

**Negotiating Place, Identity, and Role;  
First Experiences as a Teacher Leader**

**(What is the Experience of a Teacher Moving into a Teacher Leadership Role?)**

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## **Negotiating Place, Identity, and Role;**

### **First Experiences as a Teacher Leader**

#### **Abstract:**

In their respective positions as instructional coach, lead teacher, and consultant, teacher leaders are to implement and in many cases, *lead* educational reforms by modeling and encouraging changes in pedagogy and practice. This complex leadership role necessitates constant negotiation as teacher leaders gauge when and how they may encourage, direct, and support the teachers they work with. Further complicating this role is its non-supervisory nature; teacher leaders are not to evaluate their colleagues for employment purposes nor can they discipline or reprimand them. Instead, teacher leaders must rely on their credibility as experienced educators and their ability to encourage and support. Teachers who move into teacher leadership positions report that this transition is complicated by a need to balance collegial relationships while at the same time provide constructive criticism. This phenomenological inquiry, based upon lived experience descriptions from teacher leaders, examines two of the first interactions of newly appointed teacher leaders: meeting the staff and visiting the classroom. The paper provides insight into the negotiation process teacher leaders go through as they assert and define their role with their colleagues. Dimensions explored include entering new territory, being set apart, encountering skepticism, coming under fire, finding a place, providing feedback, considering the impact, and receiving validation.

#### **Keywords:**

teacher leadership, professional development, phenomenology, instructional coaching, consulting, school improvement, identity, role, relationships

# Negotiating Place, Identity, and Role; First Experiences as a Teacher Leader.

## (What is the Experience of a Teacher Moving into a Teacher Leadership Role?)

*It is my first visit to a classroom in my new role as a teacher leader. At this point, I'm not quite sure what to do with myself. What is my role? Do I just sit at a desk in the back corner and take notes? Do I hover around the classroom? Should I actually jump into the lesson? Am I here to encourage, critique, or model? Am I really ready to become a mentor, or am I just pretending to be something I'm not?*

With the current emphasis on school improvement, many teachers are being challenged to become “teacher leaders” in their schools and in their school districts. Taking on roles like instructional coach, lead teacher, and consultant, these educators are to implement and in many cases, *lead* educational reforms by modeling and encouraging changes in pedagogy and practice. However, it can be difficult to make the transition from working with children to working with adults. While these teachers may be comfortable in their own classrooms, they often have little experience in motivating adults, leading change, accessing research and providing support.

One very challenging factor in this transition from teacher to teacher leader is the teacher leader’s obligation to effect change: “It entails mobilizing and energizing others with the goal of improving the school’s performance of its critical responsibilities related to teaching and learning” (Danielson, 2006, p. 12). As Killion states: “Teacher leaders have a single guiding

purpose - to build capacity in others. They use their talents to influence, shape, support, and catalyze change that results in increased student achievement. Their actions reveal their fundamental belief that the more they build capacity in others, the more they contribute to sustaining long-term, deep transformation that allows others to address today's challenges and to be prepared for facing those that arise tomorrow (Killion, 2007, p. 11).

Providing effective teacher leadership is a tall task. Teacher leaders often find themselves “straddling the line” between colleague and coach, providing some teachers with a sympathetic ear and an open heart and others with a firm push to make meaningful changes in their practice and planning. Further complicating this charge is the fact that most teacher leaders are in non-supervisory roles; they are not to evaluate their colleagues for employment purposes nor are they able to discipline or reprimand them. These educators are to be **teacher** leaders, using their credibility and kinship as a teacher to lead through encouragement and support rather than through administrative coercion or demands.

As Danielson points out, “the role of teacher leader and the phenomenon of shifting from colleague to coach requires further attention. Teacher leaders are more than teachers, yet different from administrators. Such a concept of teacher leadership reflects an increasingly recognized hole in models of teacher professionalism that has not yet been fully explored in the professional literature” (Danielson, 2006, p.15). Just what is the lived experience of a teacher transitioning into a teacher leadership role? How do newly appointed teacher leaders encounter their new surroundings and adjust to their new situation? And what insights might we gain about their negotiation for space, identity and a meaningful role in the classrooms and schools they are to serve?

