

Department Chair & Team Lead Leadership Toolkit

Empowering Instructional Leaders to Build Culture, Not Just Compliance

Presented by Academic Allies

Dear Department Chairs and Team Leads,

You were likely asked to lead because you're a strong teacher—not necessarily because you had leadership training. And let's be honest: being a department or team lead often comes with more responsibility, little support, and no extra pay.

But here's the truth: your role is one of the most important on campus. You set the tone, model professionalism, and create space for your team to succeed. This toolkit was created with you in mind. It's honest, practical, and rooted in the belief that leadership isn't a title—it's a daily practice.

This guide will help you shift your PLC from something you HAVE to do... to something you BELIEVE in. Because when teachers feel seen, supported, and valued, everything changes.

You've got this. And we've got you.

With respect and support,

Duke & Jen Marshall

Co-Founders | Academic Allies

At We Are Academic Allies, we believe:
PLCs aren't something you DO—they're something you ARE.

What's Inside This Toolkit

- Quick Wins for Real Leadership
- The Mindset Shift: From Manager to Culture Builder
- Leading a Team You Didn't Choose
- Building Systems That Support (Not Exhaust)
- The Art of the Productive PLC Meeting
- Navigating Difficult Conversations
- Templates You Can Actually Use
- Monthly Leadership Reflection Guide
- Vision & Voice: Your Leadership Philosophy
- Your 30-60-90 Day Leadership Plan
- Resources & Next Steps

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Quick Wins for Real Leadership

These are strategies you can implement THIS WEEK—no permission required, no major overhaul needed. Start here to build trust and momentum with your team.

Establish a Clear WHY for Your PLC

Make every meeting purpose-driven. Start with: "What do we want students to learn and be able to do?" When your team knows the purpose, they show up differently.

Share Agendas 48 Hours Early

Include space for teacher input at the bottom. Let them know their voice matters before they even walk in the door. This simple move transforms passive attendance into active participation.

Use Norms to Support, Not Police

Create norms that reflect shared values, not bureaucratic rules. Examples: "We honor time," "We assume positive intent," "We celebrate risk-taking." Revisit them monthly—they're living agreements, not laminated posters.

Close Meetings With Clarity

End every meeting with three clear takeaways and one next step. Send a recap within 24 hours. Clarity eliminates confusion and builds accountability—without micromanaging.

Celebrate Small Wins Publicly

Call out efforts, not just outcomes. Send a quick email, mention it in passing, or start your next meeting with gratitude. Recognition fuels momentum.

Quick Reflection: Which of these five Quick Wins will you implement first?

Write it down. Share it with one colleague. Make it real.

The Mindset Shift: From Manager to Culture Builder

Your job isn't to control your team—it's to create conditions where they can thrive. This shift changes everything.

Manager Mindset vs. Culture Builder Mindset

| Manager Mindset | Culture Builder Mindset |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Focuses on compliance | Focuses on commitment |
| Controls the agenda | Invites input and co-creates |
| Fixes problems alone | Facilitates solutions together |
| Measures success by tasks completed | Measures success by team growth |
| Avoids conflict | Engages conflict with curiosity |

Three Shifts You Can Make Today:

- From "Here's what we're doing" to "Here's what we're trying—what are your thoughts?"
Why it works: Invitation creates ownership.
- From "Let me handle that" to "Who wants to take this on?"
Why it works: Distributed leadership builds capacity.
- From "We have to do this" to "Here's why this matters"
Why it works: Purpose transforms obligation into inspiration.

Leading a Team You Didn't Choose

Not everyone on your team will be enthusiastic, collaborative, or even kind—and that's real. You can't pick your people, but you can choose how you show up.

Start Here:

Focus on relationships first

Before you try to change anything, invest time in understanding who your people are. Ask about their teaching philosophy, what energizes them, what drains them. Listen without an agenda.

