



Alan E. Nelson

“Learn by doing.” That’s the motto of Cal Poly in San Louis Obispo, a respected university just south of where I live. I like combining head with hand knowledge. One thing I’ve learned, teaching at the Naval Postgraduate School, is that military leaders, while bright and committed, have little tolerance for theories that don’t play out well in real world scenarios. A weakness of Westernized education is our lack of impetus on connecting what we’re learning with doing life better. That’s why creating robust service projects can be so powerful, especially when it comes to leadership development of your students.

Here are 4 key elements that will turn any service project into one that is truly a leadership training opportunity.

Let the students to pick the project. A majority of service projects are preselected by adults, who then recruit students to do the task. Although this teaches service, it does little to develop leadership, unless the students are actually leading the project. By recruiting student workers, you’re creating followers. Plus, you’re less likely to have committed workers because when it’s your idea, they merely rent it. You want them own the project. They’ll do far more to get their peers involved when they own it than

when they’re merely promoting an adult’s project. Granted, you may need to do some leg work to prep a few workable ideas or even coach along the way, but let the students determine what the project is and then form a strategic plan.

Allow reasonable risks. True leadership involves risks, whether it’s money, time, reputation, resources or failure. Far too often, adults in our culture pave the way for kids, shortchanging their ability to do things on their own. Be sure that there are some legitimate risks involved with the project. Help the students learn the connection between choices and consequences. Don’t make it too easy. Don’t reduce the risk so much that there’s little to vie for in terms of making it happen.

Be sure students are truly leading. One of the most difficult aspects of a leadership project is to develop multiple leaders. Merely putting one student in charge is not sufficient. In our LeadWell training curriculum, teen leaders take turns leading meetings toward a single, large project. Then, the roles of the leaders outside of meetings requires them to share leadership, such as directing a subteam, leading one aspect of the larger

project, and then being held accountable by their peers. Leading involves at least two others, working together toward a common goal. It's more work to coordinate multiple leaders, but the long term results are extraordinary.

Provide pre-, mid-, and post-project coaching. Merely doing an activity doesn't go far enough. Make sure that you're providing coaching before, during, and after the project. Before the students gather to strategize, you may need to talk to one or two who might serve as executive directors for all the leaders. Then you'll want to walk them through a basic agenda, unless they've led projects effectively in the past.

During the planning process, as well as during the event or activity itself, you'll want to be involved as a coach. Don't tell your leaders what to do. Rather, ask them strategic questions in a Socratic fashion, so they can discover their own solutions. Observe what's happening and ask questions that will help the students think like leaders, not mimic behaviors that you're directing.

Then, don't forget to reflect on what went well and what didn't. "What would you do differently next time?" While it feels a bit anticlimactic, it's some of your most productive learning because the students are analyzing from a past perspective. Don't let too much time elapse between the event and the debrief, because the students will forget many of the processes and will not recall their thoughts and impressions as accurately.

Service projects are powerful education opportunities because they involve active learning methods and engage students in learning processes. Savvy leadership staff can utilize these events and projects to develop young leaders. For just a little more investment in time and energy, you'll raise several leaders who can then run projects themselves and be set as lifelong leaders. ■

Alan E. Nelson is a lecturer of management at the Naval Postgraduate School, founder of KidLead (www.kidlead.com), and author of the new leadership book for teens *LeadYoung*. He lives in Monterey, CA.

<LEADERSHIP LESSON —TEACHING VIDEOS>

Procedure: Divide the students into groups of four. Give each group a piece of paper and a pencil, and tell them that their goal is to create the longest sentence they can using the starter phrases you give them. Each person takes a turn adding one word. The sentence must make sense and come to a logical conclusion. The students are not allowed to talk, and they have only 60 seconds to complete the task.

After the time is up, have each group count the number of words they used and write it on the paper. Repeat the activity three or four times and then change the rules. This time each person still has to add a word, but the group may talk and make suggestions. Repeat this twice and see if there is a change in the results.

Sample starter phrases: The cow jumped.... The worm crawled.... A loud crash.... People who are.... The next time.... A woman screamed.... One dark night....

Processing: Discuss the following questions:

- How well did your team do when you couldn't talk to each other?
- How much pressure did you feel when it was your turn?
- How did the activity change when you were allowed to talk?
- Was the amount of pressure you felt different when the group was allowed to talk?

- When you have a problem to solve, does it help when someone gives you suggestions?
- Will a greater number of people always make it easier to solve problems?
- How can people with different backgrounds help solve a problem?
- What could someone from a different culture provide that you couldn't?
- How can different types of people perform better at different tasks?

Objectives

- To recognize that different viewpoints can be helpful in a group.
- To appreciate cultural differences or differences in gender or point of view in group and how they relate to problem solving.
- To show that different viewpoints help solve problems.

Materials

- Paper and pencils.
- A watch with a second hand.

Time Required: Initially they can have as much time as they need to complete the sentence, but don't let any one student take too much time, perhaps 5 seconds each. Then limit them to 60 seconds.

This lesson was written by Mary Leger for the book More Leadership Lessons.