



## INTERVIEW

# How to Teach Like a Champion: An Interview with Doug Lemov

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# How to Teach Like a Champion: An Interview with Doug Lemov

*DOUG LEMOV'S TEACH LIKE A CHAMPION* has been widely acclaimed for its practical tips and tools that focus on enhancing teacher effectiveness. Gleaned from years of observing outstanding teachers in some of the highest-performing urban districts in the country, Lemov provides a how-to manual for the classroom with practical tools that are noticeably absent from the majority of professional development strategies and education school curriculums.

Lemov is currently a managing director at Uncommon Schools. He is the founder of School Performance, and he is a founder and former principal of the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School in Boston. Lemov has also served as the vice president for accountability at the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute, where he designed and implemented a rigorous school accountability system. He holds a B.A. from Hamilton College, an M.A. from Indiana University, and an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School.

In this edited interview, Nicholas P. Morgan, DMC's managing director, talks with Lemov about *Teach Like a Champion*, and about recruiting, teacher training and coaching, enhancing teacher effectiveness, and creating a culture that promotes constant improvement and focuses on increasing student achievement.

**There have been many books on great teaching, but *Teach Like A Champion* has distinguished itself. What makes your book different? What inspired you to write this?**

I think one of the things that makes the book different is that I started with teachers and not with theory. I'm a really concrete person; my wife would say I'm too concrete. As a teacher, I remember going to training designed to make me better. People would tell me inspirational things that would put me back in touch with why I became a teacher, but when I returned to school the following day, I found that the training wasn't effective in helping me solve the real problems I faced in the classroom.

It's a chronic refrain I hear from teachers: "The training didn't teach me how to handle the things

that get in the way of my increasing student achievement." So we tried to start identifying what works and what doesn't. I've always been skeptical of some of the theories I hear people talk about, so I kept asking myself how we could identify what is right and what is wrong. I did what I learned to do when you are confronted with a problem as an MBA, which is you start with the data. I went out and tried to find the best teachers, the people who were actually doing it. I watched what they actually did and learned from what they did. I focused on what these teachers were doing as opposed to what theory says they should be doing, and even what the teachers themselves said they were doing. Some of the best teachers were not able to describe to me what they were doing. But, they did amazing things. >

I just love teachers. They are incredible, entrepreneurial problem-solvers, and I wanted to honor what they do to solve problems by learning from it. That said, the only thing that I know for sure about this book, and the only thing that anyone knows for sure about any book that they write, is that it's wrong. Some part of it is wrong. I don't know which parts yet, and whether they're big parts or little parts, but clearly, some parts of it are wrong for some teachers, in some settings, at some times. So, one of the things that I tried to stress in the book is the discretionary application of these tools. An effective tool at the wrong time is not the right tool.

**You've talked a lot about the implementation gap. Can you describe that a bit for our readers?**

What I mean by the implementation gap is the big gap between 'I get it' and 'I can do it.' The first time we tried training with video, we showed it to teachers and they said, "I get it! So inspirational! Yes, I see! Now I know what I'm going to do!" They left the workshop full of optimism, but when we checked back in with them later, they said, "I'm not able to do it yet. It's harder than I thought."

Closing that gap is all about practice. So, let me tell you a quick story. I was really honored that the principal of my kids' school read the book and said, "I want to talk about possibly trying to use this in our school." She asked me how we use it. I told her our teachers at Uncommon Schools report three weeks before school starts, and we have lots of practice sessions. During the school year, we dismiss our students at one o'clock on Fridays, and we have two hours of practice for all teachers. She said, "My teachers report one day before the kids come back."

In most schools there's no time to practice. That tells you that we assume that practice isn't really relevant to the job of teaching. And even beyond that, *team* practice—making the refining of technique a team sport like you would if you were a musician or an athlete—is the key. Unfortunately, if you ask most schools how often their teachers practice the things they do before they go into the game, the answer is zero.

