

# A SHIFT IN PARADIGM: FROM ADULT LEADERSHIP TRAINING TO YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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*This article accentuates the importance of teaching leadership skills to younger students to help them become great leaders. Leadership is not a rank or a role, but a process based on skills learned through life experiences. It is imperative to begin this teaching process early in life to develop responsible citizens who are well prepared to achieve their goals and guide others to change the world for the greater good. The article also summarizes a framework of youth leadership development which centers around three primary constructs: Leading Self, Leading with Others, and Changing the World.*

The future of our society depends on the quality of leadership development opportunities provided to our youth. Both parents and teachers play a significant role in preparing students for current and future attainments. However, since many of these skills are taught at K-12 school levels, teachers bear an enhanced responsibility. It is understandable that students need to learn necessary academic skills; reading, math, science, social studies, and other educational areas as early as pre-kindergarten, but in the 21st century, the purpose for schooling should be more than teaching students basic academic skills. Education's primary intent should be to evolve students into highly productive and influential citizens who can positively transform their communities.

Students cannot become transformational citizens by merely learning some basic skills. Students need methods that can help them become self-aware, resilient, and, most importantly, visionary. By being self-aware, they know their weaknesses and strengths. By being resilient, the students can learn to endure setbacks and recognize that setbacks are inevitable. By

being visionary, they can envision their destination. The students should know their aspirations and what is required to achieve those dreams. They should learn early in their lives to stay on task longer despite multiple failures and that achieving higher goals is a collective effort. Teaching these fundamental skills cannot be accomplished if nothing is changed in the educational systems. Educational leaders should work to acquire and expand structures to prepare students for the 21st century's intricacies. It should be unacceptable for students to leave schools deprived of the skills needed to prosper in an ever-changing and highly competitive world.

Academic organizations must strategically plan such opportunities where leadership skills can be taught explicitly and learned skills can be applied toward real-life activities. Youth and adolescents need support both from parents and educators to explore their leadership development (Turkay & Tirthali, 2010). Early leadership experiences can be extremely valuable in developing strong leaders (Mortensen et al., 2014), but little research has been conducted on how leadership is perceived by elementary or middle school students. Mortensen et al. (2014) conducted a study on youth who were between the ages of 12 and 19 and participated in the National Youth Leadership Initiative (NYLI), a leadership development program that provided leadership training for one year. Mortensen et al. (2014) sought to understand leadership from the youth perspective.

The notable findings of this study were as follows: Youth believe that anyone can be a leader; youth emphasized that for someone to be a leader, having good morals and qualities like integrity and benevolence are more critical than specific leadership traits. Youth also perceived that leadership is situational and the purpose of leadership is to bring about a positive change. According to them, leadership is not an individual effort, but a collective effort of all involved and leaders influence followers to make the right choices, and instead of directing them entirely, they act as their mentors.

People in administrative positions are generally considered to be leaders, but one must understand that leaders do not need a rank or a position. They can come from any walk of life, and anyone can learn leadership skills. To determine what makes someone a leader, leadership scholars ventured to define leader and leadership concepts for nearly a century. While tens of thousands of pages are written on defining leadership

and leadership theories in the literature, the study on youth leaders is comparatively absent. Mortensen et al. (2014) found the need to extend the invitation to other researchers for more scholarly work to promote a discrete youth-driven perspective of leadership.

During the first half of the 20th century, a fundamental belief dominated that leaders are born and not developed. It was a common notion that some people are born with natural talent and are predisposed to lead. Their life-long experiences were either not known or not considered. Talent is indeed needed to motivate others to attain presumably unachievable shared goals. Later in the 20th century, researchers agreed that one could develop these talents over time by experiencing specific life events. Multiple youth leadership development programs appeared in the United States to address the deficit of youth leaders and to encourage them to be tenacious community change agents (Mortensen et al., 2014). These leadership development programs empower youth by involving them in civic activities and producing self-confidence (Makhoul, Alameddine, & Affi, 2011; Mitra, Sanders, & Perkins, 2010). Many such youth leadership training programs are not tailored to meet the needs of youth leaders because when these programs were developed, youths' perspectives about the program were not sought when these programs were developed (Mortensen et al., 2014). These programs are more focused on developing leaders instead of leadership skills. Most programs are centered on teaching students community service, public speaking skills, or solving school or community issues.

