

[A 'Divergent' Path: Tips on Becoming a Teacher Leader](#)



—Jaap Buitendijk/Summit Entertainment

By Cheryl A. Redfield

Recently, while captivated by Veronica Roth's dystopian novel *Divergent* and its film adaptation, I found myself connecting with the lead characters, Tris and Tobias. These two young people voiced my life goals very simply: "I want to be selfless, smart, and strong."

But *Divergent* got me thinking for another reason. Tris and Tobias live in a society where people's roles are chosen for them and opportunities are limited. People who seek to change the system and embrace multiple roles are characterized as divergent and pose a threat to the status quo.

In real life, I believe this is also true of teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders possess a mindset that isn't determined by an official role or title. They also represent a paradigm shift away from traditional career advancement that leads only to administrative positions. Instead, many teacher leaders prefer to focus on instruction and influence policy from expertise gained through their own classroom practice.

In *Divergent*, society is separated into five communities of people, each representing a different characteristic: Abnegation (selflessness); Amity (peaceful); Candor (honesty); Dauntless (courage); and Erudite (intelligence). Divergents seek to blur the lines between these communities and pursue versatile, complex roles.

Like bona fide divergents, teacher leaders function outside the norm and exhibit a combination of these traits. Here are five "divergent" qualities that teacher leaders possess:

1. **Selflessness.** "Thinking of our students' needs is the first thing on our minds," says educator Shirley Brohner, who provides [positive behavior support](#) to junior high students and their families on three campuses. After spending hours observing and analyzing students' behavior, Shirley provides plans for teachers and families that help them shift their responses in order to reinforce good choices. The time and energy involved in creating seamless support networks represents a student-centered approach that makes students' needs a priority.

2. **Intelligence.** Teacher leaders typically work year-round to improve their instruction, often without additional compensation beyond their school contract. They disavow the notion that educators have summers off. Instead, during those six to eight weeks, they're pursuing another certification, degree, or learning experience that provides an extended understanding of content.

As one teacher from New Mexico, Toni Hull, notes, "Teachers spend a lot of time learning with their peers" throughout the school year. This ongoing professional development helps teachers gain insight into their instruction and discover new ways to enrich learning experiences for their students.

3. **Courage.** A day in the life of a teacher brings fresh opportunities to face the unknown with a keen mix of expectation, preparation, and flexibility. One hallmark of a teacher leader is willingness to take risks and do things differently in order to meet the needs of the whole child. Mathematics teacher Crystal Francom understands that "we have to reach out to all the basic learning styles, as well as those students who do not fit into *any* mold." Teachers meet this challenge with determination and a range of tools that they use to engage students, overcome language challenges, and accommodate different learning styles and intelligences.

4. **Honesty and peace.** For most teacher leaders, leadership is more than just something they do. It is a mindset that motivates them to advocate for great teaching and learning in *every* class and *every* school, regardless of the zip code. Teacher Brian Griggs believes that educators "have a voice. We can leave an epic legacy that starts with our day-to-day interactions with students and our community." From translating progress reports into a student's home language or inviting parents to partner in their child's learning, teachers strive to understand the needs of families and serve as trustworthy advocates who can unite communities.

5. **A threat to the status quo.** Similar to the divergents in Roth's novel, teacher leaders threaten the very fabric of traditional teacher roles in our country. Rather than being the norm, teachers who lead by advocating for their students and profession are often considered the exception (or in some cases, the aberration).

However, as educator Patrice Dawkins-Jackson notes, this may not be the case for much longer. She says that the teaching profession "will no longer let our voice be muzzled by fear. It will roar and echo for change."

Finding Your Own Leadership Path

Becoming a teacher leader isn't something that happens overnight. There is no curriculum or set of courses that can magically transform your practice.

Here are some initial questions you can ask yourself in order to explore your leadership potential:

- Which traits (or combination of traits) from this list describe me as a teacher? As a leader?
- How would my colleagues describe me or my practice?

It's also possible that you already engage in some form of leadership—without even realizing it! Here are a few leadership pathways that teachers pursue:

- Blogging about your classroom experiences.
- Collaborating with colleagues to design and deliver the professional learning you want and need.
- Partnering with a variety of stakeholders to resolve issues that plague students in your school.
- Joining teachers in online professional learning communities and networks like the [CTQ Collaboratory](#).
- Reading about current education policy that influences decisions in your district or state.
- Sharing what you learn about policy with colleagues.
- Investing your talents in an association that shares your vision.
- Developing long-term alliances with legislative, business, and community leaders.

Finally, you may recognize that you already have the qualities of a leader or that you are on your own leadership path. No matter where you are in the process, leadership still requires an intentional process of growth. Here are a few ways teachers can take their leadership to the next level:

- [Cultivate an awareness](#) of who you are as a teacher and as a leader.
- [Make reflection](#) an integral part of your practice.
- [Take meaningful risks](#) that expand the impact of your learning and teaching.
- [Strategically address areas of needed professional growth](#).
- [Seek opportunities to extend and invest](#) in your areas of strength and accomplishment.

Teachers are more powerful than we realize. But in order to become teacher leaders, we must recognize that we are experts who are well suited to lead our profession. I live for the day when all teachers awaken to their potential and take part in creating student-centered, systemic, and sustainable changes that transform teaching and learning in our country.

I long for the day when teacher leadership is no longer divergent, but *expected*.

Cheryl A. Redfield is a National Board-certified teacher in English language arts and a teacher leader from Arizona. She is a proud member of the [CTQ Collaboratory](#), [NCTE](#), [NEA/AEA](#), and the [Arizona TeacherSolutions Team](#).