# Teachers as Leaders: A Commitment to Self-Development

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**Abstract**

For teachers as aspiring leaders, reflecting upon *how* one does what one does constitutes the essence of leadership development. The quality and depth of an educator's leadership is captured in *how* one connects, inspires, and communicates with others. Teachers as leaders lead their own journey of significance every day in *how* they listen and speak to the higher selves of others, *how* they inspire others' efforts to pursue goals larger than themselves, and *how* they unleash the insights of others in the pursuit of common cause. In daily practice, thoughtful leadership is anchored in a commitment to self-development.

**Introduction**

The unrelenting array of challenges confronting educators today in a morally-interdependent world compels a thoughtful focus on the *how* of leadership development as opposed to merely chronicling a litany of *how-to* leadership principles and practices.  In leadership development, considering *how* teachers as leaders do what they do is more useful and more essential than simply offering a set of techniques such as "Five Rules of This, Ten Practices of That, or Seven Ways to Get More of Whatever It Is You Want" (Seidman, 2007, p. xxxv). In practice, it is "very rare to discover any leadership technique that can be effectively transferred to all leaders" (Buckingham, 2012, p. 89). The problem has to do with authenticity. When teachers as developing leaders adopt leadership best-practices which do not align with their dispositions and strengths, they lose their most precious commodity----authenticity.

For teachers as emerging leaders, reflecting upon *how* one does what one does constitutes the essence of leadership development. In the everydayness of academic life, the quality and depth of an educator's leadership is captured in *how* one connects, inspires, and communicates with others. Teachers as influential leaders lead their own journey of significance every day in *how* they listen and speak to the higher selves of others, *how* they inspire others' efforts to pursue

goals larger than themselves, and *how* they unleash the insights of their students and colleagues in pursuit of common cause.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the *how* of leadership development for aspiring teachers as leaders: Sensing the Self, Sensing Leadership Impact, Seeking Developmental Feedback, Modeling Interpersonal Authenticity, Sensing Effectiveness-Limiting Behaviors, Monitoring and Managing Defensive Listening, Sensing the Critical Distinction between Assessments and Facts, and Cultivating Adaptive Capacity.

**Sensing the Self**

Developing leadership capabilities begins with liberating the leader within one's self. Prescient leadership is "leading out of what is already in your soul" (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 26.) For teachers as leaders in the classroom and on campus, developing leadership capabilities is first an inner quest to discover who you are and what you care deeply about. It is through the process of self-examination that one discovers the awareness needed to lead (Kouzes & Posner). Exploring and mastering the *self* is an inner journey: What do I believe in? What are the core values that have guided my life? What principles do I stand for? Why is it important for me to be viewed as a leader? Why would anyone in my classroom, my school, or my community wish to follow me? (Bowman, 2014b)

Before one can lead others, one has to lead oneself. While leadership is characteristically viewed as getting the best out of others, it begins with getting the best out of one's self. If you wouldn't follow you, why should anyone else? Leading one's self begins with believing that one truly matters, that one can have an impact on the lives of others, and that one can inspire in others the sustainable values which will guide them in their pursuit of success and significance in life. Although the path of self-discovery can mirror a "painful process of coming face-to-face with who you are," work on one's self is integral to creating productive, deeply rewarding classrooms and campuses (Love, 2012, p. 50).

Teachers as leaders understand that the art of leadership in academic settings requires knowing one's self as well as one knowing one's craft. For teachers as developing leaders, self-reflection lights the way on one's leadership journey. In daily practice, teachers as leaders commit time each day to reflecting inwardly to achieve an outward result: Why does the world need this school? What would be different in the world if this campus did not exist? (Bowman, 2014c) Do I genuinely care about the person that each of my students will become in the world? What contributions do I wish to make to my classroom, my school, and my community? What enduring results do I really want at the end of a class period or school day? (Daft, 2011)

**Sensing Leadership Impact**

Exemplifying an authentic, connected presence to others lies at the heart of academic leadership.  Just as dropping a pebble into a pond creates a ripple effect, leaders' words and actions have a ripple effect on students' and colleagues' workplace engagement and productivity. Teachers as leaders are adept at recognizing and amplifying the "ripple effect" of what they say and do each day. A self-aware teacher senses the difference, for example, between being inspiring versus intimidating, being collegial versus unapproachable, and being able to make the connection between colleagues' contributions to what a school seeks to accomplish versus blind adherence to a particular school policy, program or instructional methodology.

