



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”  
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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series November 2009

#### What Challenges Does a Teacher Leader Face?

Two years ago, when I first accepted an instructional facilitator position in my school district, I was filled with excitement at the thought of leading my teaching colleagues through the complex maze of differentiated instruction. A few days later, though, my excitement turned to genuine fear as the enormity of the task descended upon me. How was I going to get people with whom I had never worked to trust me? What could I say to grab their interest? Would I know how to answer their questions? How was I going to define my role? I realized my dream job was going to be a huge challenge.

When I first started my new position, I knew the first, and most vital, challenge I would face would be to develop genuine relationships with my teaching peers. I was not new to the school district, but I was new to the three schools I would serve. Well aware that my new colleagues had no tangible reason to trust me, I set out to build some kind of positive relationship with each teacher. In many cases, this meant talking to people about their students or their curriculum, the things that are important to them, and offering small but meaningful suggestions. A few teachers, though, did not want anything to do with me. I had to find a way to earn their confidence, too. I found connecting on a much more personal level was effective in these situations. In one instance, a teacher who had never really spoken with me finally invited me into her classroom to help differentiate math curriculum after we talked about college basketball during lunch.

After making positive connections, a teacher leader is faced with the task of getting down to the work of helping teachers improve their practice. We are challenged to convince our highly educated colleagues, who are likely experts in at least one facet of education, that they should want to get better at their craft. This is not easy for some people to take, which is why I like an analogy that has become somewhat cliché, but is nonetheless very applicable: even Tiger Woods, the most successful golfer in the world, has a coach and continually strives to improve. When teachers hear this logic, they often become less defensive and more accepting of a teacher leader’s help. They no longer feel as though working with a coach or facilitator is an admission of weakness, but rather a characteristic of being a lifelong learner.

Opposite the teacher who is reluctant to work with a teacher leader is the teacher who wants a substitute rather than a helper. These teachers eagerly invite coaches and facilitators into their classrooms, but for the wrong reasons. Most of the teacher leaders in my school district have experienced classroom teachers sitting down at their computers, correcting papers, or even walking out of the room while we were teaching “model” lessons. Operating under the presumption that the disengaged teachers were not trying to undermine our efforts, but simply did not understand the purpose of model teaching, a lesson planning, observation, and debriefing template was developed. Now teacher leaders who go into classrooms are able to use this tool to fully engage classroom teachers as learners during all phases of model lesson planning and implementation.

Finally, teacher leaders are often challenged by their innate helpfulness. Educators are some of the most giving people on the planet, and teacher leaders are no exception. We continually need to remind ourselves that our job is to teach people how to fish, not to catch the fish for them. We need to stop and think when an exhausted teacher asks a question such as, “Could you analyze my test data for me?” Even though doing the analysis would be far easier and faster than trying to teach someone who is slightly technology phobic how to use spreadsheets, we need to patiently stand by this teacher as she learns. We cannot forget our roots as classroom teachers who would never have completed a student’s assignment for him just because he asked. We need to remember the quickest or easiest solution is not often the path to learning for anyone, including ourselves.

I have learned more about teaching than I ever imagined I could by working as a teacher leader. The relationships I have developed with so many new colleagues and their students have broadened my perspective as an educator, and for that, I am no longer fearful, but eager to face the challenges associated with leadership. Gladly, the one aspect of my work that is not challenging at all is the chance to recognize the positive qualities within so many wonderful educators on a daily basis.

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