Stepping in Early to Grow Great Leaders

Alan E. Nelson

Think of the names of three leaders, preferably ones you know personally.

How old are they? Chances are that none of the leaders you have in mind are under twenty-five, and I can almost guarantee that none are under fifteen. Why? Although there is much talk these days about developing more and better leaders, few people take the development of young leaders seriously. Most people consider leadership development primarily an adult activity in which emerging leaders between the ages of twenty-five and forty are identified in corporate cultures and sent to executive training programs. But if enough effective and ethical leaders are to be developed, people need to think significantly younger.

Forrest Gump's momma always said: "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." My father, however, told me that life is like a roll of toilet paper—the less you have left, the faster it goes. After more than a decade of leadership training with adults, my midlife pondering made me wonder how the return on investment in leadership development could be increased. In addition, the seemingly endless stream of corporate, political, and faith community leadership scandals catalyzed my thoughts about the importance of leader character formation.

Editor's note: In Focus is an occasional series that takes close looks at specific topics of importance to leadership and leaders.

Years ago, while I was completing a doctorate in leadership from the University of San Diego, I enrolled in CCL's Leadership Development Program (LDP)®. Keeping that stellar experience in mind, I wondered what it might be like to create a robust leadership training program for children. I began experimenting with the process of executive-caliber leadership training that included character and competency skills. The result was four years of program prototyping involving more than a hundred preteens.

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ESTIMATING APTITUDE

My colleagues and I initially focused on preteens, ages eight through twelve, because moral psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg have suggested that character is predominantly in place by the age of fourteen. In the Jewish tradition, the age of majority, when a person is responsible for his or her actions, is generally thirteen for boys (bar mitzvah) and twelve for girls (bat mitzvah). A related Christian tradition is confirmation, and the rite of passage to adulthood among male Australian Aborigines is the walkabout. Thus we established fourteen as the upper age if we hoped to train children in ethics in the context of leading.

Then we began examining the minimum age at which children could be taught leadership content. We found that if a child displays leadership aptitude, by the age of ten he or she is sufficiently developed cognitively to learn many of the sophisticated social skills required in leadership, such as team building, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Aptitude is the ability to learn something, and it usually predicts how quickly a person will learn and how much he or she will enjoy learning. The theory of multiple intelligences, developed in 1983 by Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University, lends to this explanation.

To estimate leadership aptitude, we designed an assessment called the Social Influence Survey (SIS). This is a twenty-five-question, multiple-choice instrument—much like a 180-degree survey—that an adult responds to regarding a child. The reason for using adult responders is that preadolescents are not sufficiently self-aware, so we rely on people who have seen the child in social

settings. (The SIS is free and online at www.kidlead.com. Those who click the "parent" button receive an automated summary of their assessment.) Because natural leadership ability tends to emerge in early social settings, the assessment is a formal approach to the intuitions of teachers, coaches, and parents who often recognize children who are more influential among their peers.

An exception we discovered is that sometimes teachers confuse academic excellence with leadership. Students who get high grades and are compliant are sometimes deemed leaders, but when placed in leadership settings many of them do not gain the respect of their peers. Conversely, students tagged as troublemakers are sometimes noncompliant leaders, using their undisciplined abilities to disrupt teaching time and steal attention away from the teacher. Although the SIS can be used for children of all ages, our primary use was to identify ten- to thirteen-year-olds with leadership aptitude.

We do not claim to predict leadership success later in life, but we do recognize the 10 to 20 percent of children with heightened leadership aptitude who thus have the ability to learn leadership skills faster than others and to enjoy this learning more. The enjoyment factor is important because few extrinsic benefits are available for preteen leaders. We require two completed SIS forms to be submitted with applications to the LeadNow training program, and only one can be submitted by a relative (the intention being to balance parental bias). This form also serves as a diagnostic tool for benchmarking participants and later as a posttest to measure improvement and aid in improving the training curriculum.

