



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

TESOL Board Connect: The Different Paths to Leadership

by [Grazzia María Mendoza Chirinos](#)

One may think the leadership path is a one-way street; however, we have all experienced the path to leadership in different ways. Some leaders have followed a straight line, others a bit of a zigzag, while others complete a path of loops, ups and downs where the path is unclear and intricate. No matter the path you need or have had to follow, keep in mind that each leader has battles to fight and obstacles to clear, and along the way there are valuable lessons to learn. Some of these lessons learned are the ones I want to share with you today.

When I think about my path to leadership in general and within TESOL International Association, it seems that many years have passed since it all began at 20 years of age. There have been many wonderful and fulfilling experiences that have transformed my life since 1993. My first positions: teacher at a binational center and preschool assistant coordinator teaching kindergarten at a bilingual school. I got the books, and I got the materials—along with zero idea of what to do or how to do it. I'd passed a test that stated my level of English was highly proficient, and that instantly qualified me as a teacher.

I was scared. The only experience I had teaching was helping my classmates at school prepare for tests. Oh, how blessed was I when I found an amazing support system among my colleagues. They did not only help me navigate the books and learn how to complete the planning documents, but they also provided tips and tricks from their own experience! I got to teach all levels in pre-K–12 and adults until 2006 and then embarked in the higher education and teacher training realm. During that time, when I met new, inexperienced teachers like me, I helped them navigate the intricacies of the field as well. That is what I learnt leaders do, and I did, both with colleagues and my students.

The next leg of my leadership path: TESOL International Association. Seattle 2007 was the first time I witnessed an international convention and the first time I presented at one! This was a new world to me, and I did not arrive at it by accident; I had the support of friend and colleague Ulises Rodriguez, who I met at Zamorano. He encouraged me to submit a proposal to a



convention where the acceptance rate was 21%. His words: “We already have a no...so...” What are the odds? It got accepted.



Oh, the experience: a huge convention center, hundreds of wonderful presentations (I wanted to attend all of them), and the amazing authors of the books I had studied and used in my classroom: Betty Azar, Diane Larsen Freeman, Rod Ellis, to name a few. This experience marked my life, and I have been in love with TESOL ever since, attending every convention, presenting every year, learning, and serving.

My service included reviewing proposals, chairing an award for the Awards Committee, volunteering at the Electronic Village, guiding others at interest section booths, founding the Honduran association, working and representing Latin American and Caribbean affiliates, and chairing the English as a Foreign Language Interest Section. On this TESOL journey, I must also highlight the words of Valerie Jakar: “You should apply for the board.” Here I am on my 3rd year as a board member and chair of the Finance Committee, serving others and now being the voice that says, “You should apply for...” My journey as a leader at this stage was marked by leading and serving, while seeking opportunities for others.

Finally, the most recent leg of my journey: the U.S. State Department, thanks to Carmen de Urcuyo, my angel on earth as I like to call her. She gave me the chance to become a U.S. State Department alumna by including me in incredible training opportunities and applications to exchanges, broadening my perspectives and allowing me to meet amazing colleagues and a support network of people who encouraged me and continued to support me in my journey. She encouraged me to try, to explore, and to apply to grants that will support others in thriving professionally in Honduras. During all these experiences, I got to interact with amazing professionals from all over the world online and in person. With many of them, I still have projects and long-lasting friendships. Thanks to her support, I founded the [Honduran English Language Teacher Association](#), and since 2014 we have trained more than 3,000 teachers, bringing TESOL to Honduras (literally in 2018). This stage marked me as leader allowing me to understand my role was one of giving back!



When I look back at my 28-year career, 15 of these training teachers and doing volunteer service, it lets me see clearly how my leadership path has been shaped. It has not been a straight or zigzag road, more of a looped path with endings, beginnings, and experiences that marked me as an English language teaching professional. The journey taught me the relevance of commitment, passion, and especially how to be a positive part of a network of encouragers and facilitators of leaders. It allowed me to understand that my role as a leader is one of creating spaces for others to grow, to enable leading, to contribute to others' lives. It has taught me to be humble, to be a good listener, and to be happy watching others thrive. It has let me love TESOL and carry it in my heart, transmit this love to others, and find ways for them to experience their own awe and care for TESOL.

My leadership journey, as Brené Brown says, has been “a daring leadership role” where I have had the chance to shine, but have been truly happy when I have seen others get the star. In this daring leadership role with my own fears, areas of opportunities for growth, and my own story, I can't help but thank my incredible support network of people who led me to opportunities and rooted for me. People who have cared about me transparently and enabled me to grow and succeed. Those who have seen something in me and encouraged me to go for the dream, to reach for the sky, to get to those places I never would have thought I would go to. Today, I have named a few of those facilitator leaders, but there are more out there, and you know who you are. To all of you, thank you for listening to me, supporting me, encouraging me. To my family, my husband, and two sons, for hanging in there and rooting for me; to my sister for taking care of the boys when I was away. You have all made me the type of leader I enjoy being and hope to continue to be. Thank you!

We all have a leadership journey and story to tell. Be sure to share yours with those around you and facilitate their path. They will surely relate, listen to you, and begin a journey of their own!

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