Shaking Things Up!
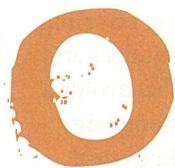
Changing the way student leaders are chosen and developed

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One of the greatest leadership development venues in our society is student leadership. In my work with adult leaders, they commonly reminisced about being in honor societies, elected to student government positions, or selected as team captains or club presidents. Even in youth, society tends to recognize those whom it wants to follow and elevates them to positions of leadership. But the past few years, as I've turned my leadership development focus to youth and primarily preteen and middle schools, I've come across a reccurring concern in scores of schools. The conversation typically goes like this:

Principal or student leadership adviser: "Yes, we have a student government."

Me: "How is that working for you?"

School: "Pretty well. It seems that we have some students who are truly leaders and who know how to get things done, and we have others who were elected because they are popular or get good grades and that's it."

Me: "Do you have students who are leaders who didn't get chosen to your group or get a leadership position?"

School: "Oh yes, but they either lacked confidence to run or they did not get elected because the more popular candidates were picked. We'd like to have students who get things done and impact their peers better, but it seems that those elected often don't know what to do."

Me: "It sounds like you're not fully satisfied with how it's going. Have you ever thought about changing the way students get selected for leadership roles?"

School: "We aren't satisfied, but we don't want to change how we do it. We want the students to be able to pick who they want to represent them."

Even though a primary role of any leader is to serve as change agent, we sometimes find ourselves falling into familiar patterns "because we've always done it that way." The perennial problem of electing popular peers versus effective influencers will not diminish unless we are willing to change the way students are selected for leadership roles. Just as we assist young minds in gaining new academic skills, we also need to help them to identify those with organizational and motivational abilities, not just social likability. So while we want to preserve some of the enduring traditions of student leadership functions, most schools could significantly benefit from improving their processes.

As the well-worn saying goes, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." Even healthy student leadership groups I've seen could improve leadership development on their campuses by tweaking the process they use to identify and elevate those with leadership aptitude. Our role as adults is to provide coaching and wisdom. Giving youth who lack life experience a full say in the election process is not necessarily good stewardship of student leadership opportunities.

Before we jump into some practical solutions for honing our selection process, let's distinguish between leadership ability and popularity. Historically, society wants leaders who possess both charisma and organizational abilities. When a person has both, that person is highly likely to win over others. Unfortunately, when we pick charisma over character and competency, we usually end up regretting our selection.

Three qualities tend to distinguish organizational leaders from the merely popular.

1. **Project initiation:** Leaders tend to combine a balance of task orientation and people skills. Popular students defer to relational interests and are less apt to initiate or manage projects that require organizational skills. Leaders pursue plans and tend to be self-starters, whereas popular students prefer to hang out, have fun, and establish social networks for the sake of expanding their personal brand.

2. **Problem solving:** By nature, leaders go after problems and work strategically. They look at a log jam and spot the problem logs. Yet they're also able to tap the various strengths, interests, and abilities of the group. They are motivated by the challenge of accomplishing a goal or fixing something that's broken. Popular students either don't apply themselves toward team problem-solving, or feel overwhelmed by the process and thus shy away from it.

3. **Political savvy:** Popular students tend to fall into one of two camps: those who have a very distinct sphere of influence and those who do not. Those with distinct spheres establish who is in and who is not, preferring a strong allegiance of a few (e.g., skaters, gamers, jocks). Generalists prefer to get as many people as possible to

like them and are often unwilling to make unpopular decisions. Leadership inevitably causes conflict. Leaders do not fear conflict and tend to be good at negotiating differences of opinions—but they are willing to take a stand even if it means being less popular.

Once we establish a sense of who has strong leadership aptitude and who is merely popular, adults subtly elevate those with leadership prowess. While it would take too much time and space to address all the scenarios of how students are placed in leadership roles, here are three guidelines you may want to consider in improving current process.

1. **Identify and empower:** As early as possible, look for students who are leaders, not just popular or good grade-getters. Talk to teachers and coaches. Develop a list and then begin planting the seed of formal leadership in these students' minds. If you're in a middle school or high school, don't waste the first year merely looking for leaders. Create a farm club system among your feeder schools so that you have an idea of who's coming your way. (You can use the free Social Influence Survey at the KidLead Web site.) There's no need to lose sixth or ninth grades merely waiting for those with leadership aptitude to emerge. If you have an election process, encourage those with influence skills to run for an office. Pull them aside, look them in the eyes, and say, "Jesse, I think you'd be really good in this role. I think you should consider it. If you want some help in knowing what to do, I'll gladly do that." Include parents and guardians in the process, too. Make it a team effort, since some leaders lack the confidence to apply, especially if they haven't been the most popular in the past. Many potentially strong student leaders are unaware of student government or honor society opportunities.

2. **Elect and appoint:** In some schools, adults influence the nomination process, but most of those I talk to do not. They rely fully on students nominating each other or submitting their own names as candidates. If you rely fully on the election process, you'll often get stuck with an inept team that wastes time and accomplishes little, simply because you have allowed a flawed process to remain unchanged. Although we use elections in the U.S.

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government, we also rely on a number of appointed positions. Even popular talent shows on television are resorting to a combination of trained judges and the call-in voting system. That avoids a very talented person with star quality being axed from the show because a less talented person gets a sympathy vote from the public. Consider ad hoc roles that school administrators appoint, or reserve certain positions on your student groups in addition to those chosen with traditional methods. This improves the chances of a critical mass of leaders who can then leverage the influence of the more popular team members. This is more natural when you've developed a leader pool, as previously mentioned.

3. **Train and coach:** We can't assume that budding leaders have a clue about what to do. While many of them will intuitively know, intentional leadership training should be a part of any student leadership body. That is the onus of our work at KidLead, an executive-caliber training system that provides a significant amount of leading experience in a short time. But if you do not have access to a program like this, you can provide other training opportunities. Buy a "training games" manual or look for these on the Internet. Don't just do team-building activities, because they alone don't hone leadership skills. Appoint an individual to lead a team of peers through an activity and then debrief the leader's influence constructively, giving everyone a chance to be the designated leader. Ask Socratic questions such as, "What's one thing your leader did well?" "If you were leading, what is one thing you might have done differently?" "If we had it to do it over, what could we have changed?"

The best replacement for the word *change* is *improvement*. Your goal is to improve student leadership, which may mean modifying the selection process. With a little tweaking, most student leadership groups can elevate the number of leader-oriented students involved. If we're unwilling to change our processes, we're not practicing what we're preaching: leadership. 🗝

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