

The Power to Effect Change



INTRODUCTION

This story chronicles the experiences of three teachers—in three different schools, with three different levels of authority—who were working to improve student outcomes outside their individual classrooms. It is an exploration of teacher leadership, defined here as teachers seeking opportunities to make an impact outside of their classrooms. As teachers in their fourth and fifth years, Heather, David and Catherine started the year with a sense of having something to offer to their colleagues and school community. They felt that their work with each other and the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation was positively impacting student learning—they had evidence of this within their classrooms and felt it was a good time to push themselves beyond those (sometimes isolating) walls. They articulated this early on as seeking the “power to effect change,” and later came to call this “agency.”

Heather and David were given formal leadership roles within their contexts, so they started the year focusing on how to leverage those roles, assuming that agency was already theirs. Catherine was new to her school and not in a formal

leadership role, so she started the year focusing on how to gain agency, assuming that she would have none to begin with.

What quickly became apparent was that these assumptions were wrong. Formal leadership roles may serve to help gain an audience, but that does not imply, as we learned, that one has agency or the ability to impact student learning beyond his or her classroom. This is because, ultimately, only the classroom teacher can directly impact the learning of his or her students. Agency to affect student outcomes for students outside one's classroom, therefore, must come from meaningfully collaborating with the teacher of these students.

Heather, David, and Catherine realized that their goal of expanding their influence on student learning would require the development of trusting, collaborative relationships with their colleagues. As the year progressed, these three teachers worked together on the same question: how do you gain agency through developing real collaborative relationships, within your context, regardless of title? Interestingly enough, Heather, David, and Catherine saw three themes emerge that were instrumental in allowing them to find success in building this agency: a need for purpose; a need for clear expectations; and a need to develop trust. Their hope in sharing this story is to highlight their experiences thinking about these themes as tools that can be used to develop as a teacher leader and to get the necessary buy-in to build agency on any scale.

MEET THE TEACHERS

Catherine is a middle school science teacher at a private, international school in Jordan. This is her second year at the school but her first year in the middle school. She does not have a formal leadership position but has found ways to work collaboratively with her colleagues.

Heather is a high school science teacher at a large public school in Virginia. She has worked at this school for four years. This past year (2014–2015), she served as the science department chair responsible for planning department meetings. Heather did not evaluate or supervise any employees.

David is a high school science teacher at a small charter school that serves both urban and rural student populations. He has worked at this school for four years

and is now the lead math and science teacher. His responsibilities are to observe, mentor, and evaluate teachers in the math and science department, as well as act as a liaison to the administration. David is a first-level supervisor to many of his colleagues.

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EXPLORING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

THEME ONE: A NEED FOR FOCUSED, MEANINGFUL PURPOSE

Teachers, as we all know, are busy. Planning, implementing instruction, and grading comprise more than a full-time job—on top of that, so many of us dedicate our personal/after school time to students, the community, and professional development. Consequently, when an administrator or colleague requests a meeting from a teacher who is already stretched thin, their natural response is often resistance ... avoidance ... frustration.

The inevitable time deficit that many teachers operate under is one major hurdle in establishing effective collaborative relationships. We know this to be true in our own lives and have certainly seen it in our colleagues' as well. That being the case, teachers who are seeking agency have to battle this time deficit and find ways to captivate their colleagues' genuine interest and attention.

Through our inquiry, we found that one effective way to establish working, collaborative relationships (that were not frustrating to our colleagues) was to ensure that the purpose of the working group was meaningful and clear and that each meeting had focus. David found this to be the case in working with the

employees he evaluates, Heather in her department meetings, and Catherine with her planning team.

As soon as a meaningful purpose was clearly defined, our colleagues began to “buy in” to our work. Our collaborative relationships transformed, and we started to recognize our agency as the potential for influence outside our classrooms. Most importantly, the teachers within our groups felt that their work was validated and that their time well spent.

As a group, we gave each other the courage to take risks in our respective contexts, we supported each other in generating ideas, and, most importantly, we helped each other to prioritize being reflective in our interactions with colleagues in a way that we wouldn't normally do.

