Podcast: Teacher Leadership Skills vs. Teacher Leadership Positions

"Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership which can be a strong catalyst for making change."

(Katzenmeyer and Mollar, "**Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders**")

Carly Quiros, from EdAdvance, explores this quote with Steve. What should instructional coaches, school and teacher leaders be modeling and doing to create schools that are "leaderfull?"

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.890] – Steve
Teacher Leadership skills vs. Teacher Leadership Positions. I'm pondering out loud today with Carly Quiros. I connected with Carly after reading her ISTE ASCD blog post titled, "3 Questions That Uncover Teacher Leadership." During a short conversation comparing our ideas, I knew she'd be a great guest for the podcast. Carly is a professional learning specialist with EdAdvance in Litchfield, Connecticut, and a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction at the University of Virginia. An English teacher by training, her work now focuses on supporting educator growth, with particular emphasis on recognizing teacher leadership and fostering professional agency. Carly is passionate about designing learning environments where leadership is distributed, agency is cultivated, and educators are empowered to influence meaningful change regardless of their formal role. Welcome, Carly. Thanks so much for joining me.

[00:01:50.100] – Carly
Hi, Steve. Thanks so much for the opportunity to chat.

[00:01:53.410] – Steve
For starters, would you give us a description of your work as a professional learning specialist at Advance?

[00:02:01.450] – Carly
Yes, absolutely. So I am definitely a learner, and this is a

role that allows me to support learning as someone who takes that learner stance. So my job really is to support professional learning with Pre-K-12, partners that support the conditions for learners and learning to thrive. I'm often working with teachers, instructional coaches, school and district leaders. Sometimes this looks like working with beginning teachers who are in the first few years of their teaching career and the mentor teachers that support them. Sometimes it looks like working with school building leaders or district leaders who are designing systems of support for teacher evaluation or professional learning. And ultimately, I show up as a thinking partner in these partnerships where I'm looking to co-plan and co-facilitate and really support whatever's in the best interests of the districts. And I love it because I get to be a learner alongside in the journey and learn hopefully as much from the folks that I'm supporting as, maybe, they learn from what I bring to the conversation.

[00:03:13.810] – Steve
You know, it's interesting because it's been a recent connection for me. I've always talked about the fact that when you can be in that coaching position, it's that it's a learner role. And when I've worked with districts and they're interviewing people to decide who to hire for a coach, I suggest, you know, the person who talks about how excited they are for what they're going to get to learn in this role, versus the person who's so anxious to share everything that they're bringing to the role, that's where I'd look. But what I've really uncovered lately, and you used the word reflection, you're in a position such as I'm frequently in where we actually get a greater opportunity for the reflection than the people that we're working with. So it really does put us in this awesome learner spot.

[00:04:12.720] – Carly
Absolutely. It would be so boring if you had all of the answers. And what a gift it is to be able to see and learn

from different contexts and to be able to offer as kind of a point of information when others ask, what are you seeing out there? But to be able to have this portfolio of experiences to say, here's how they did it there, but here's how it looked here. And then to try to honor, because our district partners know their context best. So I love that.

[00:04:43.670] – Steve
I actually used to describe years ago when people would ask me my job, I would say, I get on an airplane and I fly somewhere and I find out what the people in that school are doing. And then I get on an airplane and fly to a different school and tell them what the people I was with the day before are doing. I'd say, believe it or not, you could actually make a career out of that. [laughter] So we want to talk about teacher leadership. And I'm wondering, in your work and the research that you've done, have you come up with a definition of teacher leadership that you like? Did you find one? Did you have to design one?

[00:05:23.940] – Carly
Yes.

[00:05:24.430] – Steve
Where do we work from defining it?

