

Leading From Alongside, Rather Than Out in Front: Non-positional Ways of Being a Teacher Leader

The Knowles Teacher Initiative supports and prepares Teaching Fellows to become teacher leaders, and we do this from the very beginnings of their careers. Some might question how early-career teachers can act as leaders without more years of experience or “success” in the classroom. But we believe that teachers at all stages of their careers have important roles to play in a model of teacher leadership that is both reflexive and distributed.

Our Fellows show us examples of this kind of reflexive and distributed teacher leadership all the time. Traditional ideas of leadership assume a vocal leader who is out-in-front, promoting a vision, recruiting and persuading others, organizing activity, and directing the work of a team. Some of our Fellows take on highly visible roles like these early in their careers, stepping into formal positions of teacher leadership like facilitating a professional learning community (PLC), leading a department, or mentoring a first-year teacher.

We’ve also seen Fellows successfully advance an idea or advocate for change in less visible ways. As beginning teachers, our Fellows are interested in working collaboratively with other teachers toward improvement. While sometimes Fellows shy away from “formal” leadership designations, they nevertheless take deliberate steps to work collaboratively with colleagues in order to improve their teaching, influence their school’s culture, and improve educational outcomes for their students.

We’ve heard Fellows refer to this informal style as “stealth” leadership—leadership without hierarchical designation or fanfare, but still relying on deliberate steps to improve practice through authentic, important, and shared work.

Fellows have demonstrated this “stealth” leadership in a variety of ways:

Embracing critical “behind the scenes” roles: When Adam* began implementing Standards Based Grading (SBG) into his physics classes, he frequently talked with his colleagues about benefits he saw in his students’ learning and motivation. As other teachers expressed interest, Adam met with them one-on-one to answer questions, work out logistics, draft letters to

parents, and address students' question and concerns about this new grading system. Soon, seven other teachers in his department were using SBG, including Adam's department chair, Susan, who organized a weekly meeting of teachers using SBG and advocated directly to the principal about technical issues with the school's online grading system.

As department chair, Susan took on the more visible, and traditional, leadership role—"out in front" of the weekly meetings, and liaising with the principal. Still, Adam's own behind-the-scenes role was instrumental in bringing others on board with SBG and helping to work out the kinks. As he describes, his "behind the scenes" leadership style —initiating one-on-one conversations, generating enthusiasm for a new idea, and supporting others—is an important complement to Susan's organization and assertiveness, and both these styles are important to the department. By embracing this quieter style of leadership, Adam plays to his strengths, advances an important initiative, and demonstrates that there is more than one way to be a leader.

Acting as a "first follower": When Barbara, a special education teacher at Reagan's* school, began advocating for regular education teachers to make their classes more inclusive of students with disabilities, many teachers were skeptical and frustrated. Reagan was not naive about the work needed to modify her biology class to accommodate a wide range of learners, so she began to work closely with Barbara to better meet her students' needs. The two met regularly, often after school, to discuss upcoming units in the biology curriculum, identify key concepts that all students—regardless of ability—should learn, and then modify activities and develop guided notes to focus on these core concepts. Reagan also attended voluntary workshops that Barbara offered on behavior intervention and supports. Soon, Reagan was learning to modify her instructional materials more efficiently on her own, and Barbara was able to offer more direct support to individual students. By embracing Barbara's vision of an inclusive classroom, Reagan not only saw improvement in her students' learning, she also developed new teaching skills. But just as importantly, as the first science teacher to get behind Barbara's idea, Reagan gained a new collaborator, and helped to demonstrate to other teachers how inclusion can work in a mainstream classroom. [Derek Silver's TED Talk](#) calls a first follower "an underappreciated form of leadership." By partnering with Barbara on inclusive teaching practices, Reagan modeled how this vision was achievable, and why it was in the best interest of her students.

Valuing collaborative products over individual ideas: In her fifth year of teaching, Katherine* moved to a new school where she began working with a PLC of other chemistry teachers. Katherine did not always agree with the

pacing or priorities of her new chemistry curriculum, so she raised questions to the other teachers, or suggested new ideas for assessment or student-centered explorations. Many of her ideas were not adopted by her PLC; instead the majority agreed to modify plans they had used in previous years rather than creating something brand-new. But since Katherine's goal was to influence the chemistry curriculum in the long run, rather than do her own thing in her classroom, she continued to offer ideas while working *with* her colleagues rather than separate from them. As a result, she's finding that remaining open to her colleagues' ideas creates opportunities for them, in turn, to accept her own ideas.

As she describes, "Part of being a teacher leader is valuing group products and processes over your own opinions or ways of doing things. If the group can produce something that everyone feels proud of, then the relationships become stronger and everyone's work in their classroom improves." For Katherine, teacher leadership does not mean imposing ideas on others. Instead, it involves a give-and-take of ideas among colleagues to strengthen relationships and create collaborative products. She believes this kind of teacher leadership has the potential to improve teaching in her own classroom and beyond.

Traditional models of leadership might not recognize Adam, Reagan, or Katherine as "leaders" in these scenarios. But for each of them, sharing the leadership work with their colleagues was more important than being named as "the leader." We find that for many of our Fellows, the goal is not to assume a formal leadership position, but to improve teaching and learning in their schools, and the most effective way to do that is to work alongside their colleagues, rather than out in front.

**Names of Fellows and their colleagues are pseudonyms*