**The video clips are terrific. The focus on execution makes this so powerful.**

I think the videos speak louder than my words do. The videos show that it can be done. That eliminates a lot of potential excuses that can arise. For example, if I stood up in front of a room of teachers and said, "Here's what you should do: you should call on a kid, and when he can't answer it, you should go to another kid, and then come back to the first kid and say, 'now you tell me.'" A lot of teachers would say that the kid would be chastened by that, and it would be a negative experience for him. But, when I show you a video of a teacher doing that, you see that the kid is proud and sings out the answer. It dispels a lot of the barriers to implementation. And, I think it has shown me that video is a critical piece of teacher training going forward because it carries so much information, and because people learn primarily by modeling.

I also like the videos because I think it is important to shine a light on great teachers. Organizationally, if I'm a district and I want to make my best people feel important and want to hold on to them, I want to show how great they are and have them know that I do everything I can to honor their work. I don't think that teaching as a profession has a problem attracting people. I think it has a problem keeping people, and specifically, keeping its best people. As we know, urban districts have a big problem keeping their best people.

**Absolutely, retention is a big issue. We would like to get your thoughts on the gamut of issues that go into enhancing teacher effectiveness, from recruitment and professional development to retention. But first, let's take a step back and talk about your approach to recruitment, which I think our readers would find very interesting.**

In the process of writing the book, I realized that the fundamental premise is that teaching is about technique, and that you develop teachers by practicing. That seems like a really simple idea, but it actually pervades every aspect of what we do.

When I started doing this work, many schools that I worked with hired people based on interviews. At Uncommon Schools, we quickly realized that we needed to hire people based on watching them teach a sample lesson. The people who could talk about education were not necessarily the people who could do it in the classroom. But then, we actually took it a step further. We realized that what was most important was to hire teachers who were going to be on the learning curve. So, after the sample lesson, we did a debrief where we gave them positive feedback and constructive feedback, no matter how good or how weak they were. We realized that the way they responded to that feedback was critical. Were they people who were hungry to learn?

We took this process even a step further and invited these teachers to come back and reteach the sample lesson, incorporating the feedback that we had given them. And, let me tell you, if I have a young person who is hungry to learn and takes feedback non-defensively and then puts it into practice in the next lesson, I'll take that person. I may even take that person over a teacher who starts out more proficient. What we are really after is a culture of restless, relentless self-betterment. We want our teachers to want to get better all the time.

**Providing feedback on a regular basis and practicing the craft of teaching is central to your professional development for teachers and to your getting the results you do. Clearly, the hiring process you described helps create a group positively disposed to this process, but how else do you embed this in the culture?**

It's important to frame the concept correctly. It's critical that teachers understand that I give you feedback not because I don't respect you, but because I think you're worth the time. In fact, the better you are, the more likely I am to give you constructive feedback.

People think buy-in is a prerequisite. But, my colleague Paul Bambrick always says, "Buy-in is a result, not a precondition, for an operating system."

When your operating system makes people better, solves their problems, and makes them more successful, then they will believe in it, even if they don't believe in it at first. So, don't wait for them to say, "Yes, I want you to come to my classroom." Go to their classroom, help them get better, be constructive, and then they'll love it.

One of the most interesting negative comments about the book was a post in response to the article about the book in *The New York Times*. The comment read, "I've been a teacher supervisor in a district for 20 years, and in the picture, Doug Lemov is standing in the back of a teacher's classroom taking

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notes, and every teacher supervisor knows ... what an aggressive, threatening thing that is to do, and every teacher in the country would be offended by that." That was ironic to me, because in the picture to which he was referring, I am standing in Katie Bellucci's classroom. She is so successful, and we have such a trusting relationship; she *wants* me and Paul Powell, the principal of Troy Prep, at the back of her classroom. It makes her happy because she knows that we're there to help her, to help her improve, and to help answer her questions. Because Katie wants to be great. It's overwhelmingly sad that an administrator would assume that there's a relationship of mistrust. ▷

**It sounds like you've taken what is often an antagonistic relationship and turned it into a very positive one, so that it is a very different dynamic overall.**

People are sometimes afraid of data, but the truth is that data sets you free. Katie knows that she has got to deliver results on the math test, and her kids have to be great math students—the data has to show that. That objectivity is actually a gift to teachers. And my job is to help Katie get there as opposed to saying, “We have met. I approve of the work you have done, Katie.” Katie wouldn’t know what to make of that comment.

