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Spring 2009

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Preparing Student Leaders to Make a Difference

Adult Guides are Key

By Julia Link Roberts
& Tracy Inman

Some doubters argue, "Don't leaders just develop because they are born with exceptional leadership potential?" Of course, a few do have the charisma and basic skills to be leaders with what seems to be little effort. But more often it takes an adult—you perhaps—to provide them with the information and practice they need to become more effective leaders; in addition many more leaders will emerge when an *intentional* leadership program provides opportunities to learn about and practice leadership.

We know that the nurturing of skill development in athletes is of critical importance for those individuals who will reach their highest performance. The same is true in the realm of leadership skill development. A young person with natural ability can be an outstanding athlete in the neighborhood, but he will still need coaching with lots of specific feedback if he is ever to become a champion. Likewise, a young person aspiring to leadership needs to have opportunities to apply her leadership skills in a variety of situations if they are to be refined and if she is to become a leader who can make a difference. Leadership abilities and skills improve when nurtured, and continuous progress in leadership development pays large dividends.

Is student leadership in your school or organization developed *intentionally* or in a *less-than-focused* way? School and organization leaders often consider leadership development among young people to be very important, and yet they do not have a clear picture of how to nurture leadership and the skills needed for effective leadership. Those who make leadership a priority have a definition of leadership that is agreed upon by all educators in the building or adults in the organization, so a variety of experiences can be related directly to the development of leadership skills.

Whether your role is that of classroom teacher, school principal, district program coordinator, or leader of an outside youth group, your students need a planned leadership program so they can truly make a difference in their—and our—world. Leadership development must be *intentional.*

THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE AT WESTERN KENTUCKY

For thirteen years The Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University has offered the Leadership Institute, a two-day professional development workshop for adults who work with young people. Plans are in the works for a fourteenth professional development session with a focus on leadership activities that can be used with elementary, middle, and high school students. The Leadership Institute is planned to address both the theory and skills of leadership development. Leadership activities are modeled for the educators and other adults who work to develop leadership among their young people.

In these sessions with educators and youth leaders, the debriefing of the experiences is more valuable than the activity itself (although you cannot debrief without the activity). Debriefing provides the opportunity to reflect on what was learned in the leadership activity. Reflection allows participants to digest the experience and to see how that experience contributes to one's learning about leadership theory and/or leadership skills. The activities are the "hands-on component" in leadership development, while the debriefing is the "minds-on" component. Both hands-on and minds-on aspects are essential if children and young people are to develop their leadership potential. When adults experience these same activities, they recognize how powerful they can be for students.

You may not have a formal adult training opportunity in your area, but you can join with other like-minded colleagues to make *intentional leadership training* a reality in your classroom, school, or youth group. In this article we share some of the key theories of suc-

cessful intentional leadership training; in addition, we share activities we've found to be effective in youth development. You will also find useful resources throughout and in the reference section.

A LEADERSHIP MODEL

Various leadership models are found in the literature. Which model educators or organization leaders choose to use will vary; in this discussion, the focus is on "Leadership to Make a Difference Model" developed at the Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University (see Figure 1).

A leadership definition. Multiple definitions of leadership exist, as do various programs for the development of leadership potential. The key for developing leaders who can make a difference is having a definition of leadership that is mutually accepted by the educators or other leaders implementing the leadership program, and that provides direction for all experiences that develop leadership knowledge and skills. So the starting point for developing leadership is knowing where you are going. This focus on a specific definition allows the program to have measurable goals. Without an agreed-upon definition, any activity can be labeled a leadership development experience.

Without a focus, leadership development activities are so scattered that their impact on developing leadership is minimal. Likewise, many learning experiences hint of leadership yet lack focus. A false impression of progress in the development of leadership may be created by the tangential verbal connection of leadership to myriad learning experiences. Or the connection of the learning experience to leadership is assumed but not communicated to the student. Opportunities to develop leadership are missed when there is a weak or nonexistent connection between leadership activities and the intended learning about leadership.

The definition we adopted for the Leadership to Make a Difference Model is, *Leadership is planning and implementing with others to reach an agreed-upon goal*. Without a goal, the action taken to maintain what is going on is management rather than leadership. Simply holding an office does not make someone a leader.