So, whereas corporate life tends to elevate those with superior leadership abilities or potential, we relied on feedback from adult observers for estimating leadership aptitude in preteens. Lower-scoring students often opted out of the training at the end of the initial eight-session training module. Higher-scoring students, however, seemed to thrive on the training, and parents reported their children's anticipation of participating in the other three training modules. Many educators and developmental experts acknowledge age ten as a significant milestone for cognitive development. We discovered that with aptitude and active-learning methods, these older preteens can learn leadership principles.

LEARNING BY DOING

We developed a list of leadership qualities from a variety of research articles and my personal library of seven hundred books on the topic of leadership. The list was narrowed to sixteen qualities and analyzed for patterns and categories. About half of the qualities seemed to reflect character issues and the other half issues related to competencies or skills. Each of these two groups seemed to fall into two subgroups as well. In character there were values (ethics, integrity, responsibility, and commitment) and attitudes (honor, confidence, servanthood, and optimism). In competencies, relationships (communication, recruiting, team building, and conflict management) and decisions (power, vision, strategy, and dealing with change) emerged as subcategories.

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The calendar for most kids centers around the school year, so we tried to design a training module to fit a typical semester. Our prototype work resulted in an eight-session module, because of the number of distractions that educators and parents reported at the beginnings and ends of semesters.

Nearly all of our training methods are based on active learning, resulting in a learn-by-doing strategy. Therefore there are no chairs, desks, textbooks, or lectures. We use the acronym LEAD: Learn, Experience, and Discover. The American Society for Training and Development teaches corporate trainers active-learning methods. But we selected this approach primarily because preteens are concrete thinkers, transitioning toward conceptual thinkers. Therefore they are most apt to understand a concept when it is experienced and then identified by a trainer or coach, while the experience is still fresh.

If you watched the reality TV series *The Apprentice*, you saw the aspiring Trump executives take turns leading their peers in projects. Each LEAD activity is a microproject lasting fifteen to twenty minutes, during which the kids take turns leading their team in the activity. Each team consists of four to six children, coached by an adult. The coaches are trained not to speak more than 25 percent of the time, and of that amount 75 percent is to be Socratic—teaching by asking strategic questions such as, "What's working well?" and, "What can we do to improve?" The activities begin with strategizing, often include restrategizing in the middle, and always end with a coach-facilitated debriefing in which the team members discuss how things went.

At least two teams are required to make a club, as many of the activities involve teams competing against each other, which creates a sense of pressure. Some activities use time as a motivator, and others use performance and improvement. These scenarios, although short and synthe-

sized, provide real-world examples of what it is like to lead given a goal, limited resources, and a group of people who need motivation, organization, and direction.

BALANCE OF SKILLS

The core of each club session consists of three activities, usually with a balance of cognitive skills (thoughtful problem solving), micro-motor skills (craft or hand oriented), and macro-motor skills (athletics and relay races). This format allows those with different learning styles to experience their preference. The variety keeps the children engaged, a requirement because the training typically takes place after a day of school.

Each of the eight sessions in the initial module was created around a ninety-minute template. A typical club session looks like this:

BrainWake. A five- to ten-minute activity, such as a relay race, designed to arouse the brain neurologically in preparation for learning.

Leadership challenge. Review of a fifteen- to twenty-minute take-home assignment from the previous club session, which a parent has signed.

Concept. A short phrase summarizing the leadership principle, using sign language for kinesthetic learning along with a concept card and symbol (tactile learning).

Movie clip. Two to four minutes of a preteen or family movie that depicts a leadership quality, helping students recognize leadership in media and culture.

These are followed by three LEAD activities and a review.

Although the contents vary in each club session, the template provides a familiar rhythm that holds the children's attention. After the forty-eight hours of training, a young leader will have experienced nearly a hundred leadership mini-projects.

