Finding Allies

Part 1: The Conditions of Allyship

I began to write what, at first, seemed a simple, bright-and-shiny story illustrating how I utilized leverage, specifically money from a Knowles seed grant—a grant that funds teacher-led improvement initiatives—to lead sweeping science department change initiatives, and similar changes throughout my school. However, as I continue to reflect on what it truly takes to create institutional change within a complex organization, I am convinced that prerequisite conditions are necessary for there to be a possibility of meaningful change. Traditional sources of power (like money) are flashy, but if one has no allies, said power may not be wielded. What follows is a two-part story: 1. How I chose an organization that I felt aligned with my "why" for teaching; and 2. how I subsequently laid the groundwork to gain allies so that this important work might be an option (though to be clear, not necessarily an inevitability). I, therefore, offer my truths of allyship.

Introduction

This story begins in my school #1. I thrived in this institution. I reinvigorated the curriculum, doubled the number of students enrolled in physics, and led the design and implementation of a new laboratory where the science practices could flourish. Our science team was collaborative, and I enjoyed having allies if I wanted to try novel ideas.

After five years of teaching, I moved across the country for my partner's job. In reflecting on what I had at school #1, I wondered what it would take to have strong enough alliances to *really* move the needle in an organization. I realized my situation at school #1 had shaken out due to sheer luck—I had been privileged with a good "fit" and allies, but these do not always naturally occur. I knew I would have to be intentional in my next position.

Know your core values and your BIG "why" for teaching—this is the foundation

I found myself in school #2. On the surface, the place seemed like it might resonate with me in the way school #1 had. I came to learn I was not a good "fit", and I was probably only hired due to the local rarity of qualified AP Physics

teachers. I saw lots of problems around me that needed fixing (issues violating my core values), but it seemed I was the only one who perceived them. At this point, unhappy every day at work, I was coincidentally invited to reflect on my core values through my work as Knowles Fellow.

My core values are:

> **Growth** is constantly seeking to improve—curriculum, student outcomes, professionally, anything.
> **Happiness** is a general state of well-being and contentment, which should be a priority for all staff and students.
> **Productivity** is making the most of every opportunity: doing beyond the expected.
> **Community** is the joint creation of a shared space of belonging for all.

My lack of "fit" inhibited my formation of allies with my colleagues who were logically hired and then *stayed* because of their proper institutional fit. Sure, one can have colleagues and acquaintances; but, when considering what sufficiently drives a person, leading change and being affiliated with said changes involves inherent risk. I needed to find a space for the work I considered most meaningful and worthwhile—that which was aligned with my "why" for teaching. So I left, in search of something different—something aligned with my "why".

Hindsight is 20-20. And reflection is powerful at unlocking what could have been. School #2 was essential to my journey of recognizing what to look for in an institution and how to "be" in it. I still do not know if school #2 was a lost cause for me—it certainly felt like it. Perhaps if I had continued to employ the following truths I might eventually have gained allies. What was clear, is that it was going to be *A LOT* of work and I would not have been happy—a violation of a core value. However, school #2 was still important: I figured out what didn't work so I could later recognize a "diamond" school.

Know what work you find meaningful and where there is said work to be done

I was intentional about my choice for school #3. I interviewed at several institutions and sought to understand each before choosing one. I came into school #3 at a moment when much of the "old guard" was turning over. The science department now had 14 members, many of whom had been there for their

entire (albeit short) careers; some had even attended the school as students. What I was noticing: everyone cared deeply about their work and the institution; the majority of the science department held no formal teacher training, which they compensated for with a desire and drive to learn everything and anything about their practices. This was a place that valued collaboration, deep reflection, professional learning, and difficult conversations. I perceived my core values to be woven into the fabric of the institution: Growth was expected of everyone—an explicit part of the educational model; members were genuinely happy; teachers were productive—working hard; and the community was strong. I also perceived that there was meaningful work to be done—and problems to be fixed.

Cultivate a learning (and waiting) disposition

It was going to take time, however, to gain my allies and to learn about the true current state of affairs—so I settled in. This meant an explicit decision to create space for listening and learning because I also *knew* that there was a lot I did not know or understand about why and how the department had arrived at this place. I needed to learn. I needed to be patient, however frustrating that might be. I knew that significant change would not happen overnight, and if I was to go in "guns blazing" to say "we need to fix this" I would shut the doors on any potential allies and prevent changes from ever occurring. I spent two years listening and learning.