Location. Leadership can be developed in a variety of settings from within a classroom to a location outside of school. Where leadership is learned is not nearly as important as young people having opportunities to develop their leadership potential somewhere. What has to be in place, in addition to an agreed-upon definition of leadership, is that teachers and leaders must know the content and skills they want to focus on to develop young people into leaders. They need to know this content well so they can use examples of leadership, refer to the skills, and provide opportunities for students to use their leadership skills in authentic situations.

GOAL SETTING

Leadership is goal oriented. *Leadership is working with others to reach that goal.* The first step in working with students is setting a goal. Individuals who are working to reach that goal need to have "buy in" for the goal, so it is best to involve them in setting the goal whenever possible.

Learning to intentionally set both long- and short-term goals is critical to leadership development. In fact, the planning step cannot effectively occur until goal setting is accomplished. Usually several short-term goals must be reached before the overall goal of the leadership project is achieved.

An interesting activity focusing on long-term goals is reminiscent of daunting job interview questions: Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years? What do you see yourself doing? Believing? Sometimes for a student to visualize himself in high school or college or even early career opens up new thinking and points of view for him. Somehow putting this in writing brings a seriousness to the activity. The debriefing can be very revealing to the student, to the educator, and to other students.

The character education video series *Big Chances, Big Choices* (Pritchard) and its parent website **goodcharacter.com**, include multiple goal-setting activities. It emphasizes four important maxims for goal setting:

- It has to be important to you, personally.
- It has to be within your power to make it happen through your own actions.
- It has to be something you have a reasonable chance of achieving.
- It must be clearly defined and have a specific plan of action.

The website offers both discussion and written prompts that encourage exploration and practice of goal setting, and permission to use them freely.

PLANNING

Planning is essential in order to become an effective leader. Students need to recognize that whether it be for a classroom project or a school-wide or city event, planning is done at many levels. Karnes and Bean (1995) provide questions to guide the planning young people do to reflect on leadership. They provide a reflective piece that asks the student to list extracurricular activities in which they would like to be involved and strategies for doing so. Planning a campaign speech asks the student to reflect on why they want to run for office, personal strengths, goals for

Leadership to Make a Difference Model

FIGURE 1

the office, and reasons that others should vote for them. Such reflection increases the likelihood that students will seek more opportunities to use their leadership skills.

The next level of planning is determining a project goal, one in which the student is the leader. A useful tool is a planning form that includes several components:

- the goal
- the steps to reach the goal
- a timeline for each step
- the individual or individuals responsible for each step

Such a form works for students planning the leadership project because it builds in accountability as it requires adding details that are necessary to reach the overall goal of the leadership plan. Educators can use this same form as they plan their own leadership plan. In fact, as a final activity at the Leadership Institute, participants complete a planning form to guide them as they implement a leadership program when they return to their homes.

ASSESSING

Leadership assessment may be interpreted on multiple levels. One level is the self-assessment students do when they consider their own leadership skills and potential. A powerful activity that encourages keen reflection and self-analysis is MacGregor's Body Map (2008). After tracing their body outlines on butcher-block paper, students answer a series of questions using phrases, illustrations, quotations—whatever they feel best gets their answer across. For example, for "hands," students answer the question, "In what ways do I enjoy helping others?" For "eyes" they explain, "When people first meet or see me, what do I want them to learn about me?" This exercise can be very personal and powerful.

Another interpretation of assessment in leadership is the evaluation of the leadership plan itself. It's important for students and educators to monitor progress toward the students' goals. A simple three-pronged approach can prove very telling: Periodically asking:

- What?
- So what?
- Now what?

encourages the developing leader to reflect, alter, and refine the plan that allows her to reach her goal.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics or team building is a favorite in developing leadership skills. The Internet alone can provide tens of thousands of activities! For example, **wilderdom.com** describes the "Helium Stick" which is always a source of excitement and discussion. Toe-to-toe, teams face each other as they are given a very simple task: Using fingers only, raise the long rod placed in between your teams to chest level. Amazed and then frustrated faces see the rod move from the floor to their chests to their eyes and then to arms' length above their heads. It typically takes many attempts before they figure out the key. This is a terrific activity to start with because it generates so much discussion from such a seemingly simple task.