Listen more than you speak

In your first 30 days, your job is to learn, not lead. Ask open-ended questions and resist the urge to solve, fix, or advise.

Don't try to fix everything

Some team members are struggling because of systems, not skill. Some are cynical because they've been burned. You don't need to fix it all—just start honest conversations.

Lead by example

Your consistency builds trust. Show up on time. Follow through. Admit mistakes. Model the professionalism and vulnerability you want to see.

Name the elephant in the room

If there's tension, dysfunction, or unspoken conflict on your team, acknowledge it with care: "I know we've had some challenges. I'm not here to place blame—I'm here to move forward together."

Bonus Strategy: One Win, One Wonder

Start meetings by asking: "Share one win from your week and one thing you're wondering about." This practice spotlights success and invites curiosity without pressure. It transforms the energy in the room.

Real-World Scenario:

You have a veteran teacher on your team who refuses to collaborate and dismisses new ideas. Instead of confronting them publicly or avoiding them entirely, schedule a one-on-one. Ask: "I'd love to learn from your experience. What's worked well for you over the years?" Then listen. Sometimes resistance softens when people feel seen—not judged.

Building Systems That Support (Not Exhaust)

Consistency beats intensity. Don't burn out trying to do everything. Instead, build simple systems your team can rely on—rhythms that reduce decision fatigue and create predictability.



Monthly PLC Flow (A Predictable Rhythm)

Week 1: Look at Student Work or Data

Choose 2-3 student work samples or a focused data point. Ask: "What do we notice? What does this tell us about student learning?"

Week 2: Plan Shared Strategies

Based on what you learned in Week 1, plan one strategy or instructional move you'll all try. Keep it small and specific.

Week 3: Observe or Implement

Try the strategy in your classrooms. If possible, do peer observations (even 15-minute informal visits). Take notes on what worked.

Week 4: Reflect, Refine, and Celebrate

Come back together. What worked? What didn't? What will we adjust? Celebrate the effort, not perfection.



Keep Shared Documents Simple

Use ONE shared Google Doc or slide deck per month. Avoid the clutter and confusion of multiple platforms. Name it clearly (e.g., "October PLC Notes") and keep everything in one place. Less is more.



Create a Meeting Ritual

Start every meeting the same way: a quote, a moment of gratitude, a 60-second silent reflection, or a quick check-in. Rituals establish rhythm and reduce decision fatigue. They signal: "We're here. We're present. This matters."



Follow-Up with Purpose

Within 24 hours of every meeting, send a follow-up that includes:

- 3 key takeaways
- 1 thank you (name someone specifically)
- 1 next step (what we're doing before we meet again)

Keep it short. Keep it powerful. Keep it human.

Reflection Prompt: What is one system you can implement in the next 30 days that would reduce stress for you AND your team? Write it below—and commit to trying it.

The Art of the Productive PLC Meeting

PLCs fail when they become compliance tasks. They thrive when they become spaces for real learning, collaboration, and problem-solving. Here is how to make your meetings worth showing up for.

The Anatomy of a Great PLC Meeting

Opening (5 min)

Start with purpose. Remind the team why you are there: to support student learning and each other. Use a grounding ritual (gratitude, quote, or "One Win, One Wonder").

Review Norms & Agenda (2 min)

Quickly review team norms and the agenda. Confirm timing and priorities. Ask: "Anything we need to add?"

Main Work (30-40 min)

Focus on ONE thing: analyzing student work, planning instruction, sharing strategies, or solving a problem. Keep it focused. Avoid trying to cover too much.

Action Steps & Next Time (5 min)

Identify 1-2 clear action steps. Ask: "What are we committing to before we meet again?" Write them down.

Closing (3 min)

End with appreciation. Name something specific someone contributed. Leave on a high note.