[00:05:26.520] – Carly
I love this question because I've learned in my doctoral studies that even the broader scope of educational researchers are undefined in having kind of one single definition of teacher leader or teacher leadership. So that makes me feel better as I'm settling in on my definition. The definition that most resonates with me now does come from the work of Wenner and Campbell, and they essentially define a teacher leader as a teacher who's actively in the classroom some or all of the time, and influencing teaching, leading, and professional practice beyond the 4 walls of their classroom. And I think for me, I've arrived at resonating with that

definition over the last 22 years. I can remember being a brand new high school English teacher and thinking I had 2 options if I wanted to stay in education. I could be a teacher and stay in my classroom, or I could be a "leader" and be a principal. At the time, I didn't quite understand, and maybe it wasn't made explicit to me in my own teaching context, but I didn't understand that it wasn't black and white. It wasn't you're a teacher or you're a leader and so I've really grown in my thinking.

[00:06:53.590] – Carly
I know Charlotte Danielson and many others writes about the difficulty of teachers understanding growth options. But in my journey, it's taken me many years to understand that it's not one or the other. Each and every teacher is a leader, and it's up to our leaders with formal roles and teachers who are leaders without them to help recognize leadership skills and cultivate them and grow them so that the brilliance that teachers have goes beyond the 4 walls of the classroom. So I've really evolved in my thinking about that term teacher leader.

[00:07:35.530] – Steve
So it really ties nicely to our title of our podcast here then because a position really isn't necessary.

[00:07:44.850] – Carly
My thinking has come around to that. And I'm always open to other ways of thinking about it. You know, I think about even as a novice, the thought that I would call myself a leader. And even to some extent today, although I've grown in my thinking there, a leader always felt like this foreign thing where I needed to be named as a department head or an assistant principal or a curriculum director. But, you know, Steve, one of the things I noticed in my consulting work is that often the folks who have the most influence around the table are not those with the formal titles. It might be that teacher, and I'm thinking about the teacher that my son has

been lucky enough to have in kindergarten and first grade. You know, the expertise that she has, her demeanor with children, with students, with families. her institutional knowledge in the district that she currently works in. She has a way of influencing the actions of others, and she has a teacher title. So I've noticed that in my work, that influence and title are not synonymous.

[00:09:03.220] – Carly
And this has really intrigued me in my own research and professional studies, and looking at teacher leadership and being curious about where do we see it? When can we name it? When are we not naming it and we should name it? If we did name it, how might we bring it to light and cultivate it and nurture it so that teachers feel fulfilled within the 4 walls of their classroom and stay for kiddos, but they're also helping expand that growth? And Steve, it makes me wonder if I had a sense of that or if I understood or there were conditions that helped me understood at the time of being a novice teacher that I could grow as a leader and be in the classroom, maybe I'd still be in the classroom today.

[00:09:52.220] – Steve
Yeah. So in our earlier conversation, it led me to pull the Teacher Leader Model Standards that were published years back. And as I began to work through it, I found this quote from Katzenmeier and Moeller. It's: "Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership, which can be a strong catalyst for making change." And it's from their book, "Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders." And it was really fun for me to find this because at the time that they were doing that book, Marilyn Katzenmeier was at the University of South Florida. And I spent a bunch of years consulting with USF with the undergraduate honors program they had. And the undergraduates in the honors program took on extra responsibility, took on new learning options, one of which was that I got the chance to come in and work

with them. It had leadership components in it. But one of the guarantees they got for being in the program is they would be placed with a supervising teacher when they went out to student teach that had been through similar training. And I got the opportunity to work with those cooperating teachers as well.

[00:11:26.610] – Steve
So I didn't connect at all when I was doing that work years back. I knew who Marilyn Katzenmeyer was, I knew about them writing the book, but I didn't make the that leadership connection. But I'm thinking 25 years later, we still have a sleeping giant in a lot of our schools. And I'm wondering if that's what you're finding in your work.