Another favorite activity that gets everyone involved is MacGregor's House of Cards (2008). Teams are provided a flat surface and a large stack of index cards. They are told to construct a house of cards—of course without using any verbal communication. Although very simplistic in concept, the results are anything but simple: students have created swimming pools complete with beach umbrellas and floating rafts! Competition is strong as teams assume that they are vying for "best house." The next step proves very interesting as they are told to link the different groups' structures together. The debriefing tends to be excited discussion as they voice a range of emotions from the thrill of agreeing on a concept to the frustration of altering their vision with an attached structure. Once these insights are transferred to the realm of leadership, real learning takes place.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Leaders must develop a plethora of problem-solving skills, being able to vary the method depending on the situation. "Broken Squares" (Endris, 1998) provides tools that can be used in times of stress. Like many of the other activities described, this one develops other areas in addition to problem solving (i.e., group dynamics, communication, and decision-making).

In teams of five, each student is given an envelope holding pieces of a square. The goal is simple; each student must build a complete square without talking. Soon, the students discover that none of the envelopes holds a complete square so that they must trade pieces with each other to perform the task. The hitch is that they cannot ask for them or take them from the others; however, players may offer pieces. Typically there are groups that never complete their squares much to their frustration. This is typically due to their lack of sharing, intense personal competition, or putting their portion of the goal over the importance of the group goal. And so many of them break the rules! Be sure to devote plenty of time to the debriefing as this can be intense.

DECISION MAKING

A favorite activity for decision-making involves moral dilemmas. MacGregor (2007) explores this skill in "Doing the Right Thing." Students are asked a series of "compass questions" intended to guide their decision-making. For example, "If my mom, dad, or other important adult in my life were watching me while making this decision, how would I feel?" (p. 57). Then specific scenarios are described that force students to examine ethical parameters. Discussion over the scenarios must be monitored closely as students tend to become intensely involved in their stances. Addressing Kohlberg's "Stages of Moral Development" in light of the discussions adds another dimension.

Lewis (1998) includes character dilemmas that provide young people with numerous situations on which they can take a stand. Often the discussion brings to light factors to consider that will reinforce or change the stand that was first taken. Of course, students can design their own dilemmas as well.

COMMUNICATING

Communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, are critical to leadership development. Because of their importance, communication activities abound. One fun, yet potentially frustrating activity is "Birthday Line Up" (McLuen and Wysong, 2000). Divided into teams, students line up according to month and day of birthday—but they must do so without any verbal communication. The debriefing of this activity provides additional insight as students describe the methods used, the emerging leaders, and the importance of body language.

Another activity emphasizing the importance of listening is "A Listening and Communicating Challenge" (Joy, 1992). Here students sit back-to-back, one with paper in hand ready to listen and draw, the other with a geometric design in hand ready to describe. Round one is a description with listening only—no questions. Round two involves questioning and feedback. Imagine the improved drawings and the fruitful insight that comes from the

debriefing! Learning about one-way and two-way communication is important in understanding the appropriateness of each for certain leadership circumstances.

Another important aspect to communication is seeing situations through someone else's eyes. Roets' "Different Points of Views" (1997) provides just that type of experience. After a brief situation is read aloud (such as "The snow is falling, light, lovely, and deep"), students are assigned to consider it from various viewpoints. In this example, they are to think about it as a snowflake, a five-year-old, a snow shovel salesman, and a person driving. Although simple, this exercise paves the way for more complex situations.

A final example is "Rumor Clinic: A Communications Experiment" (Pfeiffer, 1981). This engaging exercise explores the distortion that so often occurs in transmitting information. It is especially powerful because five different people relate the same information independently of each other; the debriefing of this activity often involves multiple connections to real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

The development of leadership skills and adding to the knowledge base of leadership are learned when the opportunities to learn about leadership and to use those leadership skills are purposefully planned and taught. Agreement on the definition of leadership comes first; then planning for key learning experiences must follow in order to effectively impact the development of leadership capacity. Leadership is far more likely to develop to a point that the leader can make a difference if the content and skills are explicitly taught.