Establish competency

In the meantime, I did my job well: I brought practices to my classroom that were new to the school; I built rapport with students; I built relationships with colleagues; and I quietly did what I could within my small sphere of influence (my classroom) to make the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices more aligned with what I believed would benefit more/all students. I established relationships with colleges, parents, and administrators. I participated in meetings, professional development, and school events. I was visible. I gained a reputation as a caring and excellent teacher, colleague, and community member.

Offer invitations. Develop trust.

I learned most teachers were "siloed" and just doing their own thing in their classrooms, unaware of what the rest of the course-level teams and departments were doing despite common planning periods. I began inviting the other physics

teachers to meet and share practices. No one accepted at first, but I kept asking, and eventually, we began to have conversations about our practices and their connection to student outcomes. There was no weight, judgment, or valuation. I did not give my opinion. Trust began to develop. Trust can mean different things to different people, but to me, it means: I can question things without trepidation, I can share with someone where I am unsure/areas of growth and be taken seriously, and I can ask colleagues to explain their reasoning and be supported by norms. I remember the first moment this happened—I asked our team, "So what are our standards?" and my wondering was met with "That is an excellent question . . . "

Only when the conversation turned to asking about what I was doing in my practice did I begin to share what I learned worked best for my students. Given this was different, my colleagues were curious. I began to invite these teachers to collaborate on some joint lessons, and we reformed our labs to integrate NGSS science practice standards. When I began to take risks and share explicitly how I thought we might better serve students, my colleagues were receptive. Trust continued to grow. I instigated more formal conversations around best practices until this became part of our meeting fabric. This occurred over months into years so that it was impossible to perceive the gradual shift in conversations over time from the nuts-and-bolts cooperating teaching (e.g., what lesson should we do, what day, etc.) to data-driven inquiry into true collaboration around how our lessons were serving students and how they might be improved. Had I planned for a shift in conversations? No. I had only hoped for it and conceptualized it as possible.

It is impossible to name the exact moment when it happened but at some point, it became accepted that we needed to take a comprehensive, honest look at our curriculum and, by extension, our instruction and assessment practices. I had gained allies (those committed to and invested in doing this work together) in the department.

Accept the invitations of allyship, when given.

My department head revealed himself to be a like-minded individual. In this case, he asked to be an ally. I would come to learn that we shared many of the same core values. He had no formal education or leadership training but had done much of this work on his own. We began to have frank conversations about what

we thought the department needed. Together, we attended professional development and engaged with readings and formal discussions to learn more about equitable grading practices, specifically standards-based grading. At the same time, I pointedly sought to learn from him how I might continue to hone the leadership skills I had learned from Knowles such that I might continue to strengthen my allyship with others.

When the time is right, use that leverage!

I still do not know what made the day "right" when I decided to utilize the resources (seed grant money) at my disposal. I knew that this money was power and could be the linchpin in initiating the changes we were beginning to conceptualize. I happened to be standing by the copy machine with my department head, and two of my other strongest allies. I asked, "If we had $10,000, do you think we could shake **** up around here?" The rest is history.

With the seed grant money, we were able to educate ourselves about standards-referenced grading and hire consultant support to plan and self-lead the transition process for our department. Within nine months, we had completely transitioned to a standards-referenced model of assessment. At the same time, we had reformed our curriculum to work within this new structure and we were seeing increased student ownership of understanding and improved student outcomes against our standards. A cultural shift began to take place in the school—a year later, elements of standards referenced grading were used school-wide. The language and social studies departments are consulting with science to make the transition themselves. The spark we started has ignited a larger movement.

Epilogue:

Keep learning the principles.

Life circumstances took me away from school #3 and the allies I had gained. In my next chapter, I will know better how to gain allies by employing my principles. I am certain there are more nuanced truths yet to be discovered and I will keep looking for them. In the meantime I am joyful, remembering my farewell happy hour with my department from school #3. My department head said in a toast: "Thank you for what you did for us—it probably wouldn't have happened without you—and we will keep moving forward". Given the powerful network of alliances I

left behind, I have nothing but faith in the trajectory of their momentum.