

Listening to Lead at Acción Academy: Building Space for Professional Conversations with Peers

Social studies teacher Deon Burgher is recognized as a confident, knowledgeable, and experienced educator. These strengths helped him to be selected to take on the Demonstration Teacher (DT) role at Acción Academy during the 2013-14 school year, but he soon discovered that the skills and perspective needed to be a strong and independent classroom teacher were not necessarily the same ones that would prepare him to support colleagues.

Mr. Burgher explains, "In the past, I had a certain viewpoint that a leader should be standing on high and delegating." He needed to find his own voice and definition of teacher leadership if he was going to support colleagues.

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In one conversation with a colleague early in the school year, Mr. Burgher brought up some challenges related to classroom management he saw the teacher grappling with. The solutions were clear to Mr. Burgher and he began the conversation by offering a series of ideas for the teacher to try, but when he saw the expression on the teacher's face, he stopped. Mr. Burgher recalls, "His face [told me] that he was listening and he was being respectful of me and my position, but he was frustrated. I remember that face from when I was a mentee—it was the face of, 'I've tried that and it's not going to work.' With that, I stopped talking." Mr. Burgher refocused the conversation, asking more questions and allowing space for the teacher to talk and

process his own experience and perspective.

The experience led him to think about his work as a teacher leader differently. "That was a very important experience for me because often times when coming to the table as a problem-solver for someone else, I'm looking at it with my point of view and experiences, from my skill sets and my limitations." He began to think about his work as a teacher leader differently.

With the support of his principal, Nicole Booker, and his work with the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program, Mr. Burgher began to reflect on his approach more deeply. He came to realize that listening was a skill that a leader could develop and employ in the same manner he initially developed and used problem-solving skills.

"I had no idea what a great skill being a listener was, and [in the past] when I engaged in conversations or I listened to someone, it was with a thought in mind; either to respond, or find an answer, or think of a [similar] situation, instead of truly *listening* to what the other person was really saying. I've learned to listen without problem-solving immediately."

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As his first year as a DT came to a close, Mr. Burgher saw himself as a leader in a new way. "The TIF work allowed me to find my voice as someone who can lead from within the group, which," he highlights, "is where I really want to be."

How have you grown as a teacher and leader since taking on your teacher leadership role? If you are interested in sharing your story, please email teacherleadership@schools.nyc.gov