We found that kids with higher SIS scores typically enjoyed the training more than those with lower and midrange scores. Scores of 3.5 and above (on a 5-point Likert scale) are considered strong, 2.8 to 3.49 are on-the-bubble, and below 2.8 is what we respectfully refer to as TBD (to be determined). We found that those with stronger scores tended to feel frustrated when it was a lower-scoring student's turn to lead. Plus, the lower-scoring children often felt embarrassed or frustrated because they did not know what to do even when provided ideas by the adult coach.

The overarching discovery has been that adults have set the bar far too low in the area of youths' ability to learn leadership skills.

In talking with people about LeadNow, one question nearly always comes up: "Do you tell kids they can't be in the program?" Part of the reason for this question is the American myth that people can become whatever they want to be. The other part is legitimate concern about labeling a child who has not had significant experience in leadership. As a result, we ask our trainers to try to fill program slots with applicants who scored highest on the SIS and also to make sure there is a critical mass of these children in each club. The issue is one of fit—whether the program fits a child, not the other way around. Lower-scoring applicants may be encouraged to wait a year or so to work on leadership skills at home and allow for more emotional development, but we do not tell parents their child is not right for the program.

Following the initial training module, the kids on each team are encouraged to develop a leadership project on their own as a group. This activity is facilitated by the trainers but not led by them. For example, one team of eight children decided to raise food donations for a local Salvation Army food bank. Within a month they had donated three-quarters of a ton of food in the middle of summer—a significant accomplishment, according to the Salvation Army, because donations tend to decline during the summer. Three newspapers and two television stations reported on the project, so the young leaders also experienced being interviewed by the news media.

In addition, we developed parent and teacher training, knowing the influence of these two groups on leaders while they're young. Because schools are often leader-averse, we train educators on how to identify young influencers and create leader-friendly classrooms. For parents we teach similar skills for identifying aptitude, and we also train them to think more like leader-coaches and not just as parents, in order to fan rather than douse the flames of leadership.

SOME SURPRISES

We hoped for behavioral change in the young leaders who went through the training, and were excited about the results. But three surprises emerged.

Self-image change. The Pygmalion effect became evident as kids began being treated like leaders and experienced the training activities. Parents and teachers have reported on behavioral and attitude changes after one or two of the module sessions. That their kids are beginning to think of themselves as leaders has been a common theme of parents' comments.

Culture impact. Leaders typically form their own social circles. But when you bring them out of their

continued on page 24

Staying Ahead of the Chaos Curve

Edward M. Marshall

When my two sons received their black belts in *ninjutsu*, a Japanese martial art, they had to recite the Code of Mindful Action. In this code there is a statement about standing tall like an oak tree, with your feet rooted deep in the soil, so you can withstand the pressures of life. The code gave my sons confidence and faith in themselves. They could face anything. They were grounded.

At work, individuals face enormous pressures. The chaos of the marketplace is often complemented by the chaos of the workplace. If only we could be grounded all the time, like an oak tree.

Where does such grounding come from? Sometimes it is simply in the DNA of the organization—for instance, a solid institution with a long and storied history. Sometimes it is found in a leader who has had a steady hand on the tiller. Often, however, such grounding is just not there, and there are consequences from that lack when one faces the twists and turns that chaos brings to the marketplace and the workplace. If only each of us had a way to be consistently grounded, what a difference it could make in our effectiveness. If grounding were in our own DNA, then each of us could withstand the pressures of what could be called the *chaos curve.*

Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

ROCKING OUR WORLD

It has become a cliché to say that we live in troubled times—we are reminded daily by the financial markets, unemployment, foreclosures, an unstable economy, and gasoline prices. This is the chaos we live in. And it produces the chaos curve—the volatility in our self-confidence that results when events outside our control rock our world. When we find ourselves running *behind* the chaos curve, we are in constant firefighting mode, reacting to the pressures of the day, not planning for the long-term future, and driven by our competition. We lose perspective. The urgent trumps the strategic. We may lose confidence in ourselves and find ourselves just reacting to forces that are largely beyond our control.

If only each of us had a way to be consistently grounded, what a difference it could make in our effectiveness.