🚫 What Kills a PLC Meeting:

- No clear agenda or purpose
- Side conversations and distractions
- One person dominating the conversation
- Admin dropping by to check in without invitation
- Using PLC time for announcements or logistics
- No follow-through from previous meetings

 **What Makes a PLC Meeting Thrive:**

- Clear purpose tied to student learning
- Shared leadership (rotating facilitators, note-takers, timekeepers)
- Protocols that ensure every voice is heard
- Protected time and space (close your laptops, silence your phones)
- Follow-up that holds everyone accountable—including you
- Celebration of growth and effort, not just perfection

Pro Tip: If your team is burned out, shorten your meetings. A focused 30-minute PLC with clear outcomes beats an aimless 60-minute meeting every time.

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Leadership is built in the hard conversations—not the easy ones. Whether it is addressing resistance, accountability, or interpersonal conflict, how you navigate these moments defines your leadership.

The Framework: CLEAR Conversations

C = Clarify the Issue

Be specific. "I have noticed you have missed the last three PLCs" is better than "You are not engaged." Focus on observable behaviors, not assumptions.

L = Listen First

Ask: "Help me understand what is going on." Then listen without defending, explaining, or solving. Sometimes people just need to be heard.

E = Express Impact

Name the impact without blame: "When you are not there, we miss your perspective and it puts more weight on the rest of the team."

A = Agree on Action

Ask: "What can we do moving forward?" Co-create a solution. Avoid mandating. Invite ownership.

R = Revisit and Follow Up

Check in within 1-2 weeks. Ask: "How are things going?" Show you care about their success, not just compliance.

Common Difficult Conversations & How to Approach Them:

Scenario: The Chronic Latecomer

Approach: Private conversation: "I have noticed you have been running late. I want to make sure you are okay. Our team values starting on time—how can we support you in getting here?"

Scenario: The Silent Resister

Approach: One-on-one: "I notice you are quiet in our meetings. I would love to hear your thoughts. Is there something preventing you from sharing, or do you prefer to process and share later?"

Scenario: The Overwhelmed Colleague

Approach: Lead with empathy: "You seem stretched thin. What is feeling most overwhelming right now? Is there a way I can help lighten the load—or advocate for you?"

Scenario: The Negative Team Member

Approach: Curious, not confrontational: "I hear a lot of frustration in your voice. What is at the root of that? Let us talk about what we CAN control and change together."

Remember: Difficult conversations are not about winning. They are about understanding, accountability, and growth. You do not need to have all the answers—you just need to care enough to have the conversation.

Templates You Can Actually Use

Copy. Paste. Customize. Send. These templates save you time and help you communicate with clarity and care.

Positive Check-In Email

Use this to recognize effort, growth, or a moment of excellence.

Subject: Just wanted to say thank you

Hi [Name],

Just wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your [specific action: lesson, strategy, support, insight] this week. The work you are doing matters, and your students (and our team) are better because of it.

With gratitude,
[Your Name]

Meeting Follow-Up Template

Send within 24 hours of every PLC meeting.

Subject: PLC Recap – [Date]

Hi Team,

Thanks for your time and energy today. Here are three quick takeaways:

1. [Key point or decision]
2. [Action step or strategy]
3. [Celebration or insight]

Next time, we will [specific focus for next meeting].

Let me know if I missed anything. We are in this together!

– [Your Name]

 **PLC Agenda Template**

Share 48 hours before your meeting.

Subject: PLC Agenda for [Date]

Team,

Looking forward to seeing you all on [day/time]. Here is what we will focus on:

Purpose: [One-sentence purpose tied to student learning]

Agenda:

- Opening (5 min): [Ritual or grounding activity]
- Main Work (35 min): [Specific task: analyze data, plan instruction, problem-solve]
- Action Steps & Closing (10 min): What we are committing to and celebration

Please bring: [Student work samples, data, ideas, questions, etc.]

Anything you would like to add? Let me know by [deadline].

See you soon,
[Your Name]

 **Requesting Support from Administration**

Use this when you need help, resources, or advocacy for your team.

