

## Selecting Teacher Leaders

This material should be used as a supplement to *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions that Undermine Learning*, Acton, MA: Ready About Press, Platt, Tripp, Fraser, Warnock and Curtis 2008. The questions can be used for initial screening of teachers, selection of teacher leaders or as part of leadership team development.

### Part I. Hiring for Conviction

Once upon a time in the 90's, hiring teachers consisted almost entirely of selecting those individuals with the most promise to succeed in the classroom. In 2008 that is still the primary consideration. However research documenting the impact of teacher collaboration on student learning suggests that we need to hire "collaboration ready" teachers as well.

It is far easier to build an individual's skills than to try to change his or her beliefs. Therefore the selection process needs to identify candidates whose beliefs are in alignment with the school's commitment to building accountable professional communities and to doing collective work in service of student learning. Samples of such beliefs include

1. Adults and children have the ability to learn
2. Expertise develops as a result of continuous effort to find and tackle problems; it does not develop because individuals are able to force fit known technical solutions to new problems.
3. Individuals must sometimes give up individual autonomy in order to pursue the collective good.
4. A strong sense of urgency and hope compels us to persist in trying to reach students even in the face of adversity.

**Note: Sample** Interview questions cited below may need to be modified depending on the experience level of the teacher. In some cases a question might be turned into a hypothetical situation.

#### ***1. Probing for the Ability to Learn Belief***

Teacher leaders should be able to demonstrate that they make decisions based on strong beliefs about students' and adults' capacity to learn. Prospective teacher leaders need to have internalized and attempted to act on the threshold belief "All can achieve; no excuses are acceptable."

*Sample Question:*

*How do you or might you respond to a colleague who attributes his or her lack of success with a particular group of students to the students' low ability and/or poor home life? Cite an example of how you followed up your conversation with that colleague.*

**Look for:** examples of confronting colleagues and knowledge of attribution theory, i.e. the ways in which people give reasons (attributions) for success and failure.

## ***2. Probing for Beliefs About How Expertise Develops***

It is helpful if potential teacher leaders have experienced and/or thought about the difference between work that requires a value change or change of “heart and mind”, what Heifetz and Linsky<sup>1</sup> might call an “adaptive change” and work that merely requires an alteration in routine or minor modification in practice, i.e. a “technical change.”

Complex problems like closing achievement gaps cannot be solved by short-term, technical changes such as lengthening the amount of time spent on literacy instruction while failing to address the underlying poor instruction. Adaptive changes tend to be more sustaining.

### *Sample Questions*

1. *Can you tell us about an innovation, new approach, or strategy that required you to substantially change your classroom practice in an effort to improve students’ performance? How did it impact your beliefs about improving learning for students? What changed and how did it affect your subsequent thinking and practice?*

**Look for:** the ability to identify and analyze a change in practice that caused a reexamination of belief or a change of mind set, not just an adjustment of time spent or a change of routine.

2. *Please describe a time when you were part of a professional community that was able to collaborate effectively to make a positive difference for student learning. What were the circumstances surrounding that collaboration? What were your goals? What were the most important attributes of the way the group worked?*

**Look for:** evidence that candidates can make a distinction between cooperation and collaboration and that the work and the outcomes they describe are substantive rather than rearrangements of technical aspects of instruction such as scheduling or grouping.

## ***3. Checking for understanding of the balance between individual autonomy and collective commitments***

Strong teacher leaders understand that there are complex problems requiring collective decision making but that effective collaboration does not mean “everyone has to be involved in everything all the time.”

Balancing autonomy with collective commitment has another face. Teacher leaders need to understand when it is appropriate to challenge administrative or union attempts to ensure conformity when that conformity is not in the best interest of students.

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<sup>1</sup> See Heifetz and Linsky *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* 2002

**Sample Questions:**

1. *“How do you determine when decisions and problems can appropriately be handled by individual teachers or when they should be raised and dealt with collectively?”*

**Look for:** Examples of times when committees have invested excessive effort in work that could have been best left to individuals—e.g. taking an hour in a meeting to draft a field trip letter to parents, figure out a snack policy for exam period, “go over” library use guidelines and determine when they will be communicated to students, or decide on the format for writing mid-year comments.