Because the human brain is a social organ, neurological reactions are profoundly shaped by social interaction in academic settings. What may feel like a passing comment or a benign gesture to an educator can generate a ripple effect with a lasting imprint. Students who are harshly reprimanded, for example, "experience it as a neural response, as powerful and painful as a blow to the head" (Rock, 2009, p. 88). When teachers as developing leaders deny recess to elementary students as a form of group punishment, for example, doing so can register ambiguity and confusion in the student's brain and undercut a sense of certainty and working memory. When high school students are unexpectedly denied access to the school library because one student "took off" from the school on the way from guided study hall to the library, it also undercuts students' sense of certainty and working memory. Teachers as leaders sense resonantly that for many students "simply not knowing what will happen next can be profoundly debilitating because it requires extra neural energy" (Rock, p. 93).

In the everydayness of academic life, a leader's Signature Voice is something that requires monitoring and managing to maximize one's leadership impact (Su & Wilkins, 2013). Sometimes the most resonant Signature Voice in a classroom is that of a student. When nine-year-old student Hector Montoya learned that a mother and daughter had died in a house fire near Grand Prairie, Texas, in part because their home lacked a smoke alarm, Hector exclaimed to his classmates in his Signature Voice, "It hurt my heart to hear that they died in a fire." Hector then took the $300 that he had been saving for a new video game system and purchased smoke alarms for needy and elderly families in his community (Lee, 2014). Hector's selfless leadership subsequently created a resonance and reciprocity in his community, with neighbors presenting Hector with $150 to be used to purchase additional smoke detectors. The leadership implication for teachers as developing leaders is that leading out of one's soul can serve to create an authentic, connected presence to others in one's classroom and community.

**Seeking Developmental Feedback**

Offering and receiving developmental feedback in ways that do not trigger the classic defense mechanisms of denial, rationalization, and projection is an art requiring courage, trust, self-

esteem and practice (Noer & Sternbergh, 2009). In daily practice, leadership is a contact sport. For teachers as developing leaders, personal contact with colleagues matters greatly. Studies show that leaders who regularly ask followers for developmental feedback experience a perceived change in leadership effectiveness (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2010). That is, academic leaders who seek continuing and updated ideas for improvement from their co-workers are viewed by others as far more effective than leaders who have little or no interaction with their colleagues. Interestingly, leaders who do not regularly solicit feedback from colleagues are not necessarily viewed as ineffective leaders. Rather, they are just not seen as getting better (Goldsmith & Morgan).

In *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, Stone and Heen (2014) argue counterintuitively that it is feedback receivers, not givers, who are in control of the feedback process. Specifically, it is the receivers who choose what and how much information to take in. The implication of this fundamental dynamic for teachers as leaders is that receivers need to become more adept at discerning what givers have to say and more skillful at distinguishing between what is useful and what is not.

Specifically, the authors' analysis of how to skillfully receive feedback pinpoints three triggers that prevent teachers as leaders from fully engaging in feedback conversations that might well contain helpful insights: "Truth triggers" are activated by one's natural impulse to deny any observation that one perceives as casting a person in the wrong. (I didn't do that!) "Relationship triggers" cause receivers to shift one's focus from the feedback being offered to how one feels about the person delivering the information. (You have no right to say that to me!)  "Identity triggers" are daggers to the heart that cause receivers to interpret straightforward information as a judgment of one's overall worth. (So I must be basically worthless!) By managing these self-defeating triggers, self-aware teachers as leaders are able to leverage the promise and value of developmental feedback from colleagues and students alike.

 **Modeling Interpersonal Authenticity**

In a world enveloped by unrelenting uncertainty, the need to build and manage authentic impressions in the classroom and on campus is vital to organizational well-being. Ironically, perhaps the ultimate act of authenticity in an academic setting is to apologize to a student, colleague, or parent, knowing fully that an apology is an inherently risky act. Apologizing requires willful vulnerability, occasionally resulting in one's loss of respect, credibility, and trust (Seidman, 2007). To apologize is not only to accept responsibility for one's wrongdoing but also to cede power to the wronged party. Because an apology captures a genuine concern for the other, its very authenticity invites goodwill from the offended party by tipping the scales in his or her favor. Thus, rather than being viewed developmentally as a career-limiting leadership

behavior, an apology encourages openness, extends and invites trust, and beckons a reciprocal collegial response in a morally-interdependent world (Seidman).