To further investigate these questions, four teacher leaders were asked to write first-hand accounts describing some of their early experiences as an instructional coach. These teacher leaders were assured their anonymity (through the use of pseudonyms) and were told that, for the purposes of this study, they were to focus on the “lived experience” of those initial interactions; I was looking for moment-by-moment recollections about the nature of these exchanges. The accounts were not to explain or rationalize the particular reform the teacher leaders may have been championing (e.g. best practices in assessment or differentiation), but were to capture the essence of the experience - focusing on individual and collective perception and response. What follows is a phenomenological analysis of these teacher leader accounts. In particular, we will examine accounts related to two significant events: the initial meeting of a teacher leader with the staff they are to work with, and one of the teacher leader’s first visits to a classroom. In both instances, these leadership accounts provide significant insight into a previously under-researched area of study: the delicate negotiation process teacher leaders go through as they assert and define their role with their colleagues.

## **Meeting the Staff**

### **Entering “New Territory,” Facing New Challenges**

*I walk through the front doors of the school, which looks a little like a battlefield bunker - tons of concrete and very few windows, and I register at the office and introduce myself to the administrative staff. This is my first visit to the school and I am a little nervous, but at the same time I feel empowered. I do not know the teachers I will be working with and, as such, I feel I have nothing to lose. “Bring it on!” I think, “Today will be an adventure!”*

At first glance, the simple act of entering the school, registering at the office, and making introductions may seem most inconsequential and ordinary, but it actually reinforces the fact that this coach is “out of place” and is entering new territory. This disorientation is evident as the teacher leader describes the moment as evoking both nervousness and a sense of empowerment. Entering new territory (as this teacher leader does) or even a familiar place but in a different role, we see and experience people and situations as if for the first time.

This new beginning causes the teacher leader to be especially conscious of feelings and impressions that he may usually take for granted. As the teacher leader adjusts to the new role, he notices the look and feel of the building, the disposition of the staff, and how quickly or slowly time elapses. Of course, each teacher leader will experience this newness in different ways based upon their life experience and outlook. Never the less, every teacher leader will experience some level of disorientation and the need to self-orient; to survey and assess their surroundings.

A new beginning may also bring with it physical effects. Some recently appointed teacher leaders experience a level of stress that comes with insecurity, second-guessing, and doubt. Others experience the opposite: the rush (positive stress) of facing a new challenge and the opportunity to show their leadership. What is common in this experience though, is anticipation and uncertainty. A new teacher leader may have adequately prepared themselves for this day by doing some planning, seeking clarity about their role from supervisors and friends, and trying to visualize how the first few months might unfold. However, until they meet the people with which they will be working there will always be a measure of apprehension, ambiguity, uncertainty and excitement.

### **Being Placed in a New Position; At the Front and Set Apart**

*It's time to officially meet the staff. We walk into the library and I see a really large group spread out at different tables. They are just getting settled. I shake hands with the principal, introduce myself to the assistant principal and sit down at their table.*

*I am sitting right up front; I'd almost rather be in the back.*

The first introduction of the teacher leader to the staff often happens a day or two before the school year starts. The teachers gather in the library or the cafeteria to listen to their new consultant or instructional coach. Many of the teachers would prefer to be in their classrooms preparing materials, realigning desks and setting up pin boards. They, like the new consultant, are feeling the anticipation of the new term and are impatient to get started. As they file into the gym or library, teachers will share some of their plans, recount summertime experiences, and rekindle relationships. There is a very visible camaraderie based on shared experiences and the promise of the new school year; it is a camaraderie that the new teacher leader is not part of.

Entering such an environment, the teacher leader may end up watching the staff rather than interacting with them. She may feel pressure to find a place within the culture the school. Will staff and students welcome her? Will she be validated and appreciated or meet with resentment or indifference? Here, the new instructional coach is uncomfortable with “sitting right up front.” The physical, spatial separation underlines, to the teacher leader, that she has been set apart. She has been given a special position. Instead of sitting with the teachers, as she was used to, she is now sitting with the administration, which indicates a power shift: an alignment with the management of the school and not with the staff. However, the teacher leader does not “fit” with the administration either. She is not responsible for the daily functioning of the school as the principal and assistant principal are. The teacher leader has a much narrower focus: that of supporting teachers and leading instructional reform.

