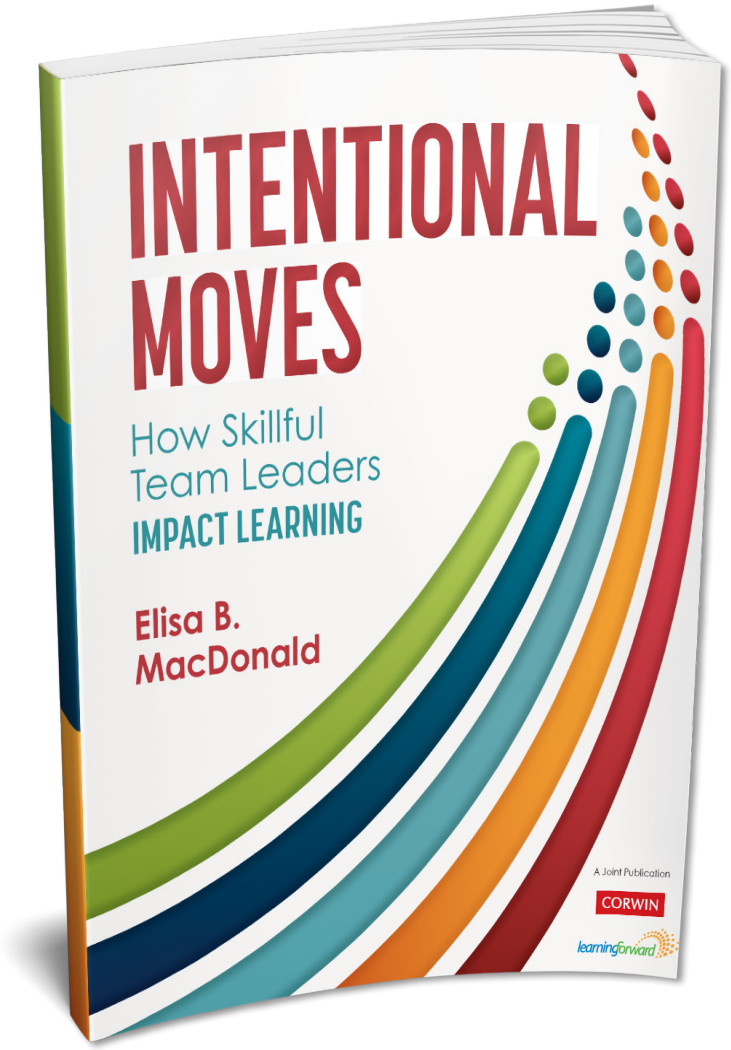

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STLs' Essential Understandings

Thank you for your commitment to leading teams of adult learners. This is complex work. It not only takes a skillful intentional approach, but also requires an understanding of, well, teams, adult learning, and peer leadership. Skillful team leaders (STLs) are aware of the social influences that affect group learning. They are attuned to the unique needs of adult learners. And, they capitalize on the advantages and learn to overcome the challenges of being a peer team leader. With the essential understandings in the following chapters, you will be better prepared to implement the moves in this book.

WHAT SKILLFUL TEAM LEADERS UNDERSTAND ABOUT GROUPS

1. All people are subject to social influence.
2. Personalities and work preferences influence how a group works together.
3. Group diversity improves outcomes if you can get past the function troubles.
4. Groups are dynamic, not static.

WHAT SKILLFUL TEAM LEADERS UNDERSTAND ABOUT ADULT LEARNERS

1. Adults are natural problem solvers and self-directed learners.
2. Adults need to know why they are learning something new, how it is relevant to them, and what practical application it has.
3. Adults are motivated by learning that improves either who they are or what they do.
4. Adults know the best ways in which they learn.
5. Adults want to be treated as professionals with their experience and expertise acknowledged.

WHAT SKILLFUL TEAM LEADERS UNDERSTAND ABOUT PEER LEADERSHIP

1. Peer leaders have a change agent edge over those with authority.
2. Peer leaders have a teacher advantage.
3. Peer leaders face a unique set of hurdles because of their dual role.
4. Peer leaders often start with misconceptions of what it means to lead.
5. Peer leaders possess five key attributes.