Subject: Support Needed for [Department/Team]

Hi [Admin Name],

I wanted to reach out about a challenge we are facing as a team: [briefly describe the issue].

Here is what we have already tried: [list 1-2 things]

What we need moving forward: [be specific: time, resources, clarity, protection from interruptions]

I believe with this support, we can [desired outcome for students or team].

Would you be available to discuss this further? I am happy to meet at your convenience.

Thank you for your support,
[Your Name]

One-on-One Check-In Script

Use this for informal check-ins with team members.

Opening Questions:

- "How are you doing—really?"
- "What is energizing you right now? What is draining you?"
- "Is there anything I can do to better support you?"
- "What is one thing you wish our team did differently?"

Listen. Really listen. Take notes. Follow up.

Monthly Leadership Reflection Guide

Leadership is not just what you do—it is who you are becoming. Use this guide at the end of each month to pause, reflect, and recalibrate.

Reflect on the Month:

- What went well this month? What am I proud of?
- What was challenging? What did I learn from it?
- How did I show up for my team? Where could I have shown up better?
- What feedback did I receive (formal or informal)? How will I use it?
- Did I protect my own well-being? What do I need to prioritize next month?

Set Intentions for Next Month:

- One relationship I want to invest in:
- One system or strategy I want to implement:
- One thing I will stop doing (because it is not serving my team):
- One way I will care for myself:
- One way I will celebrate my team:

Reminder: Leadership is a practice, not a destination. Some months will feel like wins. Others will feel like survival. Both are part of the journey. Keep showing up.

Vision & Voice: Your Leadership Philosophy

As a department chair or team lead, your voice has power—even if you are still learning how to use it. You do not have to have all the answers, but you do need a clear vision and the courage to invite others into it.

Building Your Leadership Vision:

Clarify the "Why" of Your Team

What unites you? What do you all care about? Start every year—and every meeting—by anchoring back to that shared purpose. Write it down. Say it out loud. Return to it often.

Communicate the Vision Consistently

Use consistent language and reminders that reflect what your team is working toward. Culture grows through repetition. Your words shape your team's reality.

Model What It Means to Lead with Voice

Be transparent. Admit mistakes. Celebrate growth. Your vulnerability gives others permission to show up fully. Leadership is not about perfection—it is about presence.

Invite Input—and Act on It

Ask for feedback, and when possible, implement it. Even small adjustments show that their voice matters. Co-creation builds ownership.

Transform Resistance Into Purpose

When team members push back, use it as an invitation to connect, not a reason to retreat. Lead with curiosity, not control. Ask: "What are you concerned about? What do you need?"

Your Leadership Philosophy Reflection:

Take a few minutes to answer these questions. Your responses will form the foundation of your leadership philosophy.

1. What do I believe about teachers and their capacity to grow?

2. What do I believe about students and what they deserve?

3. What kind of culture do I want to build on my team?

4. How do I want to be remembered as a leader?

5. What three values will guide my decisions and actions?

Pro Tip: Share your leadership philosophy with your team. It builds trust and invites accountability. When they know what you stand for, they know what to expect.

Your 30-60-90 Day Leadership Plan

New to the role? Stepping into a challenging team? Use this roadmap to build trust, establish systems, and create momentum in your first 90 days.

Days 1-30: Listen, Learn, and Build Relationships

Focus: Understand your team and establish trust

Your job is not to fix everything—it is to learn who your people are and what they need.

Key Actions:

- Schedule 15-minute one-on-ones with every team member
- Ask: "What do you love about teaching? What frustrates you? How can I support you?"
- Observe a PLC meeting (if already established) without leading
- Review past meeting notes, team norms, and any existing systems
- Introduce yourself authentically—share your story and your "why"

What Success Looks Like:

Team members feel seen, heard, and hopeful that things might be different this year.

Days 31-60: Establish Systems and Co-Create Norms

Focus: Build structure and invite collaboration

Now that you know your team, start creating predictable rhythms and shared agreements.