In a highly litigious society, school district leaders, when confronted with alleged unprofessional behavior, are often tempted to take refuge in the all-too-familiar adage: "Admit nothing. Deny everything. Make counteraccusations." In today's hyperconnected, hypertransaprent world, however, there is no longer such a thing as private behavior. Technology now allows individuals to peer into the daily activities of organizations as well as into the character of those individuals who lead those organizations. In 2008, the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* chronicled several stories highlighting suspect standardized test scores in Atlanta and surrounding Georgia school districts. Subsequently, investigators "cited a range of cheating violations and organized and systemic misconduct in the district." A dozen former Atlanta educators and administrators are currently headed to trial, charged in a racketeering indictment that accuses them of conspiring to change scores on state standardized tests. Today, teachers as leaders sense authentically that in the information age one's past is one's present (Bloom, 2014).

**Sensing Effectiveness-Limiting Behaviors**

Leadership self-development in diverse academic settings is often undercut by recognizable effectiveness-limiting leadership behaviors. Students, for example, intensely scrutinize and occasionally playfully mock teachers' body language, how their teachers use humor, who gets praised, and who gets blamed. While it is tempting to underestimate its importance, image-management feedback has a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of leadership as a performing art. For teachers as leaders, image management begins with leading from "the inside out." In the classroom and across campus, for example, one's reputation is who you are. It fills the synapses between student and teacher, between teacher and administrator, and between school and community. Professional reputations are earned and managed one interaction, one gesture, and one event at a time throughout one's career (Seidman, 2007). One's professional reputation enters a classroom or faculty lounge before one enters and lingers long after one leaves. In daily practice, self-aware teachers as leaders manage, build, and sustain their professional reputations, for instance, by being truth tellers and promise keepers.

Because of the power differential inherent in academic settings, the "need to be right" is a familiar self-limiting behavior that plagues teachers and administrators alike. Unchecked, a leader's need to be right can mutate into a delusion of omniscience, a devaluation of competing collegial perspectives, and diminished learning opportunities (Noer & Sternbergh, 2009). In his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More*

*Successful,* Goldsmith (2007) argues that the number one behavioral problem of successful leaders is, paradoxically, winning too much. For teachers as leaders who have to win an argument in a policy debate, for example, even though a compromise is possible, doing so constitutes winning too much. Moreover, getting into an argument during a faculty meeting that could have been sidestepped is essentially winning unnecessarily (Bowman, 2014a).

**Monitoring and Managing Defensive Listening**

Listening to reply, not to understand punctuates collegial interaction in organizational settings ranging from informal interpersonal exchanges to formal faculty debates.  It is not at all uncommon to observe a conversation in which a listener's lip twitches slightly in anticipation of regaining control of the conversation by hearing only enough of what was said to craft an immediate response.  Self-aware teachers as leaders sense that defensive listening is limiting interpersonally and organizationally. Cultural experiences, however, have conditioned teachers to listen defensively to figure out how to protect one's turf, to detect who has power, and to anticipate approaching danger. In academic settings, defensive listening is characteristically "a highly developed and tuned skill, honed by fear and an instinct for survival" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 103).

Effective listening is a skill that can be mastered by almost all leaders. A leader's commitment to self-development underscores the point that managing one's listening skills is the first step in acknowledging others' reality and in establishing interpersonal trust. Productive leaders listen to understand by probing, paraphrasing, and supporting others in telling their own truth, even when another's truth may be uncomfortable for both the sender and the leader (Noer & Sternbergh, 2009). Effective teachers as leaders listen without resistance when others appear to be in disagreement with one's point of view. What differentiates effective listeners and leaders from one's peers is a commitment to listening for shared meaning. In everydayness of academic life, listening for emergent threads of shared meaning "speaks to us about who we are becoming together" (Ellinor & Gerard 1998, p. 109).

**Sensing the Critical Distinction between Assessments and Facts**

Teachers as academic leaders sense the crucial distinction between assessments and facts. The word assess is derived from the Latin word *assidere*, meaning to "sit beside." While the word assessment has a long history of meanings and applications, assessments are characteristically one's educated opinions, interpretations, judgments, and perspectives (Braskamp & Ory, 1994). While well-reasoned opinions and judgments about one's students and colleagues may feel like facts, they are not facts. Because assessments are *not* facts, they often serve as a source of conflict in academic settings (Hamill, 2013). Imagine that a classroom teacher observes a

student yawning and looking out the window during an in-class presentation. An educator's initial assessment might reasonably lead one to conclude that the student is "tired, bored, and essentially uninterested." Moreover, once one has the germ of an idea that this student is likely uninterested, one might be tempted to look for additional evidence to corroborate that belief.