The Upside (and Downside) of Being a Peer Leader

6

Team leadership is not about running meetings. (Neither is this book.) It is about leading people. Much has been written on leadership. Whether you work in education, business, or the military, whether you lead an Olympic team or a Boy Scout troop, there are fundamental understandings about leadership that apply to all people. Despite articles claiming to reveal the "Top 10 Secrets Every Leader Must Know" or the "5 Mistakes Every Leader Must Avoid," there is no agreement among experts as to what these are. There are many branded leadership approaches that people swear by (e.g., transformational leadership, servant leadership, distributed leadership, indelible leadership), and if you are now, or are looking to become, an administrative leader, then you have likely had exposure to some or all of them. But, if you are a *peer* leading your colleagues, it is most helpful to develop a deep understanding of not just leadership, but more specifically *peer* leadership.

I define a peer as a person who leads colleagues, who does not hold a top authority position (like a principal), does not evaluate teachers (or does, but is also a member of the same union), and who might have social relationships outside of school with those they lead. You are most likely a peer leader if you are a teacher leader, an instructional coach/partner, a department lead, or, perhaps, an assistant principal. Being a peer leader poses unique challenges, but also offers unexpected advantages. In the following pages, I explore five understandings that skillful team leaders (STLs) have about peer leadership.

1. Peer leaders have a change agent edge over those with authority.
2. Peer leaders have a teacher advantage.
3. Peer leaders face a unique set of hurdles because of their dual role.
4. Peer leaders often start with misconceptions of what it means to lead.
5. Peer leaders possess five key attributes.

1. Peer leaders have a change agent edge over those with authority.

When you took the role of team leader, you likely had to consider if you were up for the job. *Can I run our team meetings? Can I be a resource to my colleagues? Do I work well with my peers? Do I have the capacity to devote the hours this*

role will require? These are the right questions to ask, but there is another one that gets to the heart of your most important responsibility as a peer leader, and that is: *Am I ready to lead my colleagues through change?*

The real work of leading teams is not facilitating meetings; it is facilitating learning for continuous improvement. And continuous improvement requires change—changes in thinking, changes to practice, changes to structures and policies, and changes in outcomes. Peer leaders are change agents.

To lead anyone in change is a tall task, particularly as different people have different go-to responses when faced with it. Some are quick to jump on board no matter the change. Others have reservations about doing something differently, and express those concerns in ways that can make them seem resistant. When you have embraced change, but someone else has not, it is common to wish for the authority to make the other person see what you see. I have heard from teacher team leaders, "If I could just tell this person what to do . . . but I'm not their boss." Or, "I can only do so much as a colleague." I understand this thinking, but unfortunately it is based on misconceptions about leadership. The truth is that no one, whether a peer or an authority figure, can *make* another person learn or change. They can only create the conditions for learning and act in ways that demonstrate that change is possible. And while you might wish for the authority, you might be more effective without it.

Peer leaders are actually positioned to bring about authentic change in ways that those who are in a role with the power to demand it cannot (Dimock & McGree, 1995; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Margolis, 2009). To be clear, I am not minimizing the influence of school leaders, as many are effective in bringing about authentic sustainable change, but the authority they have is not likely what does it. Effective school leaders will tell you that *because* they are in an evaluative role they have had to overcome the hurdle of people being guarded and hiding struggle, which thereby inhibits the change process. Others with authority who have tried to foster understanding and the need for change can end up with compliance simply because they are the "boss" and people want to please them or not "rock the boat." In short, having authority over others can actually be a hindrance.

But being a peer responsible for leading change, while it has its own share of hurdles, is actually an advantage. I'll share just a few reasons why teacher leaders have the edge:

- You've earned credibility from your peers as an effective teacher (or you wouldn't have self-selected, or been chosen, to lead).
- You are held to the same expectations as your peers.
- You have regular contact with students.
- You relate and are empathetic to the hurdles facing your peers, as you face the same ones, while also modeling how you overcome them.

- Your peers relate to you knowing you are in a similar role to them. In challenging school cultures where there is high tension between administrators and teachers, your peers will likely view you as one of them and be less guarded around you than around a school leader.

2. Peer leaders have a teacher advantage.

The question I am most asked by peer leaders is, "How do I lead collaborative learning *with adults*?" And my first response is, "How do you lead it *with students*?" Whether you teach now or have prior teaching experience, you were likely tapped for a team leadership position *because* of your effectiveness with kids. You teach with outcomes in mind; you think about how you will engage all students in learning; you decide what to do when a child exhibits pushback; you deliberately facilitate classroom discourse that stretches students' thinking and abilities. Each move you make with a class full of students is done with intention and skill. This is the teacher advantage that you bring to leading adult learners. In short, you already know how to lead collaborative learning.

