

## **Leadership: The Teacher's Imperative**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years focusing on the need for teachers to have leadership responsibilities and to participate in the decision-making processes within their respective schools. Unfortunately, these discussions are often filled with suggestions and recommendations that completely miss the point about teacher leadership. Leadership for teachers has little to do with titles and responsibilities, yet it has everything to do with their performance in the classroom. A true teacher leader is one who can create a classroom environment that fosters high achievement among the students. Teachers that can influence and gain the respect of their students are in essence bona fide leaders.

### **Introduction**

The roles and responsibilities of America's teachers have evolved significantly since public school education was widely introduced in the early part of the 19th Century. Today, there is general agreement with the research findings of organizations like Education Trust (2003), that "Children who consistently have access to good teachers are soaring; those who don't are falling behind. When it comes to closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students, good teaching matters most" (p. 2). This contention is also supported by educators such as Darling-Hammond (2012), who states that, "Educators know - and research confirms - that every aspect of school reform depends for its success on highly skilled teachers and principals, especially when the expectations of schools and the diversity of the student body increase... Regardless of the efforts or initiative, teachers tip the scale toward success or failure" (p. 8).

If we agree that teachers are in fact the most important ingredient in the success of both our schools and their students, then we need to reevaluate our expectations of the teaching profession. Today, as never before, teachers cannot continue to manage their classrooms-- they must "lead" their students. We need to stop asking what leadership will do for the teachers and ask what leadership will do for the students.

Teacher leadership is a relatively new phenomenon in K-12 education, and one that has effectively gained momentum in recent years as evidenced by the growing body of literature that associates successful teachers with good leadership skills. Unfortunately, most of the discussion on this topic has focused on teacher leadership from an organizational and management standpoint. This viewpoint favors giving teachers

positional and legitimate power within their schools-- roles that may benefit leading the school's adults but not necessarily its students. For instance, Kurtz (2012) summarizes the prevailing views on this issue by explaining that, "Current teacher leadership roles involve teachers as mentors, team leaders, department chairs, curriculum developers, staff development providers, grade-level chairs, and designers of new assessment processes, to name a few" ( p. 13). Here, leadership is defined almost exclusively by titles and positions as opposed to instructional performance. This is not what our schools need.

## **Classroom Leadership**

In recent times, one of the fundamental tenets of successful leadership has been that leaders must have a good understanding of their followers. This is why Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Frederick Herzberg's Motivation/Hygiene Theory continue to be important to most trained leaders' understanding of motivation. Herein lies the true difference between a teacher who is a manager and one who is a classroom leader. Teachers who are leaders feel that it is important to know what motivates their students; teachers who function only as managers do not need such information because they are focused primarily on short term outcomes. It is not surprising that teachers are more often viewed as managers than leaders.

Successful teachers are classroom leaders who:

- Know their students
- Create a positive classroom environment
- Take responsibility for their students' learning
- Understand how to motivate their students
- Have a mission and vision for themselves and their students

### ***Teacher leaders know their students***

Kouzes and Posner (1987) say that "The most effective leaders we know are involved and in touch with those they lead. They care deeply about others, and they often refer to those with whom they work as family" (p. xvii). It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers who know their students on a personal level will have a much better understanding of what motivates them and why they may not be working to their full potential. For instance, a few years ago I was serving as a school principal and a third grade student arrived at school in the morning with tears in her eyes; it was evident that she was distracted and disengaged from the rest of the students when she entered the classroom. The teacher talked to her for a few minutes but the young girl was in a poor frame of mind, so the teacher summoned the school counselor for support. While I was conducting

my morning tour of the school I saw the counselor talking to the young girl and walking with her out of the classroom. I asked the teacher about the situation and was informed that the girl had witnessed her mother's live-in boyfriend physically abusing her mother early that morning. The boyfriend told the young girl to get dressed and go outside to wait for the bus.

The teacher was able to provide me with background information about the girl's family environment which made it apparent that the young girl was more than likely telling the truth about the incident. I immediately contacted the local sheriff's department and the situation was quickly resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved. This incident clearly demonstrated classroom leadership. It was evident that the teacher knew her students and the more important circumstances surrounding their lives. It also made a positive impression on the young girl who had been traumatized-- she knew that the teacher and counselor cared about her well-being.