2. *“Can you think of a time when you were being pressured to conform to the thinking of a committee, an administrator or union leader? What did you do? Why did you choose to do that?”*

**Look for:** A willingness to resist pressure to conform to an authority figure coupled with clear evidence about how the individual determined that the request was not in the best interest of students. Make a clear distinction between individuals who reveal their “dislike” of any authority figure through a litany of accusations and criticism (“they always” or “if it were left up to them”) and individuals who can cite specific instances when they felt they needed to point out discrepancies between desired outcomes and requested actions.

**Checking on a sense of urgency and hope**

These twin passions provide the fuel to inspire faith during tough times. Thus teacher leaders need to be able to draw on their own images of a positive future for students, communicate that image to others, and convey the importance of timely interventions when the pace of change feels overwhelming to colleagues.

**Sample Questions**

1. *“What sustains you during challenging times? In particular, think of a time in when you were feeling discouraged or unsuccessful. How did you turn that around?”*

**Look for:** signs of resilience and bouncing back, signs of depending on colleagues and willingness to reach out for help.

2. *“Who are the role models in your professional life that inspire your practice? What did they specifically do that you found noteworthy and how has it influenced your growth as a professional?”*

**Look for:** signs of a motivating cause or personal mission, an optimism about being able to impact student learning, a willingness to continue to be influenced

by new role models.

## Part II Hiring for Competence

Convictions are essential but not enough to get the job done as a teacher leader. Without the competence to mobilize colleagues around those convictions, teacher leaders can find themselves quickly isolated or marginalized. As would be the case with anyone taking on a new leadership role, we expect that teacher leaders will come with rich skill sets and be faced with challenges they have not yet had to handle or with the demand for competencies they have not yet had a chance to develop. Candidates who have at least emerging strengths in key areas will be better equipped to make their convictions come alive in actions. Moreover, the simple act of asking an interview question about a targeted competence will

- Help reflective individuals to begin to pull together and appreciate all the things they do know how to do but were not assuming to be essential to the role
- Raise the level of consciousness about role requirements for everyone in the room
- Send important signals about what the school and district value and intend to support.

### *Probing for ability to take on the tough stuff*

Determine whether the teacher understands the value of and is able to tolerate healthy conflict without immediately rushing to compromise or trying to make people “be nice” at the expense of coming to new insights. Schools typically attract people who want to bring everyone together in harmony and people who are more naturally inclined to support the status quo than to introduce ideas, facts, or questions that may create disequilibrium. Knowing how teacher candidates have operated when they have had to raise an important—but potentially disconcerting—question with colleagues is important.

### *Sample Questions*

1. *Can you identify a time when you saw tough topics ignored to the detriment of the group? What have you done in the past when you thought a group was tacitly establishing “undiscussables” that, in your opinion, really did need to be discussed.*
2. *What should your role be if a group gets into a conflict over something?*  
**Look for:** recognition that not all conflict is bad, that conflict over ideas and approaches (as opposed to attacks on individuals as individuals) is part of non-defensive examination of practice, and that genuine adaptive change (as opposed to technical adjustments) rarely happens without some sort of disagreement that provokes new understandings. Also look for any evidence that the individual has experience in living with and living through conflicts and a mental image of how to keep a process safe while conflict is occurring.
3. *For many teachers there is a real line between “asked for” advice and unsolicited suggestion or direction. As a teacher leader how would you move that line towards a more public and open response to doing what’s best for students?*

**Look for:** understanding that many teachers are socialized to work in isolation and those norms of privacy, non-interference and non-judgment are necessary barriers to address in a leadership role and some concrete ideas re how to keep feedback standards-based and specific as opposed to a matter of personal preference, i.e. “how I think you should do things around here.”

4. *A teacher on your team routinely has grade reports with a high number of D’s and F’s. How would you proceed with that colleague?*

**Look For:** action steps that explicitly or implicitly show the candidate will base his or her interactions on gathering a range of data and on asking the colleague to join in interpreting the data and proposing solutions. Also look for an ability to sort out the different attributions for students’ failure that an individual with high student failure rate may offer a teacher leader, and for sample talk or strategies that model how the candidate would press for teacher design and ownership of specific ways to improve the situation.