Key Actions:

- Facilitate a team discussion to co-create norms (or revisit existing ones)
- Establish a monthly PLC flow (Week 1: data, Week 2: planning, Week 3: implementation, Week 4: reflection)
- Send agendas 48 hours before meetings and follow-ups within 24 hours
- Celebrate one win publicly every week (via email, in person, or at a meeting)
- Start using "One Win, One Wonder" as a meeting opener

What Success Looks Like:

Meetings feel more purposeful. Team members know what to expect. Trust is growing.

Days 61-90: Lead with Vision and Address Challenges

Focus: Clarify direction and navigate hard conversations

You have built trust and established systems. Now it is time to address what is not working and cast a vision forward.

Key Actions:

- Facilitate a visioning conversation: "What do we want to be known for as a team?"
- Address any persistent challenges using the CLEAR framework
- Implement one new instructional strategy as a team and reflect on it together
- Check in on your own well-being—are you sustaining this pace? What needs to shift?
- Plan a team celebration or acknowledgment activity

What Success Looks Like:

The team has a shared identity. Hard conversations have happened with care. Momentum is building.

Remember: You will not transform your team in 90 days—and that is okay. Leadership is a long game. What matters is that you showed up with integrity, listened deeply, and began building something real.

Resources & Next Steps

Leadership is not a solo journey. Here are resources, tools, and ways to continue growing as a teacher-leader.



Recommended Reading:

- Brené Brown – *Dare to Lead* (on vulnerability and courageous leadership)
- Doug Lemov – *Teach Like a Champion* (practical classroom and team strategies)
- Kim Scott – *Radical Candor* (on giving honest, caring feedback)
- Patrick Lencioni – *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (on building healthy teams)
- Simon Sinek – *Start With Why* (on purpose-driven leadership)

❖ Free Tools from Academic Allies:

- PLC Meeting Agenda Templates
- Team Norms Builder Worksheet
- Leadership Reflection Journal
- Difficult Conversations Script Bank
- Monthly Team Culture Check-In Survey

Visit WeAreAcademicAllies.com to download these resources and more.



Professional Development Opportunities:

Academic Allies offers workshops, coaching, and consulting for teacher-leaders, department chairs, and instructional teams. Whether you need a one-time training or ongoing support, we are here to help.

Email us at info@WeAreAcademicAllies.com or visit our website to learn more.

 **Join the Conversation:**

Connect with other teacher-leaders, share strategies, and find encouragement in our online community. Follow us on social media @AcademicAllies for leadership insights, real talk, and resources.

Final Thoughts

Being a teacher-leader is not about being perfect. It is about being present, clear, and human.

You have the power to build a culture where teachers feel energized instead of exhausted, seen instead of silenced, and valued for the professionals they are.

Start small. Stay grounded. Build trust. And remember: leadership is not a job you do—it is who you are becoming.

The students you serve deserve leaders who believe in them. Your colleagues deserve leaders who see them. And you deserve support as you grow into this role.

We are here for you. You are not alone in this work.

With deep respect and unwavering support,

Duke & Jen Marshall

Co-Founders | Academic Allies

WeAreAcademicAllies.com

"Because what you do still matters."

Quick Reference: Leadership at a Glance

Top 5 Go-To Strategies

- One Win, One Wonder – Build culture without pressure
- Send agendas 48 hours early – Invite input and build trust
- Follow up within 24 hours – Keep communication clear and consistent
- Lead with questions, not answers – Facilitate, don't dominate
- Celebrate progress, not perfection – Acknowledge effort and momentum

When You Feel Stuck, Remember:

- You don't have to have all the answers—just the courage to ask good questions
- Small, consistent actions build lasting culture
- Your team is watching how you handle challenges—model the way
- It's okay to say "I don't know" or "I need help"
- Leadership is about people, not paperwork

 *Keep this page posted near your workspace as a daily reset!*

Download additional resources at WeAreAcademicAllies.com