The Center for Creative Leadership developed a handbook providing guidelines on how to develop leadership skills (Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman, 2010). This guide can be used to develop such valuable skills early on in life. There is a discussion in the handbook that although some experiences and personality characteristics can be innate, many human skills that add to dynamic leadership can be acquired. Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman (2010) described the framework for student leadership development that has three main constructs: leading self, leading with others, and changing the world.

### **LEADING SELF**

Self-leadership is essential for individuals to manage their own actions, motivating and leading themselves using particular sets of cognitive

and behavioral approaches. The notion of self-leadership is linked to self-awareness, character attributes, and emotional intelligence. With practice, individuals can control their level of motivation, manage their feelings, and alter their behavior according to the situation. Self-leadership is a concept that evolved from self-management.

Self-leadership begins in life as early as cognitive development starts. It is the ability to manage one's feelings, perceptions, motivation, and actions. Students as young as preschoolers can learn skills for self-leadership. If students can lead themselves responsibly, their academic achievement could increase, discipline referrals could decrease, and schools' overall working conditions could improve. These are the desired outcomes of education and there are unrealistic expectations from teachers that they will achieve these outcomes without any focus on self-leadership development.

### **LEADING WITH OTHERS**

According to Van Velsor et al. (2010), the next construct of leadership is working and leading with others. Working with others is the ability to work effectively with anyone, particularly with people who are different from oneself. In this case, developing cooperative relationships through considering others' points of views while utilizing excellent communication skills is necessary. Leading with others includes having teamwork and collaboration skills. Covey (1989) emphasized the significance of teamwork, stressing that when people synergize, they deliver results a person could not produce individually. Synergy is a higher form of collaboration where team members work collectively toward a dream that seems unachievable. Hence, synergy should be instilled in children. Effective collaboration and clear communication help people in an organization to achieve maximum success.

The skills needed to lead others are interpersonal. This means one knows how to get along with people from all walks of life, handle disagreement effectively, communicate clearly, and build long-lasting, strong relationships. These are valuable skills for students to learn to be able to create high functioning teams and excel in their projects, competitions, and sports. If taught explicitly, these skills benefit people of all ages. Teaching these skills early in life changes them into habits.

## **CHANGING THE WORLD**

Youth undergoing this leadership development experience a “self-reinforcing process” (Murphy & Johnson, 2011, p. 460). Self-reinforcement is a process in which a person controls his behavior by rewarding himself when he surpasses an objective. As one becomes better in leading oneself, that individual is more likely to become involved in leadership opportunities to influence others. This will enhance the person’s leadership efficacy, which, in return, helps the person to impact the world around him positively. The notion behind this discussion is that if leadership training is provided explicitly to all school-age students, it will produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. That means the students will expect themselves and others to behave as leaders; thus, creating an environment of high expectations needed to achieve a higher purpose.

Academic organizations must include youth leadership development opportunities in the strategic planning process and devise an impactful curriculum to invest in the development of responsible and ethical student leaders who are prepared to play a positive role in the future development of society. Multiple leadership developmental opportunities starting at an early age can have a stronger influence on an individual’s later leadership development due to the reinforcement of the content (Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

There is no doubt that parents have a vital part in the cognitive and social-emotional development of their children. Still, educational leaders are accountable for providing skills necessary for students’ future success. Educational leaders can transform the school system so all students are aware of their strengths, improve their weaknesses, combat setbacks, solve predicaments, be tolerant of others’ viewpoints, stand up for what they believe in, and know how to set and achieve goals. These students’ dreams for bright prospects are contingent on the skills learned at school.

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