[00:11:51.640] – Carly
Absolutely. And I love all of your connections and all of the ways that you've touched and influenced education, it's appreciated. I absolutely am seeing evidence of a sleeping giant, and it's funny when I think about sleeping, like I think about sleepy, when I think about myself as being sleepy, I'm here, my brain is here, but I'm a little unfocused. I'm a little relaxed. I'm here, but I'm not really present. I'm not intentional. I'm not aware. And so I feel like in my observations, I'm absolutely seeing lots of opportunities where thoughtful, well-intentioned, hardworking teachers and principals, school leaders are there. And I wonder, with a little more intentionality, if there are opportunities to bring awareness to leadership. So I think about an example where I'm currently supporting a district where the principal and his staff are focused on teacher collaboration through professional learning communities. Each and every teacher engages in a professional learning community, and I noticed a couple of sleepy-ish trends as I reflect on this. So as I observed, I noticed that teachers generally were very hesitant – once they looked at evidence of student learning, they were very hesitant to name instructional actions that they wanted

to take as a result of the evidence.

[00:13:26.830] – Carly
They were hesitant to say things like, you know, the evidence shows this, so I think we should all agree to do this in our classroom. What I noticed was that they often turned to the principal, who frequently sat in on these professional learning community conversations, and asked things like, what do you think? Is that a good idea? What do you want us to do? And it's interesting because when I sat with the principal, I love that you're smiling about this. I hope it feels relatable. When I sat with the principal afterwards, he said, you know, I think, and this is practically verbatim, I think I unintentionally became the gatekeeper of good instruction. And it made me think about how when I'm teaching, I'm always working really hard not to own the learning, to share the control, even if I really love a text or a topic that I'm working really hard to create space for learners to play around, ask questions, determine a pathway. And what I noticed in this situation was that the principal had some awareness that teachers didn't necessarily have the support or the space to play around and try on their own to make those decisions.

[00:14:45.300] – Carly
And then to learn from what happened, whether they worked or whether they didn't work. And so it was – it's just really interesting to think about some sleepiness and maybe some starting to wake up, kind of thinking about how might a principal or a school building leader step back and create some supportive conditions for teachers to engage fully in the collaboration and ride that process grounded in the evidence, and make those decisions.

[00:15:13.190] – Steve
I hope that principal takes you on as a coach.

[00:15:16.780] – Carly
Yes.

[00:15:17.600] – Steve
Because the principal's behaviors are unconscious. And the fact that the principal said that to you, says they mean the most.

[00:15:31.790] – Carly
Yes.

[00:15:32.490] – Steve
I was in a situation coaching a principal starting those learning communities like that. And people in the group would ask her a question, and I would train her to call a quick timeout and say, do you want my answer as a participant, or do you want my answer as a principal?

[00:15:56.580] – Carly
I love that.

[00:15:57.460] – Steve
If what you're asking me to do is think out loud and co-create with the rest of you, I'd like to join in. But unless you tell me, I'm in the position where my offering, my ideas, are going to be interpreted as that's the direction we need to take because of my position. And I'm so glad you got there because before you did, as you first started talking about this piece, I was thinking that we have 2 problems with the sleeping giant. And one is a reluctance on teachers' parts to step into those leadership behaviors with their colleagues. No title, but to step into that behavior when it's there. But I think at the same time, we have people not requesting the leadership of their colleagues.

[00:16:54.120] – Carly
Yeah.

[00:16:54.880] – Steve
So if I'm being hesitant not to put myself in that role, if you came and asked me to step into that role with you, you've now really made it doable for me. So it's almost like we need

a consciousness on both parts.

[00:17:13.710] – Carly
I love that. And Steve, it's interesting because you asked before about a definition of teacher leader. And another thing I've learned is that sometimes even the term teacher leader or teacher leadership has a negative connotation. There are certain districts where I know that we don't use that term because the connotation is, oh, I have to do something extra. And then it becomes a challenge of time and compensation. And in this PLC example, it's, you know, we're all expected to be in this collaborative conversation, and it's the subtlest shift. And I love your distinction about the principal. Do you want me to answer as a thinking partner, a learning participant, or… I love that distinction. I'm also thinking about the broader context, and I'm thinking about sleepiness in some of our larger systems. For my field study in the spring, I took a look at the professional learning plans and evaluation system of several districts in my home state of Connecticut through the lens of the Teacher Leader Model Standards. And I basically asked, where in these plans that are supposed to shape behavior and systems for learning – where in these plans is there evidence of recognition of teacher leadership or supporting and developing teacher leadership?