Adults and children are, of course, not the same, as I emphasize in the prior chapter, but both *are* learners. *How* you lead collaborative learning with children might differ from *how* you lead it with adults, but the intentions behind what you do—the Ten Primary Intentions—are the same.

3. Peer leaders face a unique set of hurdles because of their dual role.

While the role of peer leader provides an excellent opportunity for you to stretch as a professional and lead change, even the oxymoronic name *peer leader* points to the hurdles that come with leading as a colleague. The following are a few common dilemmas that you may have encountered and an explanation of what could be contributing to them. I also make reference to particular sections of this book that provide moves to address the dilemmas highlighted. (Note: Not meant as a shameless plug, but if you want a deeper dive into team leadership hurdles, what's behind them, and how to skillfully respond, you may want to go back and read my first book, *The Skillful Team Leader: A Resource for Overcoming Hurdles to Professional Learning for Student Achievement* [MacDonald, 2013].)

Hurdles From the Peer Side

The friend dilemma: "What do I do when my friend is the one showing resistance?"

This is one of the most jarring challenges a peer leader faces. You expect pushback from the person who is typically the "school naysayer," but when it comes from

a friend, you are likely caught off-guard and might be unsure how to respond. To understand this hurdle, you'll need to tap into your emotional intelligence. Notice your emotional response; notice your friend's. Rule out personal motivations such as they wanted the leadership role that you got. Distinguish resistance aimed at you versus that aimed at your ideas, and push for change. The moves in Primary Intention 9 will help you navigate resistance.

The expertise dilemma: "Should I share my expertise or keep quiet? I don't want to come across as a know-it-all to my colleagues."

This is a real concern expressed not only by peer team leaders but by many teachers, and it is called tall poppy syndrome—when people don't want to stand out from their peers for fear of being put down, ridiculed, or even ostracized. The metaphor refers to the phenomenon that all poppies must grow together, and if one gets taller than the rest, it must be cut down. (Sounds like dystopian fiction, but it's a real thing.) If your students got better results than anyone else at the table and you are worried about sharing the data for fear that others will resent you, you have experienced tall poppy syndrome. If the principal invites teachers to present a best practice to the faculty and they decline for fear that others will snicker at them or think they are the principal's "pet," the syndrome is likely present in the school culture. If you ask individual members of your team to showcase their success, and this isn't yet the norm by which your team operates, don't be surprised if the teachers refuse or downplay their success. Sharing expertise and failure is a key component in collaborative learning. Activities and moves in Primary Intention 3 will help you create a culture in which you offer and seek out others' expertise instead of shying away from it.

Hurdles From the Leader Side

The facilitator's dilemma: "How do I facilitate a team when I'm also a member of it?"

Leading and participating at the same time can feel like juggling while riding a unicycle on a tightrope. It's doable but not easy. Because so often peer leaders are teachers alongside their colleagues, the balancing act can feel much more unsteady. As you become more sure of your intentions during facilitation and you practice the moves in this book, you will get a feel for when to full-on participate and when to pull back and manage the conversation. The "five ways to show up" explained in Move 5.5 can help you decide.

The pseudo-administrator dilemma: "My principal seems to be expecting more from me in this peer leadership role than I signed up for. I'm not sure how to talk to them." Or, "Teachers are coming to me for clarification about what the principal says. Some are asking me to advocate on their behalf. I didn't take on this role to be a go-between."

The moment you wear a leadership hat, particularly if it comes with a title like "teacher leader," people make assumptions about your role. Unless your leadership job description specifies that you are to advocate on behalf of teachers or enforce initiatives that come from administration, then be clear that your role is to facilitate collaborative learning. Similarly, clarify with your principal upfront what your job is and isn't so you know what's expected and so they don't overextend your responsibilities. Ask your principal to also message your role to the faculty. Figure 10, *Team Roles and Responsibilities Examples* (Primary Intention 2) defines roles clearly. Once everyone initially understands your role, be careful not to send mixed messages by acting in ways that extend beyond the accepted parameters.

