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## Bringing Leadership Experiences to Inner-City Youth

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## Bringing Leadership Experiences to Inner-City Youth

### Abstract

Leadership skills are essential for young people to feel satisfaction and contribute to society. But how do you teach leadership skills to teens who only have a vague concept of leadership? Service learning offers teens the opportunity to practice leadership skills and reflect on the experience. 4-H Youth for Community Action (4-HYCA) is an after school leadership development program targeting teens in inner-city middle schools. The purpose of the program was to provide opportunities for inner city youth to learn and practice leadership skills in a service-learning environment. 4-HYCA participants actively engaged in problem-solving activities that taught decision-making, communication, and cooperation skills.

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### Introduction

Leadership skills are essential for young people to feel satisfaction and contribute to society (Scheer, 1997). For today's at-risk youth, opportunities to acquire these skills may not be readily available. Many youth-serving organizations serve youth who are primarily from advantaged families (Hobbs, 1999). While 4-H prides itself on providing leadership opportunities to all youth, attracting at-risk youth can be challenging.

Service-learning projects are one method for increasing leadership opportunities for at-risk youth. Service-learning projects offer teens the opportunity to practice leadership skills and reflect on the experience to learn more about themselves. Skills such as brainstorming, decision-making, setting goals, and working with others can be taught and practiced as teens plan and carry out significant service projects. Many studies support service learning as an effective method for teaching and enhancing leadership skills and positive attitudes in youth (Conrad & Hedin, 1983; Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

Experiential learning takes place when a person is involved in an activity, looks back at it critically, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity. In the past few years, research in the area of experiential learning has strengthened this approach by adding several key processing steps beyond simply doing the activity or experience. These steps include:

- Having the participants **experience** the activity--perform or do it;
- Having the participants **share** the experience by describing what happened;
- Asking participants to **process** the experience to identify common themes;
- Having participants **generalize** from the experience to form principles or guidelines that can be used in real-life situations, e.g., life skills; and
- Asking participants to **apply** what was learned to another situation.

Providing an experience alone does not create "experiential learning." The learning comes from the thoughts and ideas created as a result of the experience. This is a "learn by doing" or experiential process. Addressing each step in the process assures a purposeful plan to obtain a specific goal (Bonn, 1999).

Woyach and Cox (1997) identified 12 principles that make effective leadership programs. The first

five principles relate directly to the outcomes or content of leadership programs. The remaining seven principles speak to the process of leadership development. The 12 principles state that leadership programs should accomplish the following.

1. Help youth learn specific knowledge and skills related to leadership.\*
2. Enable youth to understand the history, values and beliefs of their society.
3. Facilitate the development of individual strengths and leadership styles.\*
4. Facilitate the development of ethics, values and ethical reasoning.
5. Promote awareness, understanding, and tolerance of other people, cultures and societies.
6. Embody high expectations of, confidence in, and respect for the teens served.\*
7. Emphasize experiential learning and provide opportunities for genuine leadership.\*
8. Involve young people in service to others to their community, their country and their world.\*
9. Facilitate self-reflection and processing of learning both individually and cooperatively.\*
10. Involve youth in collaborative experiences, teamwork and networking with peers.\*
11. Involve youth in significant relationships with mentors, positive role models, or other nurturing adults.\*
12. Be developed around stated purposes and goals.\*

Woyach and Cox state that few if any leadership programs can be expected to address all 12 principles, yet these principles represent an appropriate set of standards against which programs can be assessed.

### **4-H Youth for Community Action**

Nine of Woyach and Cox's 12 principles (those identified by "\*" ) for effective leadership programs were addressed in the creation of a teen leadership program for at-risk youth in Fort Worth, Texas. With the support from a grant from the Texas Family and Youth Initiative, and in collaboration with the Fort Worth Independent School District and Communities in Schools program, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Tarrant County created 4-H Youth for Community Action (4-HYCA).

4-HYCA is an after-school leadership development program targeting teens in three inner-city middle schools in Fort Worth. The participating schools were chosen for their location and predominantly minority student population. The purpose of the program was to provide opportunities for inner city youth to learn and practice leadership skills in a service-learning environment, emphasizing 4-H's learn by doing philosophy.

4-H Youth for Community Action used an experiential model to teach youth leadership skills. The three 4-HYCA groups were organized as an after-school program. Hobbs (1999) identified transportation as a barrier to participation in youth activities for many minority youth. While the after-school setting eliminated this barrier, it created additional challenges. Participants had just completed a 7-hour day, spent largely sitting desks and listening to instruction. Their energy levels were high, and their attention spans at a minimum. A model that combined experiential education with service learning was chosen to engage the students.