Depending on the emotional intensity of one's initial assessment, one might even start blocking out or explaining away other occasions that do not respond to one's assessment. The initial assessment that the student is "tired, bored, and uninterested," however, lies in the world of opinion. It isn't true. It isn't false either. While all of the student's classmates, for example, might well agree with the classroom teacher that the student yawned and looked out the classroom window repeatedly, the teacher's assessment is his or her own creation, while perhaps also saying something regarding his or her unstated standards of measurement. In contrast, an assertion that there are twenty-seven students present in the classroom at a given point in time can be determined to be either true or false, once all parties agree on the same unit of measurement.

Importantly, when one forgets that assessments are *opinions*, doing so can become a significant source of unease or misunderstanding in offering feedback to one's students and colleagues. Perceptive teachers as leaders are able to view one's own assessments as assessments, as opposed to viewing them as objective truths. It is not uncommon, however, for organizational leaders to express an unshakeable belief that their assessments are *true*. While one's observations, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations are all understandably "*your* truth" they are "not The Truth" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, 181).

**Cultivating Adaptive Capacity**

In their groundbreaking study of how era, values, and defining moments shape both very young and older leaders, Bennis and Thomas (2002) concluded that there is one sentence in their findings that should be swiped with a yellow highlighter: "To the extent that any single quality determines success, that quality is adaptation capacity" (p. 91). A leader's ability to recognize and understand context lies at the core of adaptive capacity. Psychiatrist George Vaillant (2002), in his landmark Harvard study of adult development, underscored the point: "It is not stress that kills us. It is effective adaptation to stress that allows us to live" (p. 9).

Research suggests that a leader's ability to function productively in an organizational setting depends not only upon one's ability to deal with the stressful byproducts of authoritarianism—distrust, dishonesty, territoriality, toadying, and fear—but also with one's adaptive capacity in dealing with a litany of *uncomfortable truths* that punctuate organizational life (Leavitt, 2003). Surprisingly, many of the less-toxic uncomfortable truths encountered in academic life are experienced early-on in a teacher's leadership development:

- o "There's no such thing as a private conversation." One assumes that whatever one says will soon circulate to the people who will be most affected by it.
- o "There's no such thing as a casual conversation." One senses that colleagues will often attempt to read deep meaning into one's most innocent comments and gestures.
- o "People sometimes hear what they most fear." One knows that colleagues and students will occasionally attach the most negative interpretations to one's comments and movements.
- o "Trauma has a long half-life." Occasionally, one feels compelled to apologize for misdeeds that one did not commit and events that occurred before one arrived.
- o "No good deeds go unpunished." Despite the purest of intentions and the most exquisite execution, someone, somewhere will object to one's actions.
- o "Newton's third law doesn't always apply." Newton posited that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In truth, a small, seemingly harmless misstep may yield a huge negative impact (Galford & Drapeau, 2003).

A teacher as leader's contextual adaptation to these easily-recognizable truths allows one to move to heightened levels of self-development, learning, and leadership.

**Conclusion**

Self-aware leadership in academic settings requires confronting a piercing question: "What is *really* going on personally, professionally, and organizationally?" (Terry, 2003, p. 34) Thoughtful leadership is grounded in the wisdom of sensing what is really happening to one's self, one's colleagues, one's students, one's organization, and one's profession. Perceptive teachers as leaders are what Saul Bellow (2000), in his novel *Ravelstein,* calls first-class noticers. They are geniuses at grasping context by endlessly probing personal, professional, and organizational realities.

Ultimately, leadership is anchored in a commitment to self-development. In daily practice, leaders and followers are in a constant state of becoming as they contextually adapt to emergent challenges, while seeking to build stronger interpersonal connections with others in pursuit of success and *significance.* In self-governing academic cultures, the role of every individual is to lead and be a leader. In the classroom and across campus, every academic leader has one's own wall to climb as he or she puts ideas into action. The commitment to climb one's wall inconspicuously and without casualties, in concert with one's evolving ability to do so, frames the challenge of academic leadership. *How* one does that is the essence of leadership development. For one's students and colleagues alike, the test of one's leadership is captured compellingly in their daily experience: "Am I a better human being for having been in this place at this time?"

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