We have an open-door policy in our classrooms. Our teachers and our students don’t even look up when someone walks into the back of a classroom because it’s so normal. The idea of making an appointment for six weeks from now to visit a classroom seems absurd. It not only gives you a skewed sense of what people are actually doing in the classroom, but, more importantly, it doesn’t help teachers get better. At Uncommon, and at most of the top performing systems I know, we’ve fundamentally turned that dynamic on its head. If your principal isn’t someone you trust to help you, something is wrong with the organization.

**So, how does this feedback process actually work?**

Our rule of thumb is to observe every teacher for about ten minutes every two weeks. I think most people can process two pieces of good news and two pieces of bad news. When we have multiple administrators observing, we coordinate what we think the teacher’s most important issues are—positive and negative—so we’re not giving them 37 different pieces of feedback. We want to be really consistent and communicate, “These are the two things that you need to be working on.” We try and come back and give them feedback about the thing we talked about previously: “This is going well. You’re doing much better. This is still kind of an issue. Let’s keep working on it. Try this.”

**Many districts struggle with how to crack the existing culture of not giving feedback.**

**Basically, everyone is used to getting graded a certain way. So, when we start giving more constructive feedback, that is a shock to the system. Any recommendations?**

I know this is a challenge, but I would say, start with an opt-in model. If I wanted to do this training in a district where there was a history of ineffective training or resistance between teachers and administration or other barriers, I would just start with an opt-in approach—if you want this, come. The principal of my children’s school said, “My most successful teachers are probably going to be the ones who want it first.” The best teachers are the ones who are constantly thinking about improving. And then she added, “They’re going to start talking about it—‘Wow, this is really working well for me’—and then the other teachers are going to start saying, ‘How come I can’t get that?’”

There’s going to be some buzz, and then people will ask to be involved, and you can say, “Great, you can be involved.” You don’t want to ram it down the throats of people who don’t want it. The trick, as my kids’ principal rightly observed, is to make people want it.

**The feedback and coaching are great as a form of professional development. But, how do you define teacher effectiveness? How do you measure it?**

The measure of great teaching is student achievement. Much of that, but not all of that, can be measured by assessments. I’m pretty unapologetic about assessments. At Uncommon Schools, we tell our teachers they need to go above and beyond the assessments. We’re college prep, not test prep, and that’s a big difference. But, there are no kids who are prepared for college who can’t pass those tests; they are necessary but not sufficient. So, we’re going to nail them, and after we nail them, we’re going to talk about what’s next. But, as we all know, there are thousands and thousands of kids who can’t come anywhere near passing those tests. So, I believe that you have to start with measurable results and then, hopefully, our measures will get stronger and stronger and stronger.



DMC's Nick Morgan (left) and Doug Lemov (right).

Fundamentally, I think a great teacher is data-driven. They don't ask themselves, "Did I teach it?"; they ask themselves, "Did the students learn it?" At the end of the book, I talk about Ben Marcovitz and his teachers at Sci Academy in New Orleans, which is roundly praised as one of the best public schools in the country. He tells his teachers, "You're not accountable for using the techniques in *Teach Like A Champion*. *Teach Like A Champion* is a tool to get you results. And if you're getting results without it, fine. And if you're using it, but you're not getting results, we still have a problem." My biggest anxiety about the book is that it's very easy for an idea about how to do something to replace the goal. The goal has got to be student achievement. I feel that very strongly.

In summary, to me, a great teacher takes kids through a three-stage process of 'behave, believe, achieve.' First, the bottoms have to be in seats. It doesn't matter what kinds of questions you're asking if the kids own the classroom. The classroom is not a democracy; it's a very enlightened dictatorship, but a lot of teachers aren't comfortable with that. Once the kids behave, it's about getting them to change their relationship to school and to 'believe' in what they're doing. The next stage is

getting them to 'achieve,' which means challenging students with rigorous academics that push them to go as far as they can go. I think of managing this process, and it's not easy. As principals, you walk through the building, and you can evaluate the first two of those very easily, on sight: "That is a classroom where the kids' bottoms are in seats and where I see teaching going on, and therefore, I'm happy with that teacher." But, the 'achieve' part of the equation is harder to assess. It's really easy to get a false positive and miss that if you're not attentive to each of those three stages in the progression.

