



## Exploring Leadership Skill Development: Adolescents

Kenneth S. Rasmussen, Educational Leadership Chair, College of Education & Counseling  
Marilyn F. Rasmussen, Youth Development/4-H Specialist, College of Family & Consumer Sciences

The future of America is entrusted to today's youth. A promising future is only possible if our young people "learn to be leaders." Youth need to become engaged in civic affairs and community, state, and national issues. But how are our youth preparing for leadership roles in the future? And how are we helping them prepare?

Cynicism and voter apathy among the 18 to 25-year-old demographic group are indicators that adults need to give more attention to the development of leadership in young people. Many people who study leadership believe that leaders are made, not born, indicating that parents and educators have an important role to play in helping youth learn and develop leadership skills.

There is no clear definition of leadership. Or perhaps there are too many. Therefore, it is difficult for parents, teachers, youth workers, and other adults to plan coherent and relevant experiences that foster teen leadership.

The high school years are a time for youth to refine and polish athletic or musical skills and talents and to explore new capacities, such as communication skills in newspaper, yearbook, and debate, and to develop other marketable skills fostered through organizations, such as FBLA, 4-H, FFA, and FCCLA. Teen leadership development is most likely a combination of refining existing talents and testing or experimenting with new skills.

### **A working definition of leadership**

A leader is one who leads. The qualities of individual leaders become the defining characteristics of leadership.

A former U.S. president was judged to be a good leader because he was a great communicator. Inspiring a group to take action is another mark of a leader. Getting a task done and taking responsibility are other characteristics. Leaders have goals and are able to translate those goals into action for themselves and those in their groups.

A working definition of leadership or a list of leadership characteristics can actually be obtained from adolescents themselves in a brain-storming session (1). Teens can easily give examples of people who are leaders, naming individuals from sports, politics, entertainment, hometown figures, or even family members.

Listing their reasons for naming the individuals may be a little harder. By conducting a group discussion with the teens, you will almost certainly arrive at a fairly comprehensive list of what leaders do, and a description of leadership will emerge.

Adolescents will use their own words and expressions to describe leaders, but their responses will contain some or all of the same elements as experts give. What characteristics of leaders and leadership do teens mention?

Their lists may focus on task-related characteristics, such as "drive to achieve, desire to excel, drive for responsibility, enterprise, initiative, persistence against obstacles, responsibility in the pursuit of objectives, and task orientation" (2).

## Developing leadership

Leadership skill development for the 14 to 19-year-old age group requires guidance and direction from parents and other caring adults. But how does a parent distinguish which youth programs offer sound leadership development opportunities for adolescents?

Researchers have identified specific principles and practices that distinguish an effective youth leadership program. Five commonly named principles that parents should be aware of when selecting organizations, programs, camps, extracurricular activities, or special events that seek to foster leadership skills in adolescent youth include (3):

1. Leadership programs should help youth learn specific knowledge and skills related to leadership, for example, communication, teamwork, personal identity, professionalism, and project management (4).
2. Programs should emphasize experiential learning and provide opportunities for genuine leadership. Many organizations have successfully used advocacy projects to give youth competence in planning, organizing and carrying out a practical learning experience. The youth identify an issue or a cause and explore resources to come up with remedies or corrective action.
3. Youth are involved in collaborative experiences, teamwork, and networking with their peers and with adults. Leadership opportunities should originate from partnerships in which youth are in consultation with, in cooperation with, or in true partnership with adults.
4. Relationships with mentors, positive role models or other nurturing and caring adults are available to youth throughout the process. There should be significant and long-term involvement of caring adults to allow youth to form enduring relationships with one or more adults.
5. Youth are made aware of, gain an understanding of, and learn tolerance toward other people's cultures and other societies.

Parents cannot rely only on public schools to provide a broad range of civic education and leadership development.

Often, the only high school requirement is a single-semester course on government, a decrease from three courses required until the 1960s. Budget cutbacks, high-stakes testing in math and reading, political controversies and time constraints inhibit schools from offering more civic education, and most are not equipped to supervise a project which involves youth engagement in the community outside of school.

On the other hand, many youth organizations are geared up to engage youth in community service projects. Community service is now more common among adolescents than any other type of civic engagement. "Youth are volunteering and participating in community activities at unprecedented rates" (5). Parents and educators can build on this trend to involve youth in a form of civic engagement that will help youth build their leadership capacity.

For the parent, educator, or youth development professional involved in this endeavor, these are a few tips for success that can be used to guide community service and advocacy projects (6).

- In forming youth and adult partnerships for the project, it is essential to begin with a meeting to lay the foundation for the working relationship. Facilitate a discussion of adult roles, youth roles, and communicate high expectations for all individuals and for the outcomes.
- Show you care for the teens, the project, the cause, and the experiences that they will be sharing.
- See that participating adults demonstrate enthusiasm for the task, the opportunity, and for the youth/ adult relationships.
- Select a project in which responsibilities of youth are developmentally appropriate, yet challenging.
- Mentoring is essential. Positive feedback, guidance, and encouragement will foster strong relationships.
- Always consider the needs, wants, and expectations of the youth. Check frequently to see if their needs are being met.
- Give youth "real" responsibilities. This facilitates skill development.

- Show your confidence and trust in the youth and their abilities.
- Both youth and adults need to be open to constructive criticism. Adults need to solicit and be receptive to suggestions from youth.
- Make it fun! Informality, humor, and camaraderie will keep the effort on track.

In the past, parents and other adults informally mentored youth by simultaneously having youth at their side at work and expecting them to assume adult roles and responsibilities very early.

In today's world, generations are more cut off from each other, and the current generation of community leaders must deliberately make the effort to help develop youth leadership skills for the future. "Facilitating students' leadership development directly and indirectly helps communities, societies, families, and industries that these future adults will inhabit" (7).

## References

1. O'Brien, J. and J. Kohlmeier. 2003. Leadership: part of the civic mission of school? *The Social Studies* 94 (4): 161.
2. Bass, B.M. 1990. *Bass & Stogdill's handbook of leadership: theory, research, and managerial applications* (3rd ed). New York: The Free Press.
3. Woyach, R. 1996 (Spring). Five principles for effective youth leadership development programs. Retrieved June 30, 2006, from [http://leadershipcenter.osu.edu/Publications/L\\_Link/LL\\_1996/spr\\_96.pdf](http://leadershipcenter.osu.edu/Publications/L_Link/LL_1996/spr_96.pdf)
4. Zeldin, S. and L. Camino. 1999. Youth leadership: linking research and program theory to exemplary practice. *Research and practice: completing the circle. New Designs for Youth Development* 15 (1): 10-15.
5. Gibson, C. 2001. From inspiration to participation: a review of perspectives on youth civic engagement. Berkeley: The Grant-Maker Forum on Community & National Service.
6. Culp, K. and K.J. Cox. 2002. Developing leadership through adult and adolescent partnerships in the third millennium. *Journal of Leadership Education* 1(1): 41-57.
7. Hay, I. and N. Dempster. 2004 (December). Student leadership development through general classroom activities. *Educating: weaving research into practice 2*: 141-150. Retrieved July 19, 2006, from <http://eprint.uq.au/archieve/0000356/>