The Leadership Institute involves educators in leadership experiences that they can use with their own students. They complete the learning experiences rather than just hearing about how they work. In turn, they will lead students through these or similar leadership activities. But leadership activities are only the prelude to being a leader who makes a difference. At the core of the Leadership to Make a Difference Model is "applied leadership." The goal of leadership programs is to develop young leaders who integrate skills with knowledge about leadership. That is what the model is all about—developing leaders who make a difference. ■

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JULIA LINK ROBERTS, Ph.D., is the Mahurin Professor of Gifted Studies at the Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University. She received the first ever David W. Belin Advocacy Award from the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in 2001. She serves on NAGC's Board of Directors and has also chaired its Legislative Task Force. She and Tracy Inman recently published *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom* and also, *Assessing Differentiated Student Products: A Protocol for Development and Evaluation*. She represents the United States as a delegate to the World Conference for Gifted and Talented Children.

TRACY FORD INMAN, M.A., has devoted her career to meeting the needs of young people, especially those who are gifted and talented. She has taught on both the high school and collegiate levels as well as in summer programs for gifted and talented youth. She now serves as Associate Director of The Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, KY. She also serves as writer/editor for *The Challenge*, the award-winning newsmagazine for The Center for Gifted Studies. She and Julia Roberts recently published, *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom* and also, *Assessing Differentiated Student Products: A Protocol for Development and Evaluation*.

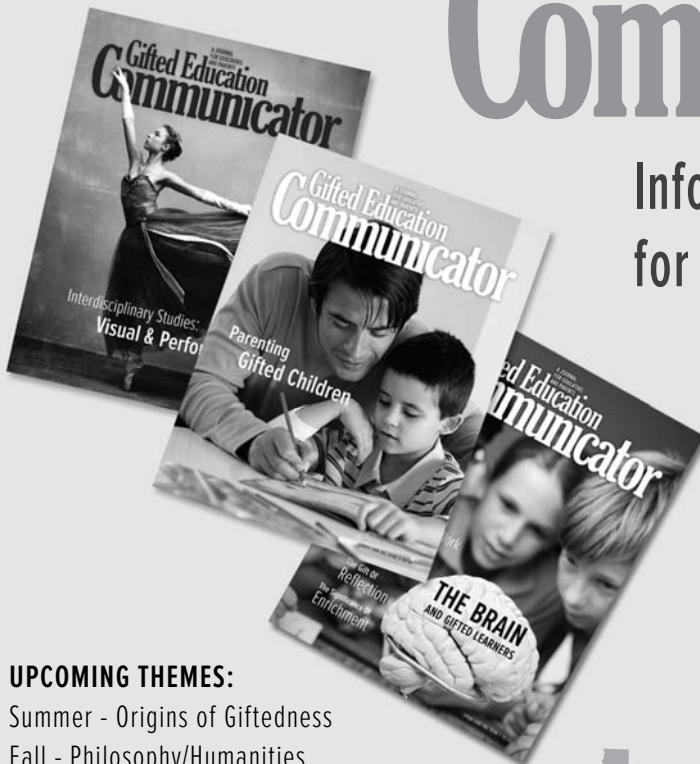# "Mickey's Ten Commandments"

By Martin A. Sklar

1. Know your audience.
2. Wear your guest's shoes.
3. Organize the flow of people and ideas.
4. Create a "wienie" (visual magnet).
5. Communicate with visual literacy.
6. Avoid overload—create turn-ons.
7. Tell one story at a time.
8. Avoid contradictions—maintain identity.
9. "Ounce of treatment—ton of treat."
10. Keep it up (maintain it).

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Editor's note* Martin Sklar is Executive Vice President of Walt Disney Imagineering and Imagineering Ambassador. In February, Mr. Sklar opened the 47th annual conference of the California Association for the Gifted with his keynote address that included the above list of "commandments." Its application to the topic of leadership is readily apparent. The list is included by permission from Mr. Sklar.

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