Teachers have opportunities to demonstrate good leadership every day. For instance, when a teacher asks a student about her mother's recent surgery and if there is anything the class can do to help, it makes the student realize that someone truly cares, and this goes a long way in establishing a positive relationship between student and teacher. Obviously, it takes time and effort to know each student. It also requires a level of subtlety. Teachers need to walk a fine line when they try to gain information about their students. Some of the information can be obtained from the student's cumulative folder, usually located in the front office; however, much of it may only be accessed through listening and maintaining open lines of communications with students' families. Regardless of how the information is obtained, teachers need to know as much as possible about their students.

### ***Teacher leaders create a positive classroom environment***

The old adage that first impressions are often lasting impressions also applies to public school classrooms. In many of his books and media interviews Jonathan Kozol makes it a point to say that when he walks into a school or a classroom he can determine almost immediately if the students are learning or simply marking time. The telltale signs of a failing classroom include: (1) no one takes pride in the appearance of the room; (2) the teacher looks bored and shows little enthusiasm for the students; and (3) the students are also bored and show little or no interest in learning.

On the other hand, if we walk into a classroom and see that the students are actively engaged in the lesson, the teacher is well groomed and involved in the instruction, and the room has a pleasant appearance with bright, positive displays on the walls, we feel comfortable that the students are being provided a favorable learning environment. Obviously, first impressions need to be substantiated with evidence, but they are usually good indicators of a positive classroom culture. It is each teacher's responsibility to create a positive classroom environment.

***Teacher leaders take responsibility for their students' learning***

When a business is not performing to acceptable standards, there is normally only one place that the board members and stockholders will turn for answers - the president or chief executive officer. Similarly, when a college or professional sports team is not winning, the coach and/or general manager are often the first to be scrutinized. In each example, the leaders, not the external environment, will be held accountable for the organization's performance. So why is it that when 50% of the students in a particular classroom fail their end-of-year tests we look for external reasons first (poverty, limited resources, etc.) rather than the quality of instruction being provided by the classroom's teacher leader? In too many instances, external factors are cited to excuse poor teacher performance.

A few years ago I was serving as principal of a K-8 school that was in the beginning stages of a turnaround effort. Late one afternoon I was in my office finishing some administrative tasks when I heard one of the fifth grade teachers talking to the school secretary in the outer office. Based on the tone of the conversation, the teacher either did not know that I was next door, did not think that I could hear the conversation, or simply did not care. The teacher was complaining that her students were unmotivated, did not care about their futures, had little or no interest in school work, and were often challenged to behave properly. She was concerned about the students' performance on the upcoming end-of-year tests and made it clear that she should not be held responsible for the anticipated poor results.

This school faced many challenges: 85% of the students qualified for free/reduced meals, 98% were minority students (many living in government subsidized housing), there was little parental support, and, the school had limited financial resources. In spite of the challenges, all but a few classes had shown significant progress in the first year of the turnaround effort. At the end of the year, as she had predicted, the fifth grade teacher's students did not make appreciable academic gains. Who was to blame? I looked no further than the teacher. Not surprisingly, the results were much different with a new, highly motivated classroom leader the following year. Moss Kanter (2004) makes it clear that part of accountability is "the courage to admit responsibility for problems" (p. 190). When teachers seek excuses for their students' failures they are simply not taking personal responsibility for their work - a clear example of leadership failure.

***Teacher leaders understand how to motivate their students***

On a Friday afternoon, after the students had left for the day, I met with one of the elementary grade teachers to discuss instructional strategies. I had conducted a number of informal observations of her classroom during the first six weeks of the school year and often provided her with various ideas and recommendations. As the first academic grading period was coming to a close, I reviewed the teacher's instructional pacing guide and it was evident that she was falling behind; however, my bigger concern was that the students in the class seemed unmotivated and uninterested in the class work. The class

also exhibited a disproportionate number of disciplinary problems that required my attention. I asked the teacher for her thoughts on these issues and she made it clear that her students simply did not care about school. I then asked the teacher what motivates her students. She looked at me quizzically and asked, "How should I know?" She then said that it was not her job to motivate the students; her job was to teach them.