Sitting with the administrators, facing the teachers and speaking to them (instead of conversing with them) tacitly sends out a message that can work against the goals of the teacher leader. This “apartness” is indicative of a relational and situational dilemma. On the one hand, the teacher leader wants to show that she is still very much a teacher and shares the concerns and pressures that teachers have. On the other hand, the teacher leader must demonstrate that she has expertise and can provide support that will lead to improved classroom practice, and she needs to do this without denigrating or demeaning current practices. The teacher leader has been set apart in a type of limbo. She is between two worlds: the world of the teacher (which she may be leaving behind if she moves to a full time coaching role) and the world of the administrator (a world that she may not ever choose to be part of). How she chooses to act from this position and how she builds connections with both teachers and management will determine how successful the teacher leader may be.

### **Making First Contact and Encountering Skepticism**

*As we go through the introductions, it is apparent that many of the teachers are skeptical. They don't come right out and say it (especially in front of their principal), but their lack of enthusiasm and some of the offhand comments make it clear that they have reservations. I just need to get through my initial presentation. Not one person is smiling. In my nervousness, I actually say: “You can laugh, that was funny.” A few people smile, but only a couple.*

*I continue my presentation.*

This teacher leader unexpectedly finds himself in a vulnerable position. There are unspoken assumptions, expectations, and perceptions with which to deal. No training and preparation could prepare him for the undercurrent of tension he is experiencing. His intention to

establish collegial relations is quietly and quickly undone by his physical position in the room, his assumed alignment with administration, and his charge to “reform” practice. The teacher leader is vulnerable and exposed, susceptible to the disposition of the teachers as they listen and evaluate what he has to say. His attempts to lighten the mood and connect with the teachers only draw more attention to the fact that he is not one of them; he has been set apart.

Such isolation may result in feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. What makes it even more challenging is the public place in which the teacher leader has to wrestle with such skepticism. As he senses the apprehension of the staff, the teacher leader may even have begun to second-guess his decision to take on the position. For some teacher leaders, such an event might lead them to question their readiness, competency, and conviction. Fortunately, this teacher leader perseveres with his presentation.

First interactions with instructional staff are all about making connections. Teacher leaders must justify their position and prove to their colleagues that they have valuable skills and expertise. Fortunately, not all first experiences are as stiff and tense as the one above. Some schools and teachers are looking for support and welcome consultants, lead teachers and instructional coaches into their staffrooms and the classrooms.

Never the less, every time that a teacher leader meets a new staff, a negotiation process begins. Teacher leaders may have invested time and energy into assuming a new role and may have carefully visualized how they want to affect change, but their intentions can quickly butt up against reality. The teacher leader must now adjust as he or she works with the staff to develop a new, shared vision for embedded professional development. This negotiation of roles and vision involves consideration of the district goals, the willingness of the staff to take these goals on, and the various ways in which the teacher leader might support the teachers in this process. Factors

that influence this negotiation process might include time, previous experiences with teacher leaders (and the effects thereof), allocation of resources, administrative support, staff relationships, and school politics. Effective negotiation may also depend upon whether or not the personality of the teacher leader meshes well with the personalities in the school.

### **Coming under Fire**

*As soon as the principal leaves, the questions start:*

*“Why are we really here?”*

*“How much time will this take?”*

*“Seriously, what does literacy have to do with Math?”*

*“Are you prepared to support French teachers?”*

*“My kids are hands-on learners. They come to the shop to get away from books and writing. Do you expect me to give them homework and readings in their CTS courses?”*

*I do my best to listen to their questions and answer them as directly and honestly as I can without seeming uncertain. It is a tricky process.*

*This is going to be much harder than I anticipated.*

From the moment he arrives, this particular teacher leader is on inspection. The teacher leader finds himself in a new and very awkward position of authority - and under the microscope. Initially, he is somewhat protected from cross-examination by the presence of an authority figure, the principal. When the principal leaves the room, the teacher leader is quickly put on trial. There are very valid questions about purpose, legitimacy, relevance, and practicality. All of the questions have an undercurrent of skepticism and seem to ask, “Who are you to make assumptions about our classrooms and our practices?”