### ***Checking on repertoire for helping adults develop problem-solving skills***

#### ***Sample Questions***

1. *“What are some cooperative group learning structures you use in your classroom? How do you see them being adapted to working with adults?”*

**Look for:** ability to apply or adapt something that they already know how to do with students; ability to specify differences between student and adult learning; evidence of prior experiments with or reflection about how particular protocols or models might help groups direct their efforts.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Describe several different group decision-making methods (e.g., unanimity, consensus, majority vote, rank ordering, nominal group technique). What types of issues or initiatives would each of these methods you’ve shared best match up with?”*

**Look for:** knowledge of (and perhaps even experience with) a range of ways to make group decisions and some evidence of thought about how they might best match to particular purposes; recognition of the importance of context, priority and needs for participation and belonging in choosing a decision-making strategy.

3. *What are the skills you see as essential to helping members of a team, committee or task force be most productive and make the most significant contributions to student learning?*

**Look for:** Ability to cite specific interpersonal and facilitation skills and name or indicate an understanding of active listening; recognition of the importance of being able to identify the target and keep the focus on outcomes rather than the minutia of means; language that suggests the emphasis of action will be less on *what I can do* and more on *what I can support the team to do..*

### ***Determining skill in using standards and data to inform instruction***

#### ***Sample Questions***

1. *What aspects of your students' academic performance are you most dissatisfied with? What do you base this dissatisfaction on and how do you measure your efforts at improvement?*

**Look for:** Statements about performance in relation to clear targets (e.g. standards, criteria, benchmarks) as well as about personal commitment to individual students' growth; references to data and assessments used to identify gaps in performance; indicators that the candidate takes responsibility for student outcomes as opposed to attributing poor performance entirely to external variables.

2. *"What are the essential qualities effective team members must bring to the table when addressing concerns about student performance?"*

**Look for:** Ability to think beyond an "egalitarian ethic" (all teachers hold equal rank and position distinguished only by differences in years of service and college credits earned) to expressing the importance of current skill level, advanced knowledge about teaching and content, willingness to experiment, non-defensiveness and fidelity to data as essential attributes.

### **Probing for background in making practice transparent**

Since at least part of the work of instructional improvement requires submitting one's practice to the scrutiny of others on a regular basis, teacher leaders cannot be guarded and defensive about being observed or observing instruction in action. They need to strike a balance between being appropriately sympathetic to others' fears or perhaps acknowledging the residue of an unfortunate experience and giving in to peer pressure in order to keep peace.

#### Sample questions

1. *In your experience, what are some concrete ways to help teachers become more public about what they do in their classrooms? If someone were insecure about engaging in any of these activities, where would you have him or her begin?*

**Look for:** examples of participation in peer observation, co teaching, mini sharing at meetings and faculty and a sense of how to match structures to different kinds of purposes and participant backgrounds.

2. *"Think of a committee or team you have worked on that was particularly successful. Now think of the committee chair or team leader. What did she or he do to facilitate the committee's successes?"*

**Look for:** identification of specific leadership skills that were effective and worth emulating not simply attributions to personality or trustworthiness, the reasons those skills worked, and any evidence the candidate has been attempting to develop and use such skills.

3. *"Think of a time when you were observed by a peer. What was the feedback that you received and what did you do with it?"*

**Look for:** can distinguish feedback as a formative tool for improvement as opposed to a summative description of their performance. Utilized the feedback to validate successful practice or to improve practice.

Interviews yield helpful data about a candidate's thinking, background knowledge, articulateness, or intellectual and emotional stances toward potential challenges of the role. However, that information should be correlated with other sources (see Chapter 7 Collecting and using Data About Teaching and Learning) that might include

- Observation of the teacher leader candidate working in a team or on a committee
- Contributions of the candidate in faculty meetings
- Assessment of prior experience as a mentor or “go to person” for other teachers
- Participation in a variety of staff development activities
- Assessment of their relationship building capabilities with other staff members
- Observations of the candidate teaching or coaching adults
- Observations of the candidate's response to high conflict or highly charged encounters
- Information about attendance, fulfillment of professional responsibilities, and relationships with parent and community

According to Jim Collins, “getting the right people on the bus” is one of the essential strategies of helping an organization move from merely good to great. If we are able to get the right sub unit leaders on the bus, we then need to think about how to help them learn the skills of effective group leadership. This is where teacher leadership intersects with the Leadership Team (LT). The Leadership Team (LT) becomes the leader training laboratory, the model for progressive interaction, and an exemplar for the unit leadership.

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