EXPERIENCES IN CONTEXT:

Catherine:

Initially it was easy to entice my colleagues to come to our lunchtime planning meetings, but as the first weeks of school passed and schedules became muddled, my colleagues' interests waned, as did their attendance. At this point, my approach and role within the group shifted. I took a risk and decided that before our next meeting, I would set an agenda and prepare a draft lesson. To my surprise, this did not seem intrusive to my colleagues. Instead, they seemed to appreciate that our meeting had a tangible focus, even if it was one I had unilaterally set. We continued to operate this way as a team throughout the year—I had convinced my colleagues that our time would be meaningful and, in doing so, had gained agency in our little group.

Heather:

I started the school year with a vision for how powerful it would be if the science

department would collaborate across courses. In my mind, the department meetings would be the lever to facilitate this. However, I became frustrated when some others didn't value the time in the same way and were not acting invested in the meetings. After surveying the department, I found that these teachers didn't feel like the meetings were a good use of time because they did not perceive the content of the meetings to be directly connected to what was going on in their classrooms. After many individual discussions, it became apparent that there was a common need for a clear set of expectations for the science learning progression from 9th to 12th grade. Therefore, we started to focus our department work on vertical alignment of science skills. Teachers have now been more invested in the meetings and are holding real conversation about instruction, student potential, and the kinds of data we can use next year to compare outcomes of our shared plan.

THEME TWO: A NEED FOR CLEAR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT ROLES

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler, 2012) points out that an obstacle to clear communication is a belief that it is actually occurring. In our experience this year, we found that communicating expectations about roles was essential to finding success as a teacher leader. To do this, we had to understand what we felt our roles could be, and we had to clarify and communicate our roles to the group. Sometimes we needed to know what was expected of us (see David's experience), and other times we needed to communicate what others could expect from us (see Catherine's experience). If roles are misunderstood, a person's willingness and strengths may not be effectively leveraged and teams will not be working to their potential.

Recognizing the need to develop skills in communicating expectations, our group turned to the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* (Patterson et al., 2012). One of our biggest takeaways was the idea that clear communication requires a "shared pool of understanding" between people. Misunderstandings, therefore, usually come from missing information. Our goal

then was to work on deepening this shared pool of understanding and eliminating missing information from within our groups.

Although this may seem like a common sense task, we discovered that, many times, our teams were operating without the clarity of a shared understanding, ultimately inhibiting our abilities to effect change.

EXPERIENCES IN CONTEXT:

David:

Being a teacher in a small school, I've played many roles this year. In addition to full-time teaching, I've been an instructional coach, curriculum developer, and supervisor for the other four math and science teachers. I felt comfortable as an instructional coach and curriculum developer but was anxious about my role as an evaluator. What I saw in classrooms was mostly effective teaching. In spite of this, we were not meeting our accountability goal in terms of student success on state exams. Eventually, I was asked to answer a question that is being asked of school leaders with increasing frequency: "How is it that you wrote a predominantly positive performance review for a teacher who is not meeting the required pass rate?" This was an incredibly difficult question to answer. This teacher certainly had much to improve upon—any reflective educator does. But because we weren't meeting our test score goals, I had to make the change from coach to evaluator, and the unclear expectations surrounding my role as evaluator made this transition challenging. This raised some questions for me: How can we navigate possible differences between how teachers see their colleagues and how administrators see teachers? How do administrators and teachers come together to establish the criteria for effective teaching? How do colleagues and administrators judge whether or not another teacher is doing an "effective job?" My lack of clarity surrounding these questions really challenged my confidence to be an effective evaluator and establish a clear role as such.

Catherine:

As a teacher new to the school, I began the year with a sketchy understanding of how things got done and needed to quickly assess the situation. As I surveyed the department, I asked myself, "Who were the change agents? Who had agency?"

What I found was disappointing; the teachers who had agency were those with formalized leadership roles. Additionally, I noticed that other teachers (like me) seemed frustrated with this structure, feeling as if our opinions and experience were not solicited as major decisions were being made. We felt locked out—but I came to realize later that our administration may not have known this. I was a new teacher who was not returning at the end of the year—maybe my principal assumed that I wasn't interested in getting involved as a leader. Of course, that assumption was wrong, but I had never made my expectations clear (i.e., there was misinformation in our shared pool of understanding). What I learned, ultimately, is that if a teacher is interested in becoming a leader, the best approach is to be clear in that expectation —share it with your administrator, and share it with your colleagues so that they understand you are eager to engage in projects outside your classroom.

