

## Why Believing in the Importance of Student Leader Training Isn't Enough

by Alan E. Nelson, EdD.

Over the last couple of years, two questions have plagued me more than any others. Quite often they've kept me awake at night and caused me to get up long before my alarm. The first question is, "Why don't people see the importance of identifying and developing young leaders, while they're still moldable?" That question may be obvious because of my commitment since midlife to create the world's finest and only program dedicated to organizational leadership training for 2- to 25-year-olds.

But the second question may surprise you. That question is, "Why do 50-70% of the people who go through our certified Trainer process never launch a module?" These people apply, pay hundreds of dollars, often travel hundreds and on occasion thousands of miles, invest hours in prep work, and then endure a 10-hour intensive day for orientation. Then they return home to put the materials on a shelf, never to train a single leader with LeadNow or LeadWell curriculum. Why?

I got to thinking about that stat, 50-70%. Did you know that 50% of people who finish their doctoral classes are ABD (all but dissertation)? They pay lots of money and invest a lot of time in classes, study, and test-taking, but never complete their degree due to the dissertation. Health club execs report that 50-70% of people who join a gym in January stop attending regularly in the first 90 days.

A while back, I talked to Dr. John Kotter, former Harvard professor who wrote a bestselling book called "Leading Change." Years later, he wondered why 70% of organizations that attempt significant change programs never accomplish them. The question caused him to follow up with one of the best books I've ever read on change, not to mention human nature. It's a small book that devoured me on a flight from California to Washington DC. The title is "A Sense of Urgency."

Sometimes we think people will follow through on projects because they think and say it's important to them. Most don't. The reason often isn't because it's unimportant, but rather because it's not urgent.

When I look at myself in the mirror, all 10-20% extra of me, I see what I'm talking

about. One of the worst things that could happen to me would be for a doctor to tell me, "Hey, chubby, if you don't get rid of 25 pounds in the next 18 months, you won't be here anymore." But one of the best things that could happen to me is for him (or her) to say that. You see, I know I need to lose some weight, but I've gone 10-15 years a bit rotund, so I know I can get away with it for awhile.

Our entire society and those around the world have gone centuries without seriously identifying and training our young leaders while they're moldable. I was under the impression when I met like-minded people who saw the need to develop young and very young leaders that with the right tools, they'd jump on it. But I was wrong. Many don't have a sense of urgency. They don't think society will be much worse off if we don't do it right away, so they never get around to it.

At my stage of life, I've come to the realization that it's just not enough to say developing young leaders is important. It's also *urgent*. We need to do it now—otherwise, there's a very good chance we never will. Something else will take its place.

What Dr. Kotter told me is that businesses are no different from other organizations. In fact, it's not so much about orgs as it is about human nature. As we progress with our work with young leaders in the future, we'll be more and more interested in finding people who see the importance and *urgency* for identifying and developing young leaders. While we applaud everyone interested in our cause, time is of the essence. We can't spin our wheels working with people who merely see the importance of young leader development without sensing its urgency. While that may sound unappreciative and a bit cynical, it is nonetheless a reality of human nature.

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