Feeling somewhat exposed and isolated, the teacher leader must now continue on his negotiation process. He has made his initial “sales pitch” but, in order to support these teachers, he must now try to understand their needs. It is obvious that many of the teachers he will work with have been “voluntold”; that is they have been strongly encouraged or even into the improvement initiative by their administration. It is a daunting task; the teacher leader cannot possibly know each of the teachers’ individual situations. He cannot be an expert in every subject and grade level in the school, nor should he be. That is not his role. Never the less, the teachers continue to grill him, testing his mettle and seeing how quickly he can adjust. The teachers are also letting him know that he cannot expect to advance his goals with a one-size-fits-all approach. Like the teacher leader, these teachers want respect for their experience and expertise, their commitment to their students and to providing quality education in very specific contexts. Most of all they want to be worked with and not upon.

When teacher leaders “come under fire,” like this one has, they are forced to adjust and redefine their role and identity. Experiencing challenges may compel the teacher leader to confront some very deep questions about their purpose and their person. Who am I, really? Am I an expert, a friend, a support, or the consultant that challenges teachers to make improvements and be reflective? How determined am I to seeing this role through? Moreover, what am I about to lose by taking on this identity of teacher leader?

Transitioning into the role of teacher leader requires a shift in orientation. Not only do teacher leaders need to reinterpret how they see themselves, they need to reinterpret how they see their colleagues. This shift happens when the new teacher leader begins to learn about the world of the colleagues they will be working with rather than simply make assumptions about it. In some ways, the confrontational experience related above is actually quite helpful; the teacher

leader has immediately been made aware of many of the challenges he will face. The negotiation and bargaining process has begun in earnest; it is a critical moment in a personal and professional negotiation for space, identity, recognition, and validation.

Most often, this negotiation is not so public or confrontational. It happens during parking lot conversations, in quick classroom pop-ins, and while meeting with smaller groups of teachers in department groups or learning teams. Teacher leaders learn to address the concerns of the teachers they work with; concerns about time commitments, applicability, and levels of support. They make assurances about the lasting importance of the professional support they will provide and try to dissuade any notions of bandwagons or flavour-of-the-month professional development. Negotiation and bargaining happen when teacher leaders:

- market themselves, selling the value of their expertise and the dividends of improved student achievement or reduced teacher workload;
- distance themselves from administration and assure teachers that they are to support - not to report (tattle);
- build inroads by providing materials and resources, designing lessons, working with individual students, or providing substitute coverage for teachers to attend workshops;
- model particular teaching strategies and provide feedback, or demonstrate and explain why some traditional approaches don't work; and
- make connections, build relationships, share concerns and build trust.

## **Working with Teachers**

### **Finding a Place without Upsetting the Climate**

*I arrive at the classroom just before the bell. Mr. Carson is greeting kids at the door and they are taking their seats in the classroom. I'm not quite sure what to do with*

*myself so I settle into a desk near the back. Then a student comes in, hovers, and I immediately recognize that I am sitting in her seat. I blush, get up, and go to the back of the room to wait until all the places are taken. I try to look casual, leaning against the pin board, clutching my clipboard to my chest, pen in hand.*

*One of the students blurts “Hey, Mr C., who is **that** dude?” Mr. Carson explains that I am an instructional coach: here to observe and work with both the class and the teacher.*

*“So are we like, being evaluated? Or is he here to help **you**, Mr. C.?”*

In this first visit to a particular classroom, the teacher leader is seeking to find a place in an already established order. While Mr. Carson greets the students and reconnects with them, the teacher leader is only an observer, watching and waiting for some kind of cue or acknowledgement that is late in coming. The newness of this situation for teacher leader is quite apparent in his uncertainty and tentativeness; he is unsure of where to sit or how to interact with the students. Choosing to blend in rather than stand out, the teacher leader opts to settle into a chair like a student. However, he is not a student and blending in is impossible. When the girl hovers by her desk, she politely reveals that there are certain developed patterns and expectations in this classroom. The teacher leader’s attempts to mask his confusion and disorientation by retreating to the back and by clinging to the clipboard further reinforce the awkwardness of the moment. At this point, another student draws attention to the teacher leader and confronts the artificiality of the situation. This student may simply be trying to tease his favorite teacher, show off for his classmates, or test the teacher leader. In any case, he reinforces the uncertainty and fluidity underlying every visit to a new classroom. The student also puts his finger on one of the

central tensions associated with teacher leadership; the perceived role of the teacher leader and the various viewpoints associated with this role.