THEME THREE: A NEED TO TAKE RISKS TO DEVELOP TRUST

Trust is often cited as one of the most important prerequisites in establishing effective leadership. It is a crucial component in any relationship—whether that be between a supervisor and an employee (as in David's context) or between collaborative colleagues (as in Heather's and Catherine's contexts). Oftentimes, however, the importance and need for trust in working relationships is overlooked.

Heather and David had assumed early on that trust was implicit in their titles but learned, almost immediately, that this was not the case.

Ultimately, we found that building trust takes time and was the result of positive interactions with our colleagues. Leveraging the ability to provide meaningful purpose (theme one) and clear expectations (theme two), we began to garner the trust of our teams. Nonetheless, as we write this story now, we acknowledge that our work in building trust is incomplete.

The difficult thing about developing trust is that it requires the leader to take risks. In Catherine's context, stepping out as a leader was risky in itself since her administration had not given her the authority to do so. Alternatively, Heather engaged in risk when she acknowledged that her original approach to department

meetings had failed. David's risk was most significant and required that he engage in conflict that he would have otherwise avoided. We all found that these risks were productive, but we also recognize that there were many lost opportunities where we could have used risk to our advantage—in that sense, our experience with trust and risk taking is just beginning.

EXPERIENCES IN CONTEXT:

Heather:

My initial goal as department chair was to build trust among my colleagues in order to facilitate meaningful collaboration. I tried to start this trust-building by asking members of the department to share why they teach and starting meetings with compliments and acknowledgements. However, I found that this kind of trust-building was superficial since we had not clarified why we were a group or what we needed to get out of our interactions with one another (focus/expectations). Real trust-building between teachers has started to come as we have engaged in shared work of creating a vertical alignment plan together. The teachers have started to trust me as I show them that I value their time and that we have shared goals. This has led to a developing sense of community in the department. Despite progress, I still feel like we are just scratching the surface of cultivating trust: we have not yet really begun to share our classroom practices nor have we had the real conversations about strengths and weaknesses that I believe would have the power to propel us from being a group of teachers in the same department to a team of teachers truly working together to improve outcomes for all of our students.

David:

My greatest point of learning this year has come from the realization that trust and clear expectations are inextricably connected. Due to unclear expectations in my role, I felt I lost trust from my administration and from my supervisees. My administration was losing trust in me because my evaluation appeared to be positively skewed when teacher test scores were not as high as expected. My supervisees were losing trust in me because I couldn't clearly articulate what was expected of them. Because we were not meeting test score goals, I was charged

with holding teachers accountable for making changes that would result in better test performance. But what if teachers are improving—making positive changes that, upon observation, I can see make a difference for students; and the test scores still aren't at our goal? The answer to this question was murky, and this murkiness eroded people's trust in me, both as a supervisor and as an evaluator. This made me really want to explore further how teachers and administrators can develop trust by working together to establish criteria for effective teaching.

FINAL THOUGHTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

Though we were investigating this question from very different contexts, we all experienced essentially the same major learning: agency (the ability to impact student learning outside one's own classroom) is only developed when a teacher leader establishes purposeful, well-defined, and trusting relationships with his or her colleagues.

Ultimately, it was our ongoing monthly reflection process that helped us get to this place. Each month we met virtually to engage in protocols looking at data like transcripts of conversations, surveys, and narratives. We used protocols like the "Looking at Data" protocol from the National School Reform Faculty in order to help drive our conversations deeper (Buchovecky). These data provided windows into our respective worlds. Through previous work together, we had developed norms like "hard on ideas, soft on people," which made it possible for us to simultaneously challenge the assumptions of those sharing their data and vulnerably share data that wasn't always flattering. Our structured discussions allowed us to notice the themes that arose in our work. For example, after we realized that Catherine was able to leverage "focus" with her group to get buy-in from her colleagues, Heather revisited the lack of meaningful focus in her department meetings. As David grappled to define his role as an evaluator, Catherine realized that she could have been clearer about defining what she thought her role could be with her colleagues and administration.

Through collaborative inquiry and reflection, we found that our experiences were not as divergent as we originally imagined. As a group, we gave each other the courage to take risks in our respective contexts, we supported each other in

generating ideas, and, most importantly, we helped each other to prioritize being reflective in our interactions with colleagues in a way that we wouldn't normally do. Therefore, our final lesson and most important recommendation is that teachers seeking agency need to find one or more trusted colleagues who can act as true thinking partners as they take on the risky, yet rewarding, task of becoming teacher leaders.

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