[00:18:48.630] – Carly
And this may feel really obvious, but what I found was these evaluation plans and professional learning plans really focused on individual teachers within the 4 walls of their classroom. There was not a lot of evidence around collaboration or sharing, promoting learning beyond the 4 walls of the classroom. And so that's ultimately what led me to write that ASCD piece that you mentioned, because I just continue to wonder, if we wake up a little bit and shake that sleepiness around teacher leadership, what happens if we intentionally think about these larger systems and practices

through that lens of where's leadership happening? Where is it happening but not being named that way? And what happens if we name it?

[00:19:39.840] – Steve
Yeah. When I went back to look at those Teacher Leadership Model Standards, there's 7 of them that are listed. And the first one, for me, best encapsulates where I would see teacher leadership. And it's phrased as fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning, which is what you were just describing. And that fits with the belief system that I work from, that teaching is a team sport. And so if we take it back to evaluation, part of the teacher evaluation process in effect ought to be looking at the teacher's skillset in being a team member. Does that align?

[00:20:39.640] – Carly
Yeah, I love your thinking about teaching as a team sport. I mean, it makes me feel better thinking about myself as a teacher. I feel like it gives me a little reprieve, like I don't have to have every answer and that's okay. And I feel like part of being a professional is thinking about not only the success within the 4 walls of your classroom, but thinking larger. How do you support the efforts and grow the growth beyond your classroom, within your team, within your school, within your district? And so I think that's really important. I think about in my work, I get to work with a lot of teacher leaders who are teaching and taking on a mentoring role to support a beginning teacher in their first few years of teaching. And when I support new mentor teachers, and maybe Steve, you found this when you were supporting cooperating teachers, I am often asked by new mentor cooperating teachers, what do I do if I don't know the answer for my novice? What's the best way I should direct them? What's the best question? What if I don't ask that question? And I think those questions are wonderful because they communicate such care that teachers have for their novice colleagues.

[00:21:57.630] – Carly
And at the same time, to use your phrasing, teaching is a team sport. So we know one person, it's unreasonable that any one person might have all the answers. And one really useful tool that I've been using with mentor teachers is aligned to the work of Sharon Helmke at Learning Forward. She talks about creating a web of support. And I love the idea of taking out a pen and paper or opening up, you know, your Google Doc and thinking through who are all the folks you know that are down the hall, that are upstairs, that are in your building, that are in the district, that have unique expertise that might not be the same as yours. Who's really good at transitions, or who really knows that content area, or understands that specific learning difficulty, who's really good with recording grades? And just reminding yourself and a novice yourself. You've got a lot of support there, and maybe you show up for something on someone else's web of support. And so being mindful of that continued collaboration and support, that even if we don't have a structured time in, like in PLCs where we're expected to play particular roles and use a protocol for dialogue, that we also have these informal webs where we're helping to strengthen one another, and I think that's really powerful.

[00:23:26.030] – Steve
So that connects for me that one of my indicators of teacher leadership is vulnerability. So I often describe to administrators, if you're looking to interview and select people for positions, vulnerability is one of the things I'd be looking for. I describe it as I don't need the best science teacher to be head of the department. I need the person who's comfortable bringing in a lab that didn't get the student learning results you wanted and taking 10 minutes of this science department meeting to ask people to take a look at it and and give you feedback. So when I would carry that over to your talking about mentoring, I did a lot of work with mentor teachers years back. Matter of fact, not too far from you, Rochester, New York, I did several years with.