County Extension 4-H Agents and volunteers met weekly with each group of students for 14 weeks. During each weekly session, participants were introduced to a leadership concept, such as decision-making models, and then provided the opportunity to practice that skill using experiential activities.

The key to experiential learning is reflection about what was actually learned during the experiential activity and how that skill or knowledge can be applied to real-life situations. Upon completing the activity, such as the Spider Web (Rohnke, 1985), students were asked how they applied the decision-making model previously discussed. Did they brainstorm many possible solutions and discuss them before attempting to complete the activity?

Following this period of reflection, the teens were asked to apply the new leadership skill as they planned their service activity. In the program, students learned to assess a community's needs and practiced decision-making and problem-solving skills, improving communication skills, setting goals, planning projects, and team building. Table 1 outlines the skills and experiential activities used in 4-HYCA.

**Table 1**  
Experiential Activities for Teaching Leadership

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<b>Concept</b>	<b>Experiential Activity</b>	<b>Application</b>
What Is Leadership? Getting Acquainted	Ball Toss <sup>1</sup>	Team members work more effectively if they know each other well.
Working Together What Are Effective Teams?	Chocolate River <sup>2</sup>	Must have an effective team to complete the service project
Assessing Community Needs Why Is Community Service Important? How to Look at Your Community What Is Brainstorming?	Brainstorming Fun	Brainstorming community service project ideas
Solving Problems 8 Steps to Problem Solving	Solving Riddles	Discussion/brainstorming of how to solve our community problem
Making Decisions 8 Steps to Decision Making	Decision Trees <sup>3</sup>	Choosing our service project
Setting Goals Setting SMART Goals	Goal Mapping Activity setting and mapping personal goals <sup>3</sup>	Setting and mapping community service project goals
Planning Projects Getting Organized Delegating Tasks	Spider Web <sup>1</sup>	Planning the service project What's needed, when, who will do it?
<sup>1</sup> Rhonke (1985), Silver Bullets. <sup>2</sup> Rhonke (1985), Cows Tails & Cobras. <sup>3</sup> Steele, D. (1997).		

Participants were evaluated using the Leadership Life Skills Inventory (Carter, 1989) in a post- then pre-test design. Kohn and Rockwell (1989) suggest that when assessing self-reported behavior changes, the traditional pre-test, then post-test design may fail to demonstrate changes in behavior or knowledge. Participants in educational programs may have limited knowledge at the beginning of a program that prevents them from accurately assessing their baseline knowledge. Asking the post-test question first, then asking participants how they perceived their knowledge level prior to the instruction, eliminates this bias.

Thirty-three teens, or 47% of the program participants, completed the survey during the last class session. Many program participants chose not to attend the final session once the community service project had been completed. While evaluation data are inconclusive, initial data appear to indicate that students did gain some leadership skills. Teens demonstrated significant increases in knowledge and skills in the areas of making-decisions ( $p=4.21$ ) and working with groups ( $p=9.34$ ). Differences were significant at the .01 level.

Combining experiential learning with the opportunity to put those skill into actions is an effective method for teaching leadership skills. Comments from the open-ended questions indicated that the students also developed a sense of pride in their accomplishments. One student from Forest Oaks Middle School stated, "I liked completing the community service project. It made me feel proud to see that I helped the school out." A teacher from Forest Oaks who assisted with the project observed, "I saw the students begin to come together and work as a team."

The students also successfully carried out three significant community service projects in their

neighborhoods. The Meacham Middle School students painted the houses of two elderly women who lived near their school. Students from Dagget Middle School repaired an area of erosion in the park near their school and placed new sod over the area to prevent future erosion. Forest Oaks Middle School received a facelift from its 4-HYCA participants, who rejuvenated the landscaping at their school, earning the praise of teachers and parents.

## Implications for Leadership Educators

Setting goals, solving problems, and making wise decisions are not just skills for leaders, but are necessary skills for leading a successful life. Combining experiential learning with the opportunity to put those skills into action appears to be an effective method for teaching leadership skills. The key to experiential activities being more than mere games to the students lies in thoughtful reflection on the activity guided by adults trained in the process. 4-HYCA is a model that can be implemented by any youth-serving organization, especially those seeking to reach at-risk youth.

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