For the teacher leader, the first visit to the classroom of a colleague can feel otherworldly. A teacher leader will undoubtedly be someone who has a history of success as a classroom teacher – but this is not his or her classroom. The teacher leader did not work to build the environment, nor have they cultivated a relationship with the students in it. In their “new” context, they may be perceived as intruders; they rupture classroom routine and have immediate environmental impacts. This feeling of being “out of place” may affect a teacher leader in many ways. In terms of location and space, the coach must wait to see how the classroom operates, what kinds of routines have been set, and where in the classroom they can take up position. A teacher leader who moves immediately to the front of the classroom usurps the teacher’s authority in the classroom; a teacher leader who retreats to the back of the classroom may unconsciously imply that they are either here to evaluate from a distance or that they are of little consequence and can be ignored.

How teacher leaders choose to incorporate themselves into classrooms and routines varies greatly. Some teacher leaders will immediately introduce themselves, initiating conversations with students as they enter the classroom and asking them for assistance. Other teacher leaders will have discussed the situation with the teacher beforehand, working out a way to introduce the teacher leader to the students in appropriate manner. However, there may not always be the opportunity to do this kind of preparation, especially with a full slate of classrooms to visit. Again, this is where negotiation comes in. Teacher leaders must recognize the complexity of the classroom and integrate their work and presence into already established routines and relationships. This negotiation requires confidence, flexibility, sensitivity, and tact.

The presence of another adult in a classroom could cause the students to act up or, alternatively, to go quiet. The students may purposely ignore the teacher leader or they may overwhelm him with questions and a need to be noticed and recognized. Teacher leaders must be prepared to clarify and work out their role every time they enter a new classroom.

### **Taking Note to Provide Concrete Feedback**

*I am observing Tanya's class, a teacher in my school with whom I have become good friends over the years. In our school, each classroom has an observation room attached with a one-way glass. While I am an unobserved observer, Tanya knows that I am there. This is the first time that I will be giving Tanya written feedback.*

*I feel it is my duty to pass on some concrete ideas and suggestions for improvement. I note things like: The class is moving along quickly, very little "down time"; needs to make sure to wait long enough for students to respond; "make sure you don't just give them nouns on their communication boards, they need action words, comment words, and questions." After an hour's observation, I go to my office to work on the report for Tanya, gathering more research to fill it up with all kinds of good ideas to improve her practice. Just before the end of the day, I pop "my report" into her mailbox....*

Not all teacher leaders are assigned to new schools; some work in their home schools with colleagues that they have had a long history. No longer are they colleagues popping in to borrow the hole punch or to pass on a message from the office; they are now in a coaching role. The teacher leader hopes to assist his or her colleague to make changes or improvements and that might mean watching with a discerning eye: taking careful notes, making judgements, giving advice and asking for specific changes. Suggestions for change are always uncomfortable even

when they are considered to be good or helpful changes; these suggestions can often evoke feelings of confusion, inadequacy, or resentment.

In the case above, the teacher leader does her best to focus on the task of providing support for her colleague. She is confident, embraces her new role, and feels empowered by it. Behind the glass, she is able to take notes without having to deal with the curious eyes and queries of the students. Like an anthropologist, she can see the classroom in its “natural” state and is able to make judgments based on her experience and research. For the teacher leader, it is an *ideal* situation. If she were to be in the classroom, her note taking would be distracting for the teacher and the students alike, *people notice when you take notes*. Because of her careful observation, the teacher leader can now give practical or “hard” feedback; specific suggestions, links to research, and cautions about oversights. The teacher leader’s work engrosses her, after an hour’s observation she is able to write a detailed report, one that no doubt will be appreciated for its thoroughness and tangibility.