[00:24:32.890] – Carly
Mm-hmm.

[00:24:34.570] – Steve
And we used to get into the discussion of how long should mentoring last? You know, is it a 6-month program, a 1-year program, is it a year and a half? And I found a district who I thought had the best example. Mentoring was over when the beginning teacher threw open the doors of her classroom and said, “you may all come in.”

[00:24:57.460] – Carly
Oh, I love that.

[00:24:58.680] – Steve
Isn’t that neat? Because what they’re really saying is, I am now fully professionally engaged. It’s not because I know the answers. It’s because I understand how you approach finding the answers. And in effect, that’s one of the most important things mentors do is not knowing the answers, but knowing how to create a structure to go find the answer. And that’s what you want the new teacher to do is to learn that process.

[00:25:36.390] – Carly
I love that. And I love how you talk about that with vulnerability. I imagine that there was a lot of trust in those kinds of relationships with the novices and the mentors where they really were trying and things were working and things weren’t working. And they were really embracing that iterative process of learning and knowing that this is the professional practice that you do it and you try it and you see how it goes and you reflect and you talk and you learn and then you do it all over again. And to do that in community sounds like a beautiful place.

[00:26:13.450] – Steve
I encourage mentors to, if there’s an instructional coach in their school, to invite the instructional coach to come and

coach the mentor on an instructional lesson, but to have their beginning teacher sit in on it. Because it now gives the mentor – so if we go back to what I was saying earlier about the leadership coming both ways, that now gives the mentor the opportunity to model how do you use a colleague, how do you use the support system to assist you in making the best things happen for kids.

[00:26:50.150] – Carly
I love that. It makes the thinking visible.

[00:26:52.710] – Steve
Yeah. Powerful. There was another one of the standards that was identified was promoting professional learning for continuous improvement. And when I hear that, I say, right on. But I also include field testing new hypotheses. I'm actually – I've got a district in New Hampshire. I'm working with their administrators the next 2 weeks on their teachers' professional growth plans and suggesting that your strong teachers ought to be going in a professional growth plan that is, in effect, on a hypothesis. They have an idea that they want to try out that they think would extend student learning, they have reasons to believe it will work, but not certified, here's the research I pulled that's guaranteeing this is going to work. We want our strong teachers to be on the – and these I see as teacher leaders. They're researchers. They're breaking new ground. It doesn't have to be new ground for the world, but new ground for this school, this community, this group of kids.

[00:28:12.570] – Carly
Yes, I love everything about what you just said. At EdAdvance, we would call this a CAPA cycle – collect, analyze, process, and act. where you're collecting information about what's happening in terms of teaching and learning, you're analyzing, you're thinking about it, you're thinking, do I have all the pieces? You're processing and planning what happens next, and then you're taking action and engaging in that reflective

improvement cycle all over again. And in my doctoral studies, I'm learning to call this action research and applied research. I love how you talked about teacher as researcher. I think it's so helpful to acknowledge, as you said, that there's not one right way for every context. So you can have a sense of what the broader research says and then use the information you have about your local context to make those decisions and build those skills. It makes me think, Steve, about right now in Connecticut, and I know across the United States, I'm noticing lots of districts who are implementing new reading programs that are aligned with the science of reading. And what I'm hearing teachers, especially the novice teachers that I'm supporting, saying are things like, my program tells me what to do and say.

[00:29:29.290] – Carly
I don't need to plan lessons anymore. And I think now is a really important time to embrace exactly what you're talking about, this iterative process. Because while it might be really helpful to have a standards-aligned resource with guidance and prompts and information, that resource doesn't know the child that's sitting right in front of you.

[00:29:55.830] – Steve
It doesn't.

[00:29:56.880] – Carly
And so I feel like I'm having to revisit with some of the folks that I support those leadership skills of looking at your data, treating it like a baseline, thinking about your classroom as a laboratory where you're testing and reflecting, and then you're sharing those adjustments with your peers. And I think that that's a way to move from a compliant state to a place of that continuous improvement in learning that you talked about.