4. Peer leaders often start with a misconception of what it means to lead.

More often than not, peer leaders start with assumptions about how they are "supposed" to lead their colleagues, and it usually involves the misconception that they must be the person who is in control and has all things figured out. For instance, when I am supporting new teacher leaders in particular, some will arrive at our first planning meeting with 10 weeks' worth of agendas already mapped out, as if it were a syllabus. Or, when I observe a meeting that we've planned together, I notice the peer leader facilitates as if they are the only one at the table, plowing through the meeting while their colleagues sit back and let them "lead." And sometimes team leaders do all the problem solving and decision making on their own, then present a polished, finished product and convince others to adopt it. (By the way, these aren't just rookie missteps. With all my years of experience leading teams, I still catch myself sometimes doing these things.)

Why might peer leaders perceive their role in this way? Here are a few reasons that I've heard from many teacher leaders:

- "I receive a stipend or some other perk that my colleagues don't."
- "I think my colleagues expect me to take charge because I have an official leadership role."
- "My colleagues are so busy; I don't want to burden them."
- "I worry that if I don't take charge, the meeting will end up a waste of people's time."
- "If I let go, I will lose control."

To be clear, peer leaders who think these things are often very smart (usually experts in their field) and have people's best interests at heart; they just haven't figured out how to embrace the "peer" side of their role, in which they show up as learners.

The truth is that you are likely a peer leader because you are an effective practitioner, a thoughtful planner, and a talented coordinator, but this doesn't mean that you have to know it all and do it all for your team. In fact, you're more effective if you don't.

Collaborative inquiry, as described in Chapter 3, is about not yet knowing. STLs respond to the ever-evolving twists and turns of the group, and learn *alongside* their colleagues. They don't know on day one what the aim of inquiry will be, or what data will reveal on day two, or what strategies the team will study and implement, or what hurdles will come their way. This "not knowing" where or how you will "land the plane," as STL Daryl Campbell describes it, can feel very unsettling for any leader, especially for a peer who feels pressure to make team time for colleagues worthwhile. It can take a while for you to realize that you can plan and lead without having all the answers. When you accept this truth about peer leadership, you'll feel tremendous relief, and your colleagues will feel more empowered.

5. Peer leaders possess five key attributes.

I don't want to succumb to the "Top 10" type lists that flood the pages of educational journals; however, I would be remiss if I did not share the five teacher team leader attributes that coaches and teacher leaders crafted with me when I was national director of teacher leader development at Teach Plus. Explained in detail in an article we wrote for ASCD, "Leading in Schools on the Edge" (2013), the five attributes of effective team leaders, particularly those doing the challenging work of transforming underperforming high-poverty schools, are being (1) *purpose driven*, (2) *evidence-based decision makers*, (3) *skillful facilitators*, (4) *ongoing learners*, and (5) *change agents*. (In the last 10 years, Teach Plus has replaced *ongoing learners* with *equity-driven*, a critically important attribute to highlight.) Even in the most challenging schools, teacher leaders who possessed these attributes were able to facilitate high-functioning, high-impact Q1 teams.

If you are a teacher team leader, it is also essential that you explore teacher leadership standards. The Teacher Leader Model Standards published by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium resonate with me (National Education Association, 2020). The standards promote the idea that teacher leaders are charged with positively influencing teaching and professional learning, in order to positively impact student-learning outcomes. (Sound familiar?) The consortium recognized that teacher leaders must develop a unique set of skills, and the standards aim to concretely define what it means to be a teacher leader. Organized into seven domains (as shown in Figure 6), the standards specify performance indicators for teacher leaders.

Although the standards address skills that teacher leaders need in order to take on a wide array of roles such as mentor, coach, or coordinator, many of the recommendations also apply to peers who lead teams. For instance, within

Domain IV: Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning, the consortium recommends that teacher leaders learn how to "engage in reflective dialog with colleagues based on observation of instruction, student work, and assessment data and help make connections to research-based effective practices." In Primary Intentions 7–9, I highlight moves that help peer leaders intentionally do this, such as specific considerations when selecting student work to analyze collaboratively.

FIGURE 6 Teacher Leadership Standards

The standards consist of seven domains describing the diverse and varied dimensions of teacher leadership:

Domain I: Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning

Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student achievement

Domain III: Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement

Domain IV: Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning

Domain V: Using assessments and data for school and district improvement

Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community

Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the profession

Source: Von Frank, V. (2011, February). Teacher leader standards: Consortium seeks to strengthen profession with leadership role. *Teachers Leading Teachers, 6*(5). https://learningforward.org/the-leading-teacher/february-2011-vol-6-no-5/