might happen next. Whether it is predicting the outcome of a meeting or a situation or analyzing political and educational trends, the ability to plan for what may be coming down the pike is a talent that not many possess. Successful athletes demonstrate this on a regular basis by just seeming to know what is needed or where they are needed. Successful teacher leaders are no different. Conducting a parametric analysis (where education is, where it has been, and where it is headed) can put a team on the cutting edge. Leaders can save their group time and growing pains by suggesting change and giving choices rather than mandates, which are always less palatable.

Futurists are often risk-takers. The teacher in a previous scenario who had the dilemma of whether or not to inform a colleague about a decision is a risk-taker of sorts. He was not foolhardy; he did not rush into the situation but weighed the risks and the consequences and took action. As General George S. Patton once remarked, taking calculated risks is quite different from being rash. Examples of risks include piloting a new idea or strategy or supporting someone who is willing to do so. Similarly, these people seize the initiative instead of waiting for others to act. They recognize the far-reaching effects of a good idea and get the ball rolling.

Global
Seeing the bigger picture is a skill that facilitates problem solving. A teacher leader is not always able to understand why decisions are made and how they affect the entire organizational structure, but she does comprehend the ramifications on her team. She is able to see beyond her classroom to at least her hallway. She doesn't deal in scraps; she deals in what is best for all students and teachers.

Decisive and Incisive
Leadership demands an action-oriented, decisive person: those leaders who get things done are the most appreciated. They take the initiative and make things happen. Penetrating to the heart
of an issue shows a keen and quick mind—and it can save time. In a profession where time is limited and people spend an inordinate amount of time discussing, debating, and deliberating issues, respect belongs to the person who, without making a rushed decision, can consider all angles and cut to the chase.

**Intelligent**

Intelligence as a key quality may sound obvious, but a leader I know was not respected because he lacked depth in his content knowledge. Once teachers realized this, they ran academic circles around him to hide what was really going on in their classrooms, and students used this to their advantage to help them get what they wanted.

Similarly, teachers resent leaders who simply give an answer because they are expected to have one. Students can sense when adults fake their way through an explanation, but adults can be more perceptive and unforgiving. Even though it seems that anti-intellectualism is rampant in our society, educators value intelligence and crave an intelligent leader.

**The Leadership Choice**

You already possess a powerful strategy for improving achievement: nurturing teacher leadership. Most people want to feel that they are part of something significant, that what they do matters, and that they are contributing members to a common goal that affects achievement. Teacher leadership meets this need because it creates a greater sense of ownership, buy-in, and community.

Although administrators hold influential positions in guiding a school toward its goals, it is the teacher leader's interpretation, support, and implementation of decisions—his and the administration's—that move an organization forward. He simultaneously deals with a myriad of obstacles and runs interference so that an avalanche of issues does not deluge the main office.

If a teacher leader is effective, he will rarely need to disturb an administrator, and what administrator would not appreciate more time to devote to her responsibilities? In fact, by taking on more responsibility or solving problems creatively, he can build rapport with her. The teacher leader, in turn, will be better supported by his administrator, which will ultimately increase his effectiveness. Moreover, because of high-stakes testing, administrators are spending more time out of the building at workshops, meetings, and training sessions or promoting the school, so the need for teacher leadership has never been more obvious. Identify those teachers in your department who are integral to its success and train them as teacher leaders.

There will be those who rise to the challenge and those who attempt to knock them down. Leadership breeds envy, and we teachers can be very petty people sometimes. What is baffling is that we're not envious of other teacher leaders because of what their positions bring. Most often, no tangible rewards are associated with teacher leadership. Many department chairs and mentors receive some kind of financial compensation, but dedicated leaders do not take on these roles for remuneration (and it usually is nominal in relation to the hours they spend).

Most teachers accept leadership as a reward in itself: they derive a sense of self-worth from having their voices heard, developing vision, or serving their students and colleagues. Desirable as this satisfaction is, it should hardly evoke envy or (at worst) maliciousness. But it can. I'm not here to explain human nature but to remind you that these kinds of feelings and behaviors exist.

To mollify those who are discontented, you or an administrator might be tempted to grant them leadership positions. This tactic might work in some cases. Perhaps putting such people in the spotlight will unleash their latent leadership abilities or force them to step up to the plate. This is not always the case, however, and such a decision can backfire with horrendous consequences. Remember that the business of educating children is not Little League baseball: everyone does not get a chance to swing the bat. A score is kept, and there are winners and losers. To give everyone a chance to play, regardless of ability, is damaging to students and can be even more
damaging to the game.

Our student athletes realize this. Students are not selected to start on the varsity team simply because they are seniors. They know that it takes more than a desire and a commitment to win: their abilities determine their roles. To use another analogy, a high-profile legal case is not given to a lawyer simply because it is his turn in the firm to have one. That would not be serving a defendant’s interests. Lawyers receive such cases because they earn them. The same should hold true for your teachers. If adolescents and other professionals can understand this concept, you need to believe that your teachers will understand it also. If a teacher who lacks leadership qualities and abilities feels it is unfair that she does not have a leadership position, find another way to make her feel valued.


