

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## COUNTERING THE KNOW-IT-ALL DISRUPTOR

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The clock was ticking as the students started to file into the chemistry workshop classroom, greeting each other with light smiles. They were talking in low voices about how their vacation had been. The picture was no different from any other first day of class to everyone except to the novice Peer Leader. Her heart was pounding hard in the unfamiliar environment she had never been in before, the environment in which she will be standing instead of sitting and leading instead of following.

A couple of workshops later, as she was just starting to relieve the nervousness, an unfortunate encounter happened that left her bare to her vulnerabilities. The encounter was with a “Know-It-All”(KIA) student, who was not bashful to raise her voice. This is a great, even essential, quality in the function of workshops when used appropriately. As commonly done in workshops, we were doing a group activity on that unfortunate day. The Peer Leader asked one person per group to come up to the board and present their numeric results up to two decimal places. Everyone did as told except for the KIA. When questioned, the KIA said “your instruction is wrong. That’s not what the book says,” and went on elaborating to the Peer Leader on her scientifically incorrect explanation. In shock and momentarily caught off-guard, the inexperienced Peer Leader was not able to provide a strong counterargument, and therefore suggested that everyone just follow the instructions. As the shocked Peer Leader turned around to fix the answer written by the KIA, the KIA yelled out “Bull- . . .” This incident created a major setback to the function of the workshop, and a huge hole developed in the confidence of the Peer Leader.



The novice Peer Leader in the story above is the author, myself. The devastation within workshop was so great that it was impossible to move on. The KIA began to show a lack of attentiveness, participation, and respect towards the workshop group and me. Her negative energy strongly influenced other students, putting the whole workshop in jeopardy. The lack of interest and enthusiasm by the students distracted group discussions, which eventually was replaced by chitchat. When I asked questions or gave instructions for the hands-on “Explorations” [lab exercises led by the Peer Leader], the students would respond with blank stares that felt totally smothering. The workshop was becoming dysfunctional.

The word “dysfunctional” might be suitable for my feelings about myself as a Peer Leader. Many doubtful thoughts were swarming in my head; “maybe I am not qualified enough; maybe I should not have tried to correct the KIA; maybe I do not know more about chemistry than the students; maybe becoming a Peer Leader was a big mistake.” In addition, my vulnerabilities began to look larger than ever: I am not a chemistry major; I have just finished this first semester of general chemistry; I have never taken a chemistry course prior to that first semester of general chemistry; I am an international student; English is my second language; I do not have a projective voice; I am shy; I am a Korean and a female, which means that I should be reserved, unassertive, and quiet. In despair, a part of me wished to give up.



However, I would not be writing about my experience if I really did give up. In the end, the KIA was transformed from a challenger/competitor into collaborator/colleague, the other students became active participants, and I recovered my face as a Peer leader. This turnaround from the downhill to the uphill took several actions.

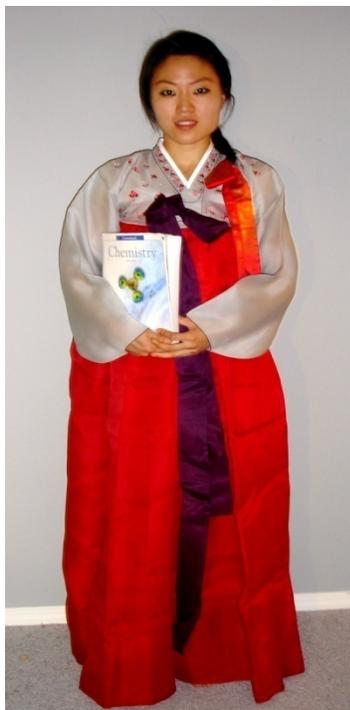
The very first step I took was to spill the beans to the supervisor, Dr. James Becvar, and a veteran Peer Leader, Ahlam Azam, which required a great deal of courage, for I was in fear of appearing to be incompetent. However, as I opened up, they provided me with much support and encouragement that calmed the storm of doubtful thoughts inside me. I also received advice from other experienced Peer Leaders on how to resolve the problem with the KIA. With my confidence restored and the possible solutions in my hands, now I was ready to tackle the challenging situation in my workshop.

The strategy in a nutshell was the opposite of an “eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” attitude, for the goal was to remove and not intensify the negative atmosphere. This was crucial because active learning is impossible without the active participation of the students.

In order to repair the damaged atmosphere of the whole workshop group, I needed to display as much confidence as I could, which involved being well-prepared for the material being covered in each workshop. Studying the material thoroughly was not only their gain but also my own. As any Peer Leader should be, being accessible inside as well as outside the classroom was important. This also calls for building a personal relationship with each student. One thing I did before the first midterm was to show the students a copy of my chemistry exam from the previous semester and tell them what mistakes I had made, which is more intimate and personal than giving them just any old exam copies.

Smiling with all my might was an important task I endured in order to change the atmosphere in workshop. As a treatment for the KIA, I asked her for help in person, especially with the other students who were struggling with chemistry, all the while complimenting her on her talent and ability to do so. In the end, leading the KIA to believe that the Peer Leader was not one to compete with, but one to help, turned the eagerness to challenge authority into the eagerness to make the workshop efficient. The successful strategy to counter this potential “loss of control” situation was to change the KIA from challenger/competitor to collaborator/colleague and thus recover function in the workshop.

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## TREATMENTS – Actions by the Peer Leader

- ❁ **For the K-I-A**
- ❁ Changing the Challenger/Competitor → Collaborator/Colleague
  - ❁ Smile with ALL YOUR MIGHT!
  - ❁ Where appropriate: find ways to compliment
  - ❁ Discuss/Ask for help after class
  - ❁ Convince K-I-A to help others who are struggling
- ❁ **For the Workshop**
- ❁ Convince Bystanders to Become Active Learners
  - ❁ Build Personal Relationships
  - ❁ Be Accessible outside of class
  - ❁ Hide Despair / Doubts / Upset Feeling
  - ❁ Display Confidence
  - ❁ Smile with ALL YOUR MIGHT!
- ❁ **For the Peer Leader**
- ❁ Terrified → Terrific
  - ❁ Spill the Beans!
    - to Supervisor and Fellow PLs
    - Receive Support / Encouragement / Help
    - Recover Confidence
  - ❁ Be Well Prepared

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