[00:30:30.160] – Steve
So what role do you think teachers have in promoting

leadership skills among their colleagues?

[00:30:40.820] – Carly
The teachers that I work with are brilliant and passionate and well-intentioned and hardworking. And I feel like I could give so many compliments for all the effort and the skills. I think that teachers are leading every day without they themselves or others with titles, naming it leadership. You know, just last week I was speaking with a teacher who is new to the district or will be new to the district, and she already has a colleague who's offered to give some feedback for the first observation of the year. It's not required, it's just a colleague reaching out providing some assistance so that her novice colleagues feels more comfortable. You know, I think those are the kinds of leadership moves that so many teachers are doing all the time. I do think that all teachers deserve access to training that supports their leadership skill development. In my work at EdAdvance this year, for the first time, I'm going to pilot an academy for teacher leadership, where I am working with teacher leaders from a variety of districts. And all of these teacher leaders want to stay in the classroom, but they're beyond those first 4, 5, or 6 years where they're looking to develop their skills to increase their influence beyond their classroom.

[00:32:14.190] – Carly
And so we're gonna study together about communication strategies, and working with adult learners and thinking about promoting professional practice beyond the classroom. And they're each going to look at a locally contextualized issue that's passionate to them. And we're going to think through and problem solve and build community to try to support their efforts. I hope in that experience to build and allow for trust and vulnerability like we've talked about and to have this network of support that exists beyond these teacher leaders' immediate schools and districts. But I think it's important that we think about leadership skills and we name

them and we make sure that teachers have access to grow themselves in those leadership ways.

[00:33:02.600] – Steve
So I've been picking up and using the term leaderfull.

[00:33:07.770] – Carly
Love that.

[00:33:08.640] – Steve
We need schools that are leaderfull. We need classrooms that are leaderfull. We need communities that are leaderfull. And it sounds like you got a project already out and going to test that out. So can I get on the schedule to reconnect on a podcast?

[00:33:32.360] – Carly
Absolutely.

[00:33:32.940] – Steve
I'd love to hear what you did and what you found.

[00:33:36.570] – Carly
Absolutely. I would jump at the chance to talk more about that with you. And I love your term, leaderfull. I think it's It's a good one and it's one that I want to use moving forward.

[00:33:48.510] – Steve
Yeah, I think especially if you keep the vulnerability component, if that's a strong component of a leaderfull organization where the members are vulnerable themselves with each other, I think that's a powerful picture.

[00:34:11.440] – Carly
Absolutely.

[00:34:12.820] – Steve
What's the best way for listeners to connect with you with follow-up questions or continuing to follow the work that you're doing, the writing you're doing?

[00:34:21.550] – Carly
Yeah, I would love to connect with listeners and keep the conversation going. So I would say the best way to follow me would be to follow my writing on the ISTE and ASCD blog and also on Learning Forward's The Learning Professional. I have a new article coming out this month in August. And you can also feel free to reach out through edadvance.org to see about the work I'm doing and my team's doing related to teacher leadership. I'm always eager to hear how leaders and coaches are engaging in their thoughtful work. So don't hesitate to reach out.

[00:34:55.230] – Steve
All right. I'll put the link to the article and 3 questions that I read that sparked me.

[00:35:02.910] – Carly
Fantastic.

[00:35:03.490] – Steve
I'll put that in there. And I'll put the EdAdvance – make it easy for folks to find.

[00:35:08.340] – Carly
Oh, fantastic. Thanks so much, Steve. What a joy and pleasure it's been talking with you. Thank you.

[00:35:13.410] – Steve
Same on this end. I look forward to hearing about what comes out of that project that you're jumping into.

[00:35:19.930] – Carly
Absolutely. Thank you so much.

[00:35:22.130] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks so much. Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @SteveBarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.