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# Service-Learning Leadership Development for Youths

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# Service-Learning Leadership Development for Youths

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*Service-learning without intentional leadership development is trivial and shallow, these youthful authors point out. And such leadership development requires adults and young people to work collaboratively in the design of service-learning. When that happens, the outcome will be both profound learning and successful projects.*

BY JOY DES MARAIS, YOUA YANG, AND FARID FARZANEHKIA



**NEEDED IMMEDIATELY:** Young people and adults ready to work together toward community improvement, social change, and learning. Ideal candidates must be willing to take risks, learn, and share power and accountability for success and failure. Benefits include challenge, leadership development, a new perspective on intergenerational affairs, and relationships with people of different ages and backgrounds.

**I**F YOU READ a job description such as this in your local paper or on the Internet, would you apply? Would you describe service-learning leadership this way?

The service-learning field is growing larger and reaching more educators and young people every day. Much has been written about the benefits that can accrue to young people who participate in service-learning. But what has rarely been considered is the potential for *all* young people to develop character, citizenship, and knowledge through *leading* service-learning — not just participating in it.

We have been inundated with research on leadership. Names like Howard Gardner, James Kouzes, Barry Posner, Robert Greenleaf, and Kenneth Blanchard have become synonymous with theories on leadership attributes, leadership practices, servant-leadership, and situational leadership. For the most part, the field of leadership development has concentrated on adults in-

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involved with organizational management and has relied on methods such as simulations and case studies. But young, emerging leaders do not have the same leadership development needs as adults. For young people, the best approach is to develop leadership in *real situations*.

We have found that service-learning is the most powerful approach in youth leadership development. However, if it is such a powerful method of developing leadership, why isn't it better known and more widely practiced? Because it's challenging. It's threatening to the status quo. It allows for mistakes. It means sharing power and responsibility between youths and adults. It means blurring the line between teaching and learning. With that distinction gone, the ageist hierarchy collapses, and many people assume that chaos will follow.

But that is fear of the unknown speaking. Our experiences as emerging service-learning leaders contradict such pessimism. Through service-learning, young people become engaged leaders taking responsibility for solving complex problems and meeting the tangible needs of a defined community. Case studies, simulations, and other typical leadership development methods become tools of the past. Public policy, stakeholder analyses, interpersonal communication, technology, and project management are tools of the present and future — tools that make learning about community, self, and leadership authentic and meaningful.

## Generation X and Generation Y

The authors' generations, otherwise known as Generations X and Y, have suffered from a great deal of criticism. Unlike the baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, today's young people have not been part of a widespread movement that is working toward a major social change. Previous generation-based movements focused on the Vietnam War and on equal rights for women and people of color. Today, with the vast number of issues that surround us, we have not devoted the same degree of attention and effort to any single issue. For that reason, today's young people have been misunderstood and criticized for not being leaders, for not being involved, for simply being lazy.

As a result of the previous generations' hard work for racial, ethnic, and cultural acceptance, today's young Americans live in highly diverse communities. Living with

such diversity brings challenges and responsibilities. Simply living in a community with others who are different does not mean that one respects, understands, or benefits from those differences. Here lies the greatest challenge of any generation. This challenge is unique and requires leadership, involvement, and effort.

But today's young people have stepped up to meet the challenge. A 1998 national survey conducted for Public Allies (an organization dedicated to developing community leadership in young people) by Peter D. Hart Research Associates and funded by the Surdna Foundation of New York City found that 68% of the young people surveyed had been involved in their community in the past three years. Furthermore, 54% said that they participate in service activities at least once a month.<sup>1</sup>

Our perspectives on leadership, community, and social change are also distinct from those of our predecessors. When asked to describe their preferred model for leadership, respondents to the survey overwhelmingly supported leadership that is "bottom up" — that comes from "ordinary people in the community, regardless of their position or level of authority."<sup>2</sup> Contrary to popular belief and media portrayals, we young people are striving to eliminate the barriers that keep us from loving, respecting, and helping one another.

While Generations X and Y do not promote a specific goal within the area of social change, today's young people do share a concern for building, maintaining, and serving community. We are motivated to serve, learn, and lead by issues that affect an aspect of our own lives. This motivation leads us to be involved in our communities as individuals rather than to take part in collective action.

## Acting Like a Leader Versus Being a Leader

Young people face several challenges in their development, growth, and establishment as capable and important leaders. One of the most difficult is the mismatch between what they are told is expected of them as leaders and the manner in which they are prepared to assume such leadership.

In the late 1970s James MacGregor Burns contrasted traditional leadership, which he labeled as "transactional," with a more "complex" and "potent" type of leadership he

called "transformational."<sup>3</sup> These two concepts of leadership lie at the core of the problem we are describing.

When adults list the types of skills, traits, and characteristics they want to see developed in young leaders, they are visualizing transformational leaders — leaders who communicate a vision and inspire action; leaders who may stand alone when faced with controversy. Names such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Gandhi; and Gloria Steinem come to mind. Individuals such as these are uncommon leaders with uncommon experiences. And none of them are young people.

Consciously or not, adults assume that leadership is something one earns or grows into. Thus young people cannot possibly be leaders in the present. They may be ready to rehearse leadership, but not to perform it. Moreover, adults are not willing to relinquish their own positions of power and decision making. These attitudes lead adults to limit young people's leadership development to transactional activities and responsibilities. In typical service-learning experiences, for example, young people are given a project and told the tasks that need to be accomplished. Calling businesses to ask for donations of funds or supplies, scheduling speakers for reflection activities, and distributing fliers about a service-learning project are examples of transactional activities. All these steps must be taken to ensure a successful service-learning experience. But most often, students are assigned to do particular tasks rather than being allowed to *determine* each and every step of a service-learning experience, from community assessment, to evaluation, to celebration.