Her emphasis on instructional improvement and on providing concrete suggestions has already affected the orientation of this teacher leader. The classroom reveals itself as a place to be noticed, studied, and critiqued and less of a place simply to live and interact in. This detachment, this critical observation, allows the teacher leader to look past her relationship with the teacher and students and zero in on how things might be improved. In doing so, she chooses not to re-affirm many of the successful practices in the classroom. Instead, she chooses to focus on growth areas, citing deficiencies like inappropriate pacing, inadequate wait time, and missed opportunities. Her careful attention to detail and her commitment to sharing expertise are admirable, but as we will see later on, this teacher leader fails to anticipate or gauge the response she would receive from her friend, Tanya.

Giving useful feedback is at the heart of the teacher leadership role and it is a very challenging task. Without “hard” feedback, visits from teacher leaders do little more than create goodwill. In some cases, these coaching visits are regarded as nuisances or interruptions that interfere with lesson sequencing and disrupt the classroom climate. Moreover, knowing what to look for and how and when to give critical but supportive feedback is art that can take years for teacher leaders to develop. Most teacher leaders work directly in the classroom where their note taking, facial expressions, and level of interaction with the students and teacher set off ripples of apprehension and nervousness. Both teacher and students are conscious of being watched and perhaps judged. For this very reason, many teacher leaders will choose to put away their clipboards and formulate their notes only after the lesson is completed.

### **Considering the Impact; The Scathing Report**

*The next morning I try to catch Tanya right away so we can have a chance to talk about my observations. As I come in, she walks right by me. She actually she storms by me, not saying hello or making eye contact. My stomach twitches. Hmm... that's odd. I put my things in my office and go to her classroom. As is my usual practice I knock quickly and then enter with a “Hi, it's me!” Stony silence. Now my stomach is really turning. Something is wrong. “Tanya, are you okay? Can we talk?” She takes a long, deep breath before turning to face me. Then as she does, she says, “I am not sure I want to talk to you ever again.”*

*“What?” I say, clueless.*

*“I thought you liked what I was doing! I thought you believed I was a good teacher!” then, worst of all: “I thought you were my friend! I never want to have you in my classroom again!”*

*I feel sick: Tanya is one of the best teachers I know.*

*We spend the next hour reflecting not on Tanya's class, but on my scathing evaluative observation. Tanya walks me through my "brilliant" report showing me the criticisms that she reads there. During this hour, we talk, we cry and I come to understand.*

Any shift from a collegial, friendly relationship to one based upon "school and district goals" comes with overtones of evaluation, the politics of power, and the complexity of interpersonal relations. In this continuation of the last anecdote, the teacher leader encounters all of these pressures. When she dropped off her report for Tanya in the mailbox the day before, the teacher leader believed she had done her job, and done it well. Eager to talk about her observations and the work she had done, the teacher leader seeks out her colleague only to encounter tension. While some teachers may have tried to mask their disappointment, Tanya's feelings are in open display. She "storms by" refusing to make eye contact or say hello. The signals are unmistakable and give evidence that more negotiation and bargaining need to take place. When the teacher leader pops in to Tanya's classroom and tries to re-establish a collegial rapport, she meets with silence, resentment, and even anger. Tanya feels betrayed.

The result is a shock to the teacher leader. Once again, good intentions have met unanticipated but very real roadblocks. She did not envision her report as being scathing, only as constructive and purposeful. Faced with this sudden realization, the teacher leader is at a loss. She feels sick. Her physical and emotional state reveals just how important it is for her to maintain both her role as teacher leader (expert) and as colleague (friend). Rather than become defensive or haughty, the teacher leader chooses to try to understand Tanya's reaction. This choice to listen and learn from the teacher she was to coach, ultimately brought about a

restoration of the relationship, or perhaps the development of the relationship of a new relationship based upon their revised roles.

