



Making recognition contagious.

Alan E. Nelson

**I**n the decades that I've worked with leaders, I'm convinced that one of the top two complaints people have of those who lead them is that they're not affirming. Obviously, there are exceptions, but most leaders could easily improve their reputation by raising the recognition level of others.

Therefore, it makes sense that those of us who work with young leaders, help them embrace the value of recognition early. The following is a list of ideas we incorporate in our young leader training curriculum that pertains to affirming others. Use these as you train your young leaders to recognize others around them.

**Students.** Make sure that students affirm each other in each meeting. Learning what it feels like to be recognized is a great way to prime the pump. Some of your students get little affirmation at home. Research shows that even loving parents tend to reduce the number of affectionate interactions as their kids mature. Make up excuses to affirm young leaders for their attitudes, actions, commitments, and progress. Let them practice on each other. Recently we provided training for KIPP 6th grade leaders from around the country. One of the things they did at the camp is encourage students to give another student his/her leader lanyard if they caught the student exhibiting good leading. Catch young leaders doing things well. This is what Ken Blanchard referred to as one minute affirmations. You may want to give a token—such as a ribbon—or wrap a rubber band and a note around a candy bar, and pass them out for little things done well.

**Write notes.** Take time in your meeting agenda to hand write notes to school and community leaders who have direct and indirect involvement with the student body. Perhaps it is a superintendent or a janitor, the mayor or bus driver. This teaches young leaders to recognize both visible and the "invisible people" who occupy each organization and make sure it functions smoothly. Create your own student leadership stationery or note cards, so they know the source of the thanks.

**Celebrate milestones.** A sin of busy leaders is to go from event to event, meeting to meeting, and program to program, without stopping along the way to recognize milestones, small or large. Schedule celebration parties after a big project, to relax and pay tribute to those who played key parts in the process. Be sure to schedule an after-semester and end-of-school-year banquet or recognition party. Take this opportunity to note the team's achievements and then hand out real and made up certificates of recognition for roles, tasks, and achievements. You'll be surprised how many of these end up being framed. Invite the mayor or superintendent to drop by for the actual presentations.

**Bombardments.** This is what we do on family member birthdays. We also do it in staff meetings. Pick one or two people that others bombard with what they like and appreciate about them. Ground rules include: the receiver can't deflect compliments; only say "thanks." Satire is not allowed. Address the person directly. Instead of saying, "Jill is really nice," say, "Jill, what I appreciate



about you is the way you care for other people. It makes them feel special." Encourage everyone to be specific and avoid generic comments. After 4–6 compliments, everyone applauds and you move to the next person or agenda item.

**Model it.** Be sure you're regularly affirming your student leaders for jobs well done, positive attitudes, and time commitments. It only takes one generation to extinguish or spawn new behaviors.

**Give recognition to role models.** Years ago, my wife, Nancy, was a junior high school director for leadership guru, John Maxwell. She had one especially challenging student, "Ken," who disrupted the group and frequently got in trouble. But Nancy saw something in Ken. In fact, Ken looked a bit like her boss, John. One time, she wrote Ken a note, stating her belief in him. More than a decade later, Nancy was speaking at an event when a woman came up to her and said, "You may not remember me, but I'm Ken's mother."

"How's he doing?" my wife asked.

Tears filled the woman's eyes. "Ken is doing well now, but it hasn't been easy. I want you to know that he kept that note you gave him. Whenever he was going through a difficult time, he would take it off of his mirror and read it. I want you to know that you and that note changed his life and I want to thank you."

Max DePree, former CEO of Herman Miller furniture, said that the first thing a leader does is to establish reality. The last is to say, "Thank you." Culturally we perceive it is the team's job to say "thanks" to the leader, but servant leaders realize that leading is impossible without team members. The best leaders consistently say "thank you" and recognize those involved in the process. ■

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## <LEADERSHIP LESSON —Motivational Moments>

### Procedure

Part 1 (10 minutes): Have students sit at desks in a circle. Create strips of paper that have risky activities written on them—one per strip—and pass them out. Instruct the students to read each strip, then try to keep a maximum of five strips that describe something they would feel very comfortable doing. They should pass along the "not so comfortable" strips clockwise in the circle. Students may come across the same activity more than once, so just encourage them to continue passing. At any time they can replace a strip that they have kept with a more appropriate activity. When you call time, if any student has some strips in their possession that they do not want, just collect them.

### Objectives

- To help students discover and share their comfort levels with risky activities.
- To identify steps to help the student body take risks and get involved in student activities.

### Materials

- Poster size piece of paper.

- Markers.

- Copies of the following sheets: Risky Activities (copied and cut into strips—I usually make four copies of a page for a leadership class of 28); My School Ranking Sheet (one for each student), and Learning Log (one for each student).

### Time Required

Part 2 (5 minutes): Read all the risky activities aloud. Ask for volunteers to share which five they kept. Which did they pass along? Did other people in the class choose the same activity? Are any students surprised at anyone's response? Did they learn something new about someone? Discuss the differences between the types of risks and how they can determine a person's leadership strengths or weaknesses.

Part 3 (8 minutes): Pass out the My School Ranking Sheets. Have students rank their comfort level on the given school scenarios (will need to be adapted for a different school and leadership program).

Part 4 (8 minutes): Have students fill out the Learning Log.

### Processing

Part 5 (8 minutes): Conduct a discussion from the Learning Log and the ranking sheet. In what ways can leadership foster growth for safe risk-taking experiences? How does one decide what is and what is not a safe risk? Does moving out of your comfort zone really foster growth? Share experiences where risk taking was good and helped personal growth occur.

Part 6 (15 minutes): Lead a brainstorming session to determine how a leadership class can encourage a student body to take safe risks. As a class, decide upon the five most important things your leadership class must remember to do to help the student body take safe risks and get involved. After the students choose five things, copy them on a poster and hang in a conspicuous spot in the classroom so the students can refer to it as they plan each event.

This lesson was developed by Holly Young and appeared in *More Leadership Lessons* published by NASSP.