**Data-driven assessments always make people fear the end-of-year, high-stakes data.**

We got our data late this year. But, I would say that in most cases, we know which teachers are weak and which teachers are strong because we have other forms of data. While data and results are important, teamwork and being committed to the learning curve are critical. If a teacher struggles in their first year performance-wise, but fits our culture and is working hard to improve, I am inclined to keep working with that teacher. For example, managing an orderly classroom is >

important to our culture. When you've got one disorderly classroom, it's a tax on every other classroom because kids learn that they can get away with things that then affect other classrooms. So, as long as they're not eroding the school culture for other teachers, I often say, "Let's see how your data goes. I'm concerned about some things, but I expect to see a big second-year bounce."

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But, if they're not learning, and not receptive to feedback, and they are not in line with our culture, I'm probably going to cut bait at the end of the year, possibly even before I've seen their data.

**If you have to make a tough decision at the end of the year not to renew someone's contract, it sounds like it shouldn't be a shock to them. You've had a series of conversations that have led to that point.**

Absolutely. I think that's critical. I think you want to ask yourself, "Have we as an organization done everything we can to give this person a chance to succeed?" And then, it comes down to the kids. I don't want to be reckless in talking about people's careers, but the purpose of the organization is children's education, not the employment of adults. I appreciate the hard work the teacher did, but if we didn't get there, I need to put someone else in the game and give them a chance to take the ball forward for the sake of the students.

**And what about the upper end of the performance curve?**

In too many organizations, the reward for being good is you get ignored, and the organization no longer invests in you. Organizations end up losing their best people for this reason. At Uncommon, we talk about this with our principals all the time. You pour all of your resources—supervision, development—into your weakest teachers, and at the end of the year, they're the people who are most likely to leave. It's more productive to be investing in the second quartile or top quartile. I hope that this book gives people a roadmap of things they can talk about with their good and great teachers to not only make them better, but to make them love the job and love the process of constantly getting better.

**A lot of your book focused on what I'd call the mechanics of teaching, which are inherently scalable and replicable. That's very compelling.**

The interesting thing is that the training, in fact, gets better as there are more people in the room. The training is okay with three people in the room, but with 15 teachers in the room, master teachers as well as struggling teachers, it's great because then you hear master teachers watching your video and talking about your lesson plan and saying, "Here's how I would adapt that. Here's when I'd use that. Here's when I wouldn't." In some ways, there are economies of scale in that you hear multiple versions of adaptation, which normalizes the notion of trying it a different way. And, you hear other people saying, "I do it, and I win." It not only eliminates the potential excuses, but opens the door to a range of possibilities. It's also great for teachers to talk about the problems that plague their day and try to solve them with their peers. It transforms it from a lonely job—a job where you're running your own store in the shopping mall and no one ever sees you—to a team sport, which people like. It makes them happier in the work.

**I want to shift gears a bit. Many of our readers are focused on how to run a system better. They are thinking about what kind of system-wide practices can be put in place and what kind of support is needed. What kind of recommendations do you have based on your interaction with districts as to where the big opportunities are for improvement?**

This is obvious to all of us, but when you look at the budget of a school system, it's 80% people. You could get 50% better at some other item in your budget, but it won't have much of an impact. It's really all about cultivating people. So, the first thing that I want to do is I want to build a culture. And I think that has to mean getting people together. One thing I think about all the time, and it's going to sound like an obscure analogy, is the success of microfinance, which has revolutionized capital in the third world and in poor economies. People routinely repay their loans at a rate far higher than any purely financial model would predict. The reason that microfinance is so powerful is people feel accountable to their peers; the fact is that ultimately people feel more accountable to their peers than to authority. So yes, people have to be accountable to authority, but I also want to put them in positions where they're explicitly accountable to their peers. So, if I were a superintendent, I would want to get all my principals together and have them decide, "What are the three most important things we need to work on? What are we going to hold each other accountable for?" Then, whenever we get together, or whenever I talk to you or email you, we're going to focus on how we are doing on these three things. I want to try to make it like a team sport.