In this instance, removing the teacher leader to a spot behind a one-way glass may have assisted the teacher in being more at ease and forgetful of the ever-present eyes, but it also interfered with the subtle negotiation of roles that needs to happen when teacher leaders are in the classroom as participant observers. As the lesson transpires, both teacher and teacher leader will communicate in verbal and nonverbal ways, sharing understandings and sensing each other's intentions. A one-way glass does not permit such a negotiation. In this instance, the one-way glass served as a physical and emotional barrier that interfered with rapport and relationship building. Because she was not engaged in the classroom, the teacher leader failed to notice the vulnerability of the teacher, and there was no friendly connection in the greeting or reassurance that she liked what she saw in the good bye. Moreover, when a teacher leader interacts *in the classroom*, she can disclose her own vulnerabilities, her humanness. *Ironically, many teacher leaders have made the mistake of operating as if they are behind a one-way glass even when they are physically present in the classroom. In keeping quiet, making clinical observations and scribbling notes, they can put up barriers and miss relational subtleties and nuances while focusing only on instructional and procedural structures.*

However, even the most experienced and sensitive teacher leaders can sometimes be blindsided by reactions to their well-meaning guidance. Despite best intentions and careful wording, constructive criticism can still provoke defensiveness, embarrassment, hurt feelings, and even anger. Written reports, however delivered, can sometimes burn - scorching relationships and damaging trust. The formality of any written report and the specificity of it, indicates a radical shift from a teacher-friend role to a more evaluative teacher leader role. Such

a report also invites reciprocal action: the teacher-leader's performance in their new role is also a source for evaluation. This tension around criticism is one of the paradoxes facing teacher leaders. It is difficult to build relationships while at the same time provide "hard feedback" (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011, p.49). Teacher leaders may seek to provide concrete (hard) suggestions for improvement, but any suggestions that imply that the teacher is doing a less than optimal job are "hard" to hear.

Unlike the teacher leader singled out above, many teacher leaders actually choose to avoid giving feedback that is, in any way, critical or judgmental. Instead, they try to support their colleagues in more subtle ways (by co-teaching with them, supplying them with timely readings, and asking thought provoking questions about planning, practice and the nature of learning). These teacher leaders actually skirt around anything that might seem confrontational, often allowing ineffective practices to continue so they might still be welcome in the classrooms of their colleagues. For these teacher leaders, the leadership aspect of teacher leadership is less important to them than their need to remain collegial. They just want to be one of the teachers; they do not want to be seen as an evaluator or even as a coach, just as a supporter. The irony is that, in working so hard to build relationships and establish trust, these teacher leaders actually devalue their own work with the result being that staff members may conclude that the teacher leader really does not have much to offer as far as expertise or insight (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011, p.49).

In order to give "hard feedback" teacher leaders must first address this issue directly by redefining peer relationships, the improvement process, and norms of teaching (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011, p. 49). In addition, the teacher leader needs to read each situation and carefully consider the world of each of the teachers they work with. What constraints do they face in terms

of time for planning, availability of resources, amount of training, and class composition?

Moreover, the teacher leader must recognize the individuality of each teacher with which they work, doing more than just listening. They need to know their colleagues by working beside them and reading body language, level of eye contact, and tone of voice. When a situation gets difficult or miscommunications happen, the teacher leader will need to address the issues, not avoid them. Moreover, there will be times when a teacher leader might need to take their turn as the learner rather than as the leader, and acknowledge the wisdom and experience of the teachers they are working with.

### **Making a Difference, Receiving Validation**

*It was my second visit to this particular school. I was just heading down the hallway to check in with the principal to find out who I might be working with when I was intercepted by a young teacher in the hallway. She spied me from the end of the hallway and flagged me down.*

*“Hey Pete!” she called out, “got a minute?” I stopped in my tracks, I knew who she was, but I couldn’t remember her name. Frantically I started searching my memory; I had worked with her only a couple of weeks earlier! In seconds, she was upon me. “I just wanted to say thanks,” she said. “I tried several of the “call to order” techniques you suggested after your last visit with my 7Bs. It only took a few times for them to get it! Now my classes are quieter and I have enough voice to get through the day. You can come to my classes anytime!”*

*I wasn’t sure how to respond, but it didn’t matter. She said something about photocopying and headed off with some speed to the prep room. I remained standing in*

*the hallway, processing the moment. It may have been a quick thank-you for her, but I would remember it for the rest of my life.*

