

Engaging emerging leaders: Working with young and nontraditional student leaders

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For many youth, the perception that they may be included in the broad category of being "a leader" doesn't always feel natural. Often, the larger population of students in a school identifies or segregates the "leaders" from the others. In their minds, they perceive that leaders are those who run for (and win) student council, lead the athletic teams, or serve on advisory boards -for the principal. In some settings, this student perception may be an accurate reflection of the leadership development efforts of staff and faculty at the school. However, conscientious leadership educators, increasingly sensitive to the immense diversity of characteristics and behaviors of leaders, should be capable of identifying emerging leaders outside the traditional positions, and likewise, develop programs and opportunities that assist those youth in expressing their leadership potential. Most significant in developing the leadership potential of youth is paying attention to two student populations-- young leaders on the cusp of taking on more significant leadership roles, and nontraditional student leaders, individuals who are leaders in their own right yet have not been widely identified or nurtured because of limited opportunities to display these talents.

Working with Young Leaders In some ways, young leaders are a step ahead of nontraditional leaders because they generally have already engaged in some type of visible leadership experience. These experiences may include participation in a school committee, athletic participation through childhood, running for a secondary leadership position, club membership, youth group participation, or attending a leadership workshop. In doing these activities, these students have started to self-actualize whether or not they enjoy taking on the roles related to being a leader.

Depending upon the school culture (positive/negative) and intrinsic or extrinsic rewards of experiences, young leaders are vulnerable to ceasing to go on with developing leadership skills. At this point, it is crucial for adults who work with these youth to take time to expose them to additional leadership experiences that reinforce

the value of being a leader. Most important, these experiences must be meaningful, not simply token, and should require the use of personal skills that demonstrate leadership ability. As a young leader develops greater self-confidence in his or her ability to make a difference in the school and community, the attractiveness of being a leader increases.

Young leaders must have opportunities that not only build upon personal abilities but also provide a safe environment for trying new things. For example, if a young leader attempts to plan an event without support or formalized skill development, he or she likely will become frustrated and step away from future opportunities. Likewise, if a young leader makes a mistake and is not given a chance to reflect on and apply the lessons of that mistake, apprehension about taking on the responsibility of leading will overshadow the rewards that could come from future successes. Adults can greatly affect these emerging leaders by respecting their present experiences rather than wanting them to demonstrate more sophisticated leadership skills than for what they are prepared. Adults can also encourage greater leadership involvement by providing leadership development efforts that reflect how leadership skills apply in daily life and for the future.

Working with Nontraditional Leaders Nontraditional leaders are those who have not taken intentional steps to be recognized as leaders in school. These students are active in volunteering, tutoring others, being a student assistant, or working outside of school; are members of a club without holding a position; or have informal leadership within their group of friends. Nontraditional leaders are also those who may be viewed by adults and peers as high-risk or lacking potential to make a positive difference in school. Most can agree, however, that informal leaders often have greater influence on peer behaviors than student leaders who are insensitive to the broader student population or remain in cliques comprised only of other student leaders.

As with young leaders, it is important to inspire these youth by acknowledging the leadership skills and experiences they have gained through their existing involvement. For example, a student who actively volunteers develops strengths in communication, team work, resourcefulness, dependability, working for the greater

good, and so forth. The simple act of inviting this student to participate in a formal leadership experience such as a workshop or class echoes the value of his or her skills even if they have not been exhibited in school. Many nontraditional leaders will be less likely to participate in leadership activities if they have to develop a campaign or be selected by others, primarily because they tend to recognize their internal strengths and successes as leaders, even if their ability isn't apparent to others.

A latent talent group of nontraditional leaders are those viewed by others as at-risk-delinquents, special needs students, non-attenders, teen parents, and so forth. In general, these teens are overlooked and undervalued with regards to their potential contributions as leaders. Ironically, their innate leadership skills are incredible because they often struggle to survive in a complex environment, with the truth of this environment hidden from the greater awareness of adults and peers. When equipped with leadership skills, at-risk youth become resilient youth who are able to take care of their destinies instead of drifting through school. Again, a simple invitation to participate gives these nontraditional leaders the sense that someone else believes in them.

Suggestions and Action Steps Following are some actions that can help transform the leadership potential of young and nontraditional leaders, as well as inspire these youth to continue on the path to explore more deeply what leadership means in their lives:

- * Develop meaningful leadership experiences that allow youth to self-select for participation (rather than relying upon votes, nominations, or other selection processes)
- * Provide consistent, frequent, and diverse opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles within the communities or organizations most influential to youth (e.g., schools, youth groups, community centers).
- * Respect and be sensitive to the power of pre-adolescent and adolescent experiences and help students relate these to their roles and responsibilities as leaders.

- * Deliberately select different students for leadership opportunities (workshops, conferences, etc.) so that the same students are not repeatedly selected.
- * Involve high-risk youth in school-related leadership roles. Overlooking this population or believing that leadership development should serve as a reward increases the attractiveness of negative social experiences to take precedence (e.g., gangs, negative peer-pressure, drug culture).
- * Take advantage of formerly missed opportunities to develop leadership. Use detention time to conduct leadership skills activities. Challenge the paradigm-who says students must sit doing nothing? Teach a leadership class specifically for emerging and nontraditional leaders, create broader selection criteria for advisory boards, promote leadership opportunities in new and creative ways, and so forth.
- * Develop an understanding of the diversity and cultural differences expressed through leadership behaviors and incorporate different styles into leadership experiences.
- * Empower and allow youth to take on significant responsibilities and leadership roles without expecting perfection. Recognize that everything takes time and leadership learning occurs even when mistakes are made.
- * Encourage all students to develop a cocurricular transcript or portfolio and emphasize the variety of ways that leadership can be demonstrated without only identifying elected or selected positions.
- * Recognize students who demonstrate nontraditional leadership skills through volunteering, taking on greater responsibility in a job, or serving as student assistants, and promote the power of one person or a small collective of individuals to make a difference in your school.
- * Be flexible to learn from spontaneous classroom or group discussions rather than maintaining an over-programmed setting where leadership issues are only addressed by student council or the principal's advisory board.

* Evaluate and explore your own definition and beliefs about leaders and leadership so that you are open to involving a greater variety of students in leadership development efforts, even if it requires additional time to identify and invite students who don't naturally rise to the top.

Using these ideas or other productive efforts will engage these two student populations into developing and contributing their leadership talents more deliberately with others. Ideally, creating opportunities for meaningful participation will increase the number of youth involved in leadership activities, and decrease the tendency to rely on the same students, event after event, class after class. An ultimate outcome of inviting hesitant youth leaders, in addition to providing broader diversity in the views, voices, and visions represented, is to enhance the overall climate and culture for everyone by having a greater proportion of students connected to school-based leadership development efforts.

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