Simply assigning students tasks in teacher-designed service-learning projects denies them the opportunity for decision making and action planning. It limits their understanding of the interconnectedness of tasks and gives them no sense of the complexity of project management and leadership. Thus emerging leaders have the frustrating experience of being told to aspire to transformational leadership but being deprived of the opportunities necessary to develop it.

## Elements of Effective Leadership Development

Our experiences have taught us that several elements are critical to the development

of effective young leaders of service-learning: youth/adult partnerships; granting young people decision-making power and responsibility for consequences; a broad context for learning and service; and recognition of young people's experience, knowledge, and skills.

*Youth/adult partnerships.* Relationships between young people and adults are usually cast in terms of a traditional mentor/mentee dichotomy. In a mentoring relationship, the adult is seen as the individual with the power — with the experiences, resources, and skills to give to a young person. Mentoring implies a leader and a follower.<sup>4</sup> Partnerships are different from mentoring. Partnerships often evolve from mentoring but offer a mutually beneficial relationship for young people and adults. The success of the relationship is dependent on both parties. Each person is valued because he or she contributes unique experiences, resources, skills, and perspectives, regardless of age. Most important, both parties have the potential to learn from each other. Partnerships in which young people and adults share learning and leadership allow them to become co-creators of community.<sup>5</sup>

Relationships between young people and adults are often manipulative — one party tries to obtain a perceived benefit by causing the other to act against his or her will and possibly even self-interest.<sup>6</sup> Positive and healthy leadership and youth/adult partnerships are not manipulative. They are the result of the development of potential and the achievement of goals. There is no question that morale soars in an environment of good leadership and healthy collaboration.

In effective service-learning classrooms, the teacher moves from being the gatekeeper of knowledge and resources to acting as an ally and a partner in learning and so-

cial action. Good adult partners listen, offer ideas, give students responsibility for positive and negative consequences, and respect the students as people with resources to contribute. Even more important in such partnerships is the sharing of power between the teacher and the students.

*Decision-making power and responsibility for consequences.* Adults in the kinds of partnerships we are describing often face the question "Do I let a problem work itself out — even if it may mean failure — or do I jump in and rescue a service-learning project?" The answer depends on whether the goal is profound learning or a fruitful service-learning project. It is possible to achieve both outcomes, but it is difficult.

Adults must recognize that being a young service-learning leader means taking responsibility for the process and the outcomes. But being able to "let go and let be" seems to be the greatest challenge for adults in service-learning. It takes strength and courage to hold young people accountable and to know when to intervene. In situations where students' safety is in question, adults must step in with caution. But errors and blunders are inevitable and come with the territory of freedom and responsibility. Mistakes and failures provide the greatest learning. Young people aren't challenged to improve when they are constantly rescued or corrected.

*Context of learning and service.* In service-learning, the entire world is transformed into a "classroom under construction." Learning is no longer seen as a scheduled activity from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in which the teacher lectures and the students take notes. The community is no longer seen as just the place where people live. Young people begin to make real connections between needs and resources, learning and service, people and leadership. With a background in service-learning, students have the opportunity to expand and explore their knowledge with others in the community.

The concept of community is ever-changing as learning and action take place. The connections between the self and spheres of influence begin to take shape for each person. And to the learning is added the feeling of being a part of something greater than oneself — the feeling of knowing that one has made a difference; the feeling that one's contribution is important, even critical, to the success of a service-learning project. As a result, students are more engaged in their learning.

*Recognition of experience, knowledge, and skills.* When a young person turns 18, it is assumed that he or she has acquired enough experience, knowledge, and skills to vote. In this instance, young people have an adult citizen's responsibility thrust on them with little or no experience in how to handle it. Leadership in service-learning activities can help to bridge this gap.

But the general attitude toward young people is clear: the shorter the time one has lived, the less respect he or she is entitled to. This attitude must change.

The reality is that we all know and can do different things. The development of service-learning leaders builds on what young people already know and can do well while challenging them to enhance their skills or even to try something different. Though it is true that young people may not have years of experience in recognizing and diagnosing a problem with acceptable and proven methods, a fresh perspective can sometimes lead to new and efficient ways of solving community problems.

## Conclusion

The most powerful aspect of service-learning is the opportunity it provides to all young people to be leaders now, today, in their own lives and in their communities. Our experiences as young leaders in service-learning have had a profound impact on our learning, our decisions, and our perspectives on our communities. Service-learning without intentional leadership development is trivial and shallow. And such leadership development requires adults and young people to work collaboratively in the design of service-learning. Then the outcome will be both profound learning and successful projects.

1. *New Leadership for a New Century: Key Findings from a Study on Youth, Leadership, and Community Service* (Washington, D.C.: Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1998), pp. 1, 8.

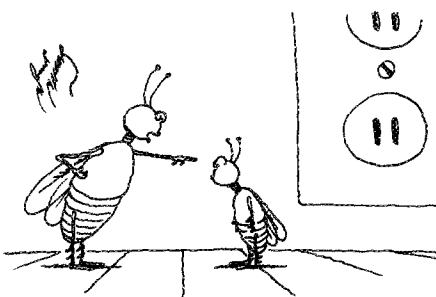
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

4. Loring Leifer and Michael McLarney, *Younger Voices, Stronger Choices: Promise Project's Guide to Forming Youth/Adult Partnerships* (Kansas City, Mo.: Quality Books, 1997).

5. Barbara Marx Hubbard, *Conscious Evolution: Awakening the Power of Our Social Potential* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1998).

6. Danny Cox, *Leadership When the Heat's On* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 12. ■



"If your friends told you to fly into a windshield, would you do that, too?"