On this second visit, our last anecdote, we meet a teacher leader still finding his way in relatively new territory. Rather than popping by the staffroom, or checking in on teachers he may know, he conscientiously checks in at the office to gain direction from the principal. When confronted on his way by a teacher, uncertainty bubbles forth. The teacher leader is acutely aware that he has lost his colleague's name. He feels exposed, he knows how important it is for each of the people he works with to feel acknowledged and valued. What makes the situation even more difficult is the fact that the teacher feels comfortable enough to address him by his first name. Pete has obviously built up a level of trust and familiarity; will he undermine this by admitting his momentary lapse or simply bluff his way through? Before Pete can pretend or come clean, the teacher startles our teacher leader in a second way; *she pays the teacher leader a compliment*. Pete is unsure as how to respond. In spite of its awkwardness, this is an important moment for both Pete and the teacher. For the teacher, it is an opportunity to say thank you and perhaps to show Pete that things are improving in her classroom. Thankfully, while this teacher makes a special trip down the hall to say thanks, she is kind enough not to linger. Perhaps she sensed Pete's embarrassment or maybe she really did have photocopying to do. All the same, the teacher leaves Pete alone in the hallway to reflect upon this moment. For Pete, this simple "thank you" is even more important; it brings validation to his work.

Teacher leaders will receive feedback and validation in many different ways, through email, online and paper surveys, feedback from administrators, and conversations with the teachers. This feedback may positive and direct, like the "thank you" Pete received. Alternatively, it may be negative, in the form of unanswered emails, avoided interactions, and

whispered conversations in the staffroom. Sometimes feedback can be disingenuous; intended only to flatter or hurt. When analyzing follow-up surveys, teacher leaders do well to sift through the comments and put aside their egos. They need to “read between the lines,” and find areas to improve on amid the kudos and the criticisms. Teacher leaders also need to look elsewhere for feedback; they need to study school achievement records and gauge the openness and disposition of the staff. If there are less behaviour issues, more engaged students and more invigorated teachers stepping into instructional leadership roles, it may reveal something about the effectiveness of the teacher leader.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While many educators believe that moving from a teacher to a teacher leader is an easy and natural transition, a closer examination of this conversion reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Even though teacher leaders may be motivated and passionate about their work, this passion may not be shared or even understood. The classroom is a complex place, fraught with tensions related to expectations, relationships, and power.

Teacher leaders are, by the nature of their position and charge, distanced from those that they would serve. These leaders feel obligated to provide solutions and facilitate change. This obligation often comes into conflict with the need to create trust and build relationships. As a result, from the very moment of their appointment, teacher leaders will spend their energies seeking to narrow this distance while at the same time working to earn respect and gain influence. Their complex role (colleague, coach and expert) necessitates constant negotiation as teacher leaders gauge when and how they may encourage, critique, advise, and support the teachers they work with.

Training can help, and in many school districts prospective teacher leaders are given some preparation for the roles they are about to take on. In some cases, teacher leaders might attend a weeklong retreat shortly before the school year begins to meet with their new colleagues (other teacher leaders), discuss expectations, and clarify their goals. But teacher leadership is learned minute by minute and situation by situation *on the job*. It is shaped and defined when teacher leaders make sense of their experiences, learn from them, and enact in response to their learning (Norris, 2010, p. 169). Experienced teacher leaders have related how they grew into their roles during the first few months on the job and that the lessons they learned are not in any “how to” manual or teacher research publication.

How newly appointed teacher leaders negotiate place, identity and role depends greatly on their level of expertise, their sensitivity, their willingness to be flexible and on the professional climate in which they have been placed. Throughout their careers, but especially in the first few months, teacher leaders need to regularly examine and consider their experiences and interactions. They need to reflect on their orientation, identity, and role and how they might balance personal, relational, and professional goals.

For the newly appointed teacher leader, opportunities present themselves in the form of teachers who open their classrooms and volunteer for consultation and collaboration. Dangers present themselves when teacher leaders fail to recognize the commitment, investment, and humanity of the teachers they work with. Teachers, as well as teacher leaders, take risks and invite criticism when they collaborate for school improvement. Both teacher and teacher leader have a need to be valued and validated as part of the school culture. Teacher leaders who are sensitive to this need and brave enough to share their vulnerabilities as well as their experiences

and expertise will be able to negotiate a place, an identity and a fulfilling role within the fabric of the school.

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