One of the smartest principals I know, North Star Academy's Julie Jackson, had her teachers choose from a list of six techniques the three things they wanted to do first. She told them to list them out, hold each other accountable, and just focus on getting those three things down. I think you can extrapolate that idea to the district level. I want people to work together in a culture; I want them

to have a shared vocabulary. I want them to use their shared vocabulary so that they use it in peer-to-peer interactions when I'm not there. And I want them to call their shots together and say, "Here's what our shared purpose is."

**Something else really important in what you just said is the idea of taking long lists and breaking them down to short ones. Prioritization and getting things done is a big challenge when districts have such a long list of things they need to address.**

Doing fewer things better is our approach. Also, I think there's so much to learn about training people and about developing organizations from what we do on the front lines. I find that one of the most powerful tools is scope and sequence. For example, if I have twelve things I want to get done this year, it's far better to break that down and say, for example, "For the first six weeks, these are our two issues, and we're not going to move on to the next two issues until we feel like we've mastered the first two. We're going to attack these two by two together, and we're going to hold each other accountable, and we're going to come back and talk about it."

I think that adults develop a lot like kids do. Just as we teach kids a concept and then come back to the same topic later to reinforce it, we can't just do a drive-by training or a drive-by meeting where you talk about an issue and then expect follow-through. You have to come back to it over and over and over again. You ask people to report back, and you say in a way that's non-judgmental that lets them struggle forward, "How's it going? What are the issues you're facing, and what are the challenges? How can we talk through the challenges you're facing?"

I really believe in Jim Collins' adage that you punish sins, but you forgive mistakes. You want people to be comfortable sharing their mistakes so that they and their peers can learn from them, and we can make everybody better. That's kind of how I've been imagining building a district infrastructure. ▷

I love the notion of a CompStat meeting. I come in. I share the data. We identify what we think the solutions are together. The people on the front lines are more likely to know the solutions than the people who are a step removed from the front line. We buy into our strategy together. We come back, repeatedly look at the data and how we're doing, talk about our struggles and our successes equally, hold each other mutually accountable for it—it's a shared goal—and follow that cycle down until we've won, and then we do it again, and then we practice. Then, what we're really practicing is solving problems as a team.

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**I'd be remiss without asking one last question, which is on the union issue. With regard to collective bargaining agreements, are there any key things that should be non-negotiables for a district in terms of teacher effectiveness? Or, what kind of things would you really want to see in an ideal world?**

I don't want a good teacher to have to spend their life indistinguishable from their least competent peer.

I think the issues that would concern me most are those that interfere with information flow. I feel like opening the information flow so you can

earn the trust of people by giving them useful feedback and making them better is really critical.

Even if your hands are tied from a bargaining agreement, one of the most powerful tools you have is the power of creating a positive culture. So, I'm thinking about what happened in Los Angeles with the publication of the value-added scores. If that's me and I have that data, I'm not going to publish everyone's value-added, but I want to say, "Here's the top 10%." Stress the positive and say, "Here are the 10% of teachers in the district who have done incredible work this year." I think everyone wants to be honored and respected in the building by their peers, and everyone wants to be on that list. I think that's going to make a bigger difference than calling out the bottom 10%.

**Right. That recognition that you're talking about for your top performers is a powerful motivator.**

I would love to be able to pay people differently, but I think we often miss the opportunity to reward people with non-financial compensation. There probably are collective bargaining structures that prevent you from giving people positive non-financial compensation, but it seems like an easy case to make to the union to say, "I want to be able to honor our best teachers and put video up and let the newspapers know so everyone in the city can see what great teachers they are." Then, I've created that positive capital for teachers and instructors.

**Thank you, Doug, and congratulations. The concrete techniques and the scalability of the training is exciting.**



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