

# ***CASCADING LEADERSHIP AMONG STUDENTS***

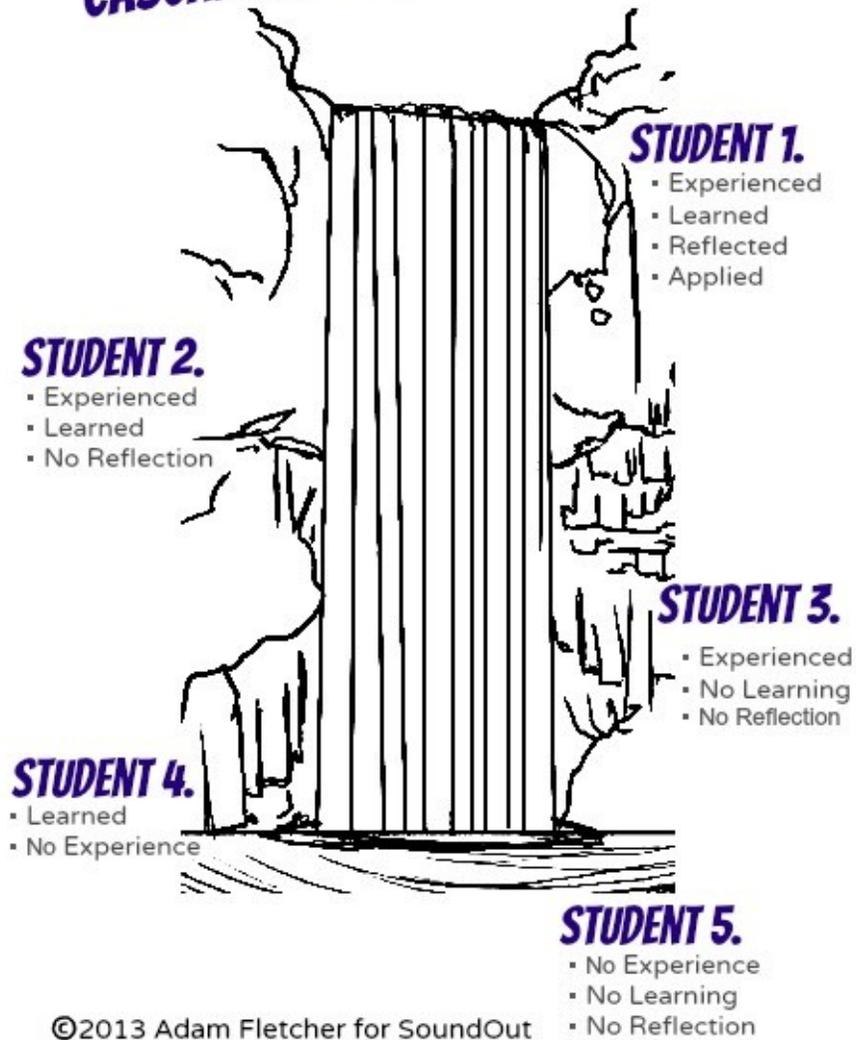
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Cascading leadership is the experience of having students facilitate students in a sequence according to their skills, knowledge, and experience. It is different from traditional leadership, which is generally having students command other students according to their interest and ability.

In my experience working with student leadership programs in hundreds of K-12 schools over the last decade, I have discovered that students can be the best purveyors of student leadership skills and knowledge. This is especially true among nontraditional student leaders—the ones who lead their peers in negative ways throughout your school. I have actually found cascading leadership to be a norm among these students, as they rely on self-guidance and peer relationships to meet their needs, as opposed to traditional student leaders who rely on adults.

Cascading leadership offers students the chance they need to mentor, support, and sustain each other as they engage in decision-making activities throughout school. Acknowledging the variety of experiences, knowledge, reflections, and applications of student decision-making can leverage student ability, engagement, and outcomes, in the more effective ways than traditional student leadership. It does this by activating greater effectiveness, ownership, and belonging among students.

## CASCADING STUDENT LEADERSHIP



In this model:

- Student 1 gives direct instruction, mentoring, and critique to Student 2;
- Student 2 provides instruction to Student 3;
- And so forth.

At the end of the waterfall, Student 5 is acknowledged as the foundation for successful leadership, and as their knowledge, experience, and reflection expands, they will in turn “swim upstream” to new positions of authority. This way even more students can become engaged in leadership by expanding student engagement activities beyond the immediate leaders at the top of the waterfall and increasing the capacity of the school to engage student leaders.

This model offers a new way to visualize how students can support students becoming more engaged in leading themselves, their peers, and their entire school. Cascading leadership among students is best supported by student/adult partnerships, and is one of the very best ways to support Meaningful Student Involvement.

### **In Practice**

The Cascading Leadership model is my “process-ization” of a naturally occurring phenomenon. There are plenty of opportunities to see how it works, with many obvious in highly functioning classrooms and youth programs.

Working with a group of students last year in Seattle, I saw cascading leadership flow quickly. Focused on stopping youth violence among youth in their high school, this particular group was led by a pair of 18-year-old students who were set to graduate. Other students in the group were from throughout their high school (secondary school), with the youngest ones being 13 or 14. There were 15 students in the meeting when I was there.

One of the oldest students facilitated almost the entirety of the group's 40 minute session. The other took notes and questions, and seemed to have the "behind-the-scenes" authority. In 40 minutes, the students did a short training on strategic summer communication to their peers, voting for the next year's leaders, finishing plans for the end-of-year celebration, and reflecting on this year's challenges and successes.

However, instead of those two student leaders talking the entire time, watching conversation throughout the session was like watching a great juggler handling a dozen balls in the air. One student volunteered to take notes while another showed them how; everyone engaged in brainstorming when a different student stepped forward to lead the key question period for that section; while students took student-driven reflection to a whole other space through its depth and brevity!

This was actually these students' interpretation and actualization of the Cascading Leadership model! I'd trained them on it early in the school year. A few of the students humored me afterwards by going through this article with me and showing me how they did it:

- *Student 1 gives direct instruction, mentoring, and critique to Student 2:* In this group, that meant training and facilitation by the senior students throughout the school year;
- *Student 2 provides instruction to Student 3:* Roles in this group were designated according to interest, versus the age of the students, so

younger students actually facilitated the reflection questions for the whole group;

- *Student 3 learns from Student 2 and leads reflection for Students 4 and 5:* When less-capable students were stumped, students with a bit more experience or knowledge were empowered to assist them in activities;
- *Student 5 is acknowledged for their role:* All students were involved throughout the group's activities, both within the 40 minute meeting and throughout the group's operations in the rest of the school year.

As I propose in the model, this type of deliberate engagement among students in fostering student involvement not only increases student engagement, but ensures succeeding generations of students stay invested and maintains ownership over group activities.

I have taught classroom teachers, community youth workers, and government officials this model as well. It basically takes peer tutoring to the Nth degree, with students fully empowered to engage their peers by acknowledging their capacity for self-leadership by ensuring they have the skills, authority, and ability to drive their own learning and activities.

For more information and resources, visit the [SoundOut](http://SoundOut) website, call (360) 489-9680, or email [info@soundout.org](mailto:info@soundout.org).

## About the Author

Adam Fletcher is a speaker, researcher, and writer who has worked with more than 300 K-12 schools across the United States and Canada to promote student voice. His work on Meaningful Student Involvement has been used internationally to promote school improvement, and he has keynoted at dozens of education conferences. In addition to training students and educators, he has also written more than 25 publications for schools. Learn more at [adamfletcher.net](http://adamfletcher.net).