

WHEN THINGS AREN'T GOING WELL...

Alan E. Nelson



Although young leaders are sometimes stellar examples of good citizenship, respect, and responsibility, even the best of them at times act out in potentially offensive and irritating ways. When teen leaders push back on adults who lack sufficient leadership abilities themselves, they can be quite intimidating. How many of us have spent a few restless nights, replaying a previous day's tense conversation with a young leader who failed to use his or her influence in a positive way?

Developing young leaders is not for the fainthearted. You have to be on your toes, exude a velvet-covered-brick attitude, and a resilient self-esteem. But we need people like you who'll help these young influencers use their abilities in constructive ways. Here are three primary things I've found most strategic when you need to discipline student leaders.

1. Young leaders need understanding. Before we get to "what" to do, we need to push the pause button and think in terms of what undisciplined young leaders need first; understanding. Young leader discipline begins between your ears as an adviser. When you see a troublemaker, rebel, or obnoxious, break-the-rules student, you'll treat them as such. The Pygmalion effect is pervasive in young leader development. Go back to thinking about the awkward pup, knocking over the lamp, before you blurt out a verbal condemnation or worse.

2. Treat your young leaders the way you'd like to be treated by a superior. Most of us answer to someone else, either an administrator, principal, superintendent, department head, or board. There's a significant change in psyche that occurs between years 12 and 14. When we pushback on childish behaviors from teens as you might a ten year old, you'll offend them, much like you'd feel if your superior treated you in that manner. Responses such as, "If they're going to act like a kid, I'm going to treat them like a kid," are more about your emotional intelligence than

theirs. Again, push the reaction pause button and think, "Okay, how would I want to be treated as an adult, if my superior confronted or reprimand me?"

3. Facilitate discipline, not punishment. Young leaders desperately need self-discipline. If and when they don't learn it as young people, when character is still somewhat pliable, chances are they'll end up imploding and worse, perhaps doing jail time, because power tempts us to misuse it. Leaders are dealers in power, a toxic necessity required for leading. A powerless leader is an oxymoron. Future employees, stock holders, and family members need people like you to help future leaders learn self-discipline. Healthy discipline does that far better than punishment.

Establish the ground rules up front. Obeying the speed limit is easier when signs are posted. When you have a new group of student leaders or when a new member joins the team, this is a great opportunity to go over expected behaviors. Conflict is a result of unmet expectations. When you proactively state your cultural norms, you buy the right to hold people accountable when they deviate from them. When you don't state them or make them up as you go, it's far less effective. Examples of these may include: We listen to each other and don't interrupt; We honor each other by what we say and how we say it; We respect one another by being on time.

Communicate your needs in a firm but honoring manner. Although they don't like it, leaders respect a person who can establish healthy boundaries. "Jesse, here's what I need from you..." "Kelsie, I do not accept being treated with that tone of voice. I am more than happy to talk to you, when you're willing to respond to me respectfully." If you go down the road of "I'm the sponsor and you're not." "I'm in charge around here," you've lost the war, if not the battle. Young leaders can smell fear and insecurity a mile away. This will not endear you to them and once you've lost their respect, it will be difficult to regain it.

You are vital to society, because without your strategic use of discipline, young leaders will grow up to become older leaders who abuse power.

On behalf of the future society, thank you for disciplining your young leaders when they need it.

Connect consequences with choices. While I was writing *KidLead: Growing Great Leaders*, I interviewed several national leadership development experts, people such as John Maxwell, John Kotter, Stephen and Sean Covey, and Ken and Scott Blanchard. I wanted to know not only how they were raised by their parents to be leaders, but also how they raised their children. In the case of the Coveys and Blanchards, I had the opportunity to interview both father and son, separately.

I asked Scott Blanchard what it was like being raised by a leadership guru. He said, "You need to understand that my Dad's book, *One Minute Manager*, didn't become a bestseller until after I was in college. But I hated the way my dad disciplined me at the time. I much preferred how my friends' parents punished them, with restrictions, curfews, and being yelled at. If I got in trouble at school and had to go down to the Principal's office, I knew that when I got home, I'd have 'the talk.'"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Dad and I would sit at the kitchen table and he's say, 'Scott, what do you want to do in life?'"

I knew that he and mom went to Cornell University, so I'd say, "I want to go to Cornell like you and mom, and then become a successful businessman."

"Okay," Ken Blanchard would respond. "So how is that decision you made at school today going to help you accomplish those goals?"

Scott explained, "That sort of conversation went on, time after time. I hated it then, but I realize it was great. I use it on my own kids today. They hate it too, but I know it's the best for them."

This is a teen version of the "love and logic" approach to parenting, but it's extremely important when developing young leaders, because it helps them realize that with their choices eventually come consequences, good or bad, depending on the decisions they make. This is empowering and burdensome, as they gain a sense of responsibility for their influence.

Punishment involves inflicting pain, in hopes of extinguishing a negative behavior. But punishment is temporary, situational, and tends to be short-lived. In other words, when the pain or threat of pain goes away, the person will revert to the same behaviors. Removed from your watchful eye, leaders who have been punished and not disciplined, will tend to error again.

Disciplining young leaders well is not easy or enjoyable, but is very important. It requires significant emotional intelligence on your part and often lacks immediate gratification. You are vital to society, because without your strategic use of discipline, young leaders will grow up to become older leaders who abuse power. On behalf of the future society, thank you for disciplining your young leaders when they need it. ■

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<LEADERSHIP LESSON>

Objective: An icebreaker for any leadership topic or activity. It can be adapted to a specific topic. It can also specifically help with a later discussion of leadership characteristics and responsibilities.

Materials: Paper or plastic bag, board to record results on and paper.

Time required: 10-15 minutes if used as an icebreaker; a class period if used to generate an outline for further discussion

Procedure: Students are asked ahead of time to bring something to the meeting that they can contribute to a grab bag. The items will be used for a discussion.

The items are placed in a bag and someone has to begin and discuss how the object relates to leadership. For instance, a pencil might relate because a leader has to "make his or

her point" and has an eraser, because every group and leader makes mistakes. The concepts that are developed are put on the board and recorded on paper.

That person then returns the item to the person who brought it and they select an item.

Processing: The ideas that come up can be discussed by the group briefly, and they can describe how they might relate to their job in the coming year. The group can also work with this exercise for a longer period and brainstorm and think of some of the skills required of a leader: communication skills, organizational skills, time management, interpersonal skills, goal setting. Have students think about those skills and come to the next meeting to talk about which ones they want to develop and why. They can also discuss which skills the group should develop.