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Teacher Leadership Is More Complicated Than You Think

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on December 29, 2014 8:06 AM

Where "*Teacher Leadership*" is concerned, have we reached the "**Tipping Point**?" Taken from Malcolm Gladwell,

"The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. Just as a single sick person can start an epidemic of the flu, so too can a small but precisely targeted push cause a fashion trend, the popularity of a new product, or a drop in the crime rate."

It seems as though we have reached the tipping point when it comes to "*Teacher Leadership*." Everywhere we look there are articles, panel discussions and books about teacher leadership. Unfortunately, teacher leaders are sometimes chosen in closed-door meetings with school leaders sitting at the table wondering who can help them the most, and they don't always choose the best people for the job.

Are teacher leaders a positive option in schools today? Or is it just another title that is here today and gone tomorrow? Are they the teachers who will help their colleagues, or help themselves gain access to the administrative "*In Crowd*." Choosing teacher leaders is much more complicated than we may think. Like peeling an onion, there are many layers to the position.

- Who are the best teachers for the job?
- Do they want it?
- What does the position entail?
- Is it a paid full-time position? Or in these days of budget cuts, is it more of an add-on to a day where they have other duties?
- Are teachers who are picked looked at with respect...or are they talked about by their colleagues in a negative way when they aren't present in the faculty room?

As much as school leaders may be overjoyed about teacher leaders, those teachers who aren't chosen to "*lead*" may feel left out and wondering why they weren't offered the position (grab a mirror folks & answer that question yourself!). Those teachers left behind (NTLB!) may also become the roadblock to teacher leader success because they don't quite **get** how one teacher is somehow better in the classroom than they may be.

ASCD panel

In a **recent panel discussion** in Washington D.C. focusing on teacher leadership, ASCD's Whole Child Director Sean Slade used Gladwell's words "*Tipping Point*." With so many changes happening in education (some good...some bad!) school leaders cannot be everything to everyone within their school, and sometimes they lack the instructional leadership and integrity in the classroom that teachers who still teach may have in the school.

In one of two panels for the day Becky Pringle, Vice President of the National Education Association (NEA) said that teacher leadership needs to be formalized and funded because there will be 2 million new teachers in classrooms around North America in the next six years, and they need leaders in the classroom that they can look up to and learn from as they negotiate through their first years of teaching.

In the second panel discussion, which I was a panelist for, Robyn Jackson (former teacher and administrator, founder of Mindsteps) shared a concern if we have reached the tipping point with teacher leadership. Jackson worries that we are at risk of standardizing teacher leaders, creating ineffective professional development around it, and then sending our principals in to observe and evaluate them with a checklist.

The reality is that teacher leaders can be a principal's best asset because they can help mentor and teach new teachers, as well as work as an instructional coach to veteran teachers. They can find the best resources, because they are innovative and use social media, and they can often help other teachers see their blind spot (Scharmer)...the area where they have an issue where they don't know they have an issue.

However, the issue will be what teacher leaders are used for in schools, and that will look different in every school system depending on the leader. Some teacher leaders may be used to mentor, while others may be used to push central office initiatives. Should we come up with a common definition of teacher leadership? Or will that just play into Robyn Jackson's concern of standardization and bad PD?

As much as a teacher leader may be one principal's best asset, they could easily become another principal's worst enemy. What happens if a principal leaves and the new leader isn't as keen on the "*assets*" of the teacher leader in charge?

Teacher Leaders...or Opinion Leaders?

The idea of teacher leaders is very similar to the concept of "Opinion Leaders." Back in the early 60's Everett Rogers focused on **Opinion Leaders** which has strong implications for education's present focus on teacher leadership. Rogers wrote,

"Opinion leaders are individuals who lead in influencing others' opinions about innovations. The behavior of opinion leaders is important in determining the rate of adoption of an innovation in a social system; in fact, the diffusion curve has its usual s-shape because of the time at which the opinion leaders adopt and owing to their ability to activate diffusion networks in a social system."

Rogers goes on to write, "Four main methods of measuring opinion leadership and diffusion networks links have been used in past research: (1) sociometric, (2) informants' ratings, (3) self-designating techniques, and (4) observations." The four methods have implications as schools move forward with choosing the best teacher leaders.

- **Sociometric** - "The sociometric method consists of asking respondents whom they sought (or hypothetically might seek) for information or advice about a given topic, such as an innovation. Opinion leaders are those members of a system who receive the greatest number of sociometric choices (that is, who are involved in the largest number of network links)." In a school system the principal may know who this is already, and it may not be the person they want to choose for the position. Remember that there is a difference between those people whose opinions are sought and those who always have an opinion regardless of whether others want to hear it.
- **Informants' Ratings** - Providing a choice to staff as far as who they would go to for help within the system. This is clearly a complicated task, but it could be part of an informal conversation at the beginning of the year.
- **Self -Designating Techniques** - The self-designating technique asks respondents to indicate the tendency for others to regard them as influential. This goes back to the person's opinion that is sought and the squeaky wheel who doesn't give listeners a choice.
- **Observations** - "Observation works best in a very small system, where the observer can actually see and record interpersonal interaction as it happens. Unfortunately, in such small systems observation may be a very obtrusive data-gathering technique. Because the members of a system know they are being observed, they may act differently.* Further, an observer may need to be very patient if the diffusion network behavior that he or she wants to observe occurs only rarely."

In the End

Teacher leaders can be an important asset to schools, especially as veteran teachers retire and new teachers enter into the profession. Let's face it, pre-service programs leave a lot to be desired when it comes to preparation and teacher leaders can offer a great deal of guidance, especially if they are one-part mentor and two-parts instructional coach.

The hard part will be deciding who the best person may be for the job.

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ASCD's Whole Child Panel discussing Teacher Leadership

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3 comments

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tdohrer

Score: 0

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12:13 PM on December 30, 2014

Ouch! Peter, let's not drag down teacher preparation as a rationale for pushing up teacher leadership. Your last paragraph is, I think an unfair and inaccurate assessment of teacher preparation programs, including the one I lead at Northwestern University (where, by the way, we have one of the first Teacher Leadership degree programs in the country). Let's work together on defining teacher leadership without stepping on anyone!

3 replies



Trueteacherleadership

Score: 1

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11:06 PM on December 30, 2014

No actual teachers on the teacher leadership panel?? Irony? When left to administrators, teacher leadership often is reduced to a tool for them to attempt to manipulate standardized test scores.

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/07/15/colucci_ctq_leadership.html

1 reply



Debbie Zacarian, Ed.D.

Score: 0

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5:00 PM on January 1, 2015

is is a very thought-provoking article for a variety of reasons--- Aren't all teachers leaders? If we are a community of professionals, what are the risks associated with assigning some (or a precious too few) the label of teacher-leader and the majority the label of teacher? While the role of teacher-leader might appear to be a principal's "best asset," we may be missing out on a lot by not including the full range of voices of the majority-- who as a whole know much more about teaching an increasingly diverse student population than any one teacher or, really, any one or a few of us do.

2 replies



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