In an online piece for *Education Week* (2012), Ryan Kinser makes a simple yet profound statement: "great teachers accept responsibility for motivating their students. The most effective educators establish an environment where kids not only want to succeed but feel that they can" (p. 1). Much of the research on motivation comes from studies about human behavior in the workplace. Although these studies deal primarily with adults they have some clear applications to public school students. One influential model is Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory. In discussing this theory, Hersey and Blanchard (1982) point out that Herzberg used *hygiene factors* to describe the fundamental elements of the environment in which individuals work. In a school setting this might include the overall physical condition of the school, its culture, administration, grading procedures, and various policies such as those associated with student discipline. The term *motivators* refers to the intrinsic aspects of the job itself. In a school setting this might refer to students' and their teachers' feelings of achievement, recognition, challenging assignments, increased responsibilities, and opportunities for growth and development (p. 58).

Successful schools go beyond mere hygiene factors to address the motivation of teachers and their students; school administrators and teachers need to understand the specific role they play in motivating their students. The administrator's responsibility is to establish an environment that is conducive to learning, good order, and discipline. Such hygiene factors will not motivate students to perform at high levels but they will eliminate dissatisfaction that can get in the way of motivation. In other words, if these ingredients are missing, the effect will be a negative impact on student achievement. The more important element in motivating students is found in the classroom, where teachers play a crucial role. They establish a positive environment that supports the individual needs of their students, recognize students for their achievements, and offer students opportunities to excel. If these motivator factors are present in the classroom, most students will invariably succeed.

### ***Teacher leaders have a mission and vision for themselves and their students***

The preponderance of literature about successful entrepreneurs, those in for-profit as well as non-profit businesses and organizations, almost always exemplifies a visionary leader. Each teacher, from elementary through high school, should prepare classroom mission and vision statements, albeit short term (school year), with the help of their students. This is not the same as a professional development plan that asks teachers to identify their individual goals and objectives for the upcoming school year. The class mission and vision statements should take into consideration how the students will collectively, as well as individually, achieve success.

In his national bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey (2004) makes a compelling argument for the value of mission statements, both personal and organizational. He pointed out that such statements keep us grounded in our values and help us maintain a clear focus and direction (p. 106). This is exactly what our nation's K-12 classrooms need. In essence, teachers who work with their students at the beginning of each year to prepare a mission statement (from kindergarten up), will help their students understand what is expected of them, thereby establishing a foundation for success. Such teachers will ask their students, as a group, to define the purpose of the school year, i.e. why they are in school and what they want to accomplish.

Additionally, if these teachers include a vision statement (one that delineates how the upcoming school year will contribute not only to the students' academic success but their individual and collective success as members of their families, neighborhoods and society) they will help the students visualize the fruits of their labors and the benefits they will reap. Bennis and Nanus (1985) make it clear that "A shared vision of the future suggests measures of effectiveness for the organization and for all its parts" (p. 92). A well developed and clearly communicated vision will help create a collaborative atmosphere within the classroom, whereby every student will feel as if they are part of a winning team.

Preparing a mission and vision statement is simply one way of making sure that everyone in the class stays focused. For instance, the mission statement of a third grade class might be as simple as, "We will work hard every day and learn as much as possible so that we can be promoted to the fourth grade." The vision statement might say, "Our class will work as a team, everyone will be promoted to the next grade, and we will be the best third grade in the city."

Once the mission and vision have been developed, the teacher would help the students prepare a short list of goals and objectives for the year. The goals would be aligned with specific rewards in order to keep the students motivated and focused. For instance, one goal might be that no students will be suspended from school during the upcoming school year. If this goal is successfully met, a possible reward might be a class party on the last Friday afternoon of each month that the goal is met, a free movie pass at a local theater, or maybe an overnight field trip near the end of the school year. These events and related rewards are intended to mark the milestones associated with a clearly stated goal. It is also important to place the mission, vision, and goals in a visible location, where the teacher can easily point to them on a regular basis and discuss their progress with the class.

### **Final Thoughts**

True classroom leaders, as noted earlier, will "know" their students and will find subtle ways to influence them. The first step in this process is to make sure the students understand why they are in school; second, they need to know that school will serve a

practical and useful purpose in their lives; third, they should be motivated by meaningful and easy to understand rewards that celebrate goal accomplishment; and last, the students should have no doubt that their teacher is a leader.

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## Author Biography

Les Stein is an Adjunct Professor of Education at Meredith College, Raleigh, North Carolina and an adjunct professor of Leadership at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. He retired from the United States Marine Corps after almost 27 years on active duty and has since been the principal of two K-8 public charter schools. He also works as an education consultant. His scholarly interests are focused on the leadership requirements associated with failing or underperforming schools.