The chaos curve is evident in how people deal with the realities of the marketplace. Certainly in the auto industry, these realities have struck home with a vengeance. The chaos curve is also very present in the workplace. When we see our companies being sold off in parts, merged, acquired, integrated, right-sized, or reorganized, chaos takes its toll. We may feel as though we have lost the ground we stand on. We may have lost relationships. We may have lost our history. How should we operate and function in an environment where we can count on nothing and have come to expect that everything may change in a nanosecond?

How can we address these challenges so that we are rooted in the ground, like an oak tree?

ONE SURE SOURCE

Where does grounding come from? For some it is in their spiritual beliefs. For some it is in their work or even in their title. For others it is in their families or personal histories. Although the source of grounding may vary from person to person, there is one sure place where grounding can come from for each of us—from within. We each have within ourselves powerful and often untapped resources of strength, courage, dignity, honor, commitment, passion, service, willingness, and creativity. To become grounded, we can simply look inside our own minds and hearts.

Our values and principles. These are the timeless things we know to be true and that withstand the pressures of any given day or moment—things like integrity, respect, and honor.

What we believe. These are the fundamental beliefs we have about

ourselves, the world, our families, and our lives. About right and wrong. About love and fear. About the glass being half full or half empty.

What we know to be true about ourselves. This includes who we are, where we came from, our histories, our training and education, our experiences, and what we have learned about ourselves from these experiences. Again, we own these. They are solid ground. They are our DNA. No one can shake them or take them away from us.

What our dreams are. This is where our imagination gets to roam free. It is our creative self that gets to imagine what we want to do with our life. Here we have choice. Here no one says *no.* Here we find affirming ground to stand on.

What we are prepared to do to live our dreams. Last but not least is our spirit, our will. This is the ground of determination that says, *Chaos, you cannot stand in my way.* Here we get to make realistic choices about how to spend our time, our money, and our energy. This is where our feet hit the ground.

So, when the chaos curve strikes, you don't have to just react. You can find your ground to stand on deep within yourself. And standing on *that* ground, you can face anything—just as an oak tree does.

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Stepping in Early to Grow Great Leaders

continued from page 22

groups to meet each other, as we do in our training, there's an initial jostling for position before they bond. This building of rapport spills over into the larger organization as the leaders gain confidence and work together. Reports have been coming in on increased positive peer influence and decreased classroom disruptions.

Verbal articulation. Adult trainers and coaches have noted how profound many of the children's verbal responses are. One theory for this is that in addition to their aptitude and training, young leaders have very little to unlearn. They also have little to fear in terms of political fallout, so they are willing to take risks in speaking up about their ideas.

The overarching discovery has been that we as adults have set the bar far too low in the area of youths' ability to learn leadership skills. When adults see a budding leader, they'll often make a remark such as, "Someday you'll be a leader," suggesting that leading is something adults do, not kids. In our culture we continue to spend billions of dollars on child entertainment and athletics and other development of skills that in general will not be significantly used in adulthood, whereas there are practically no concentrated leadership development programs for children. Most programs referred to as developing leadership skills in children involve community service and character development, not true leading. Plus, practically no research exists in the area of child leadership.

A HEAD START

The power of intentional, concentrated leadership training for preteens is that you give them a ten- to twenty-year head start. You get to leaders while they're still moldable in character and yet developed enough mentally and emotionally to learn essential skills. Moreover, some top universities no longer base enrollment on grade-point averages and SAT scores alone but are also looking for applicants who have had early leadership training.

Imagine a world filled with effective, ethical leaders. What if organizations vetted job applicants for leadership skills before making the hiring decision, thus reducing the risk of failure and the expense of development because the new hires are already proficient leaders?

The organizational strategy of merely hoping that the leaders they employ possess sufficient character is faulty. The term *ethicacy* was coined to describe the interrelatedness of leadership ethics with efficacy. In the past, ethics were considered a preferred option but not mandatory. Character development was relegated to the realms of faith and parenting. But given the recent and obvious ethical debacles costing billions of dollars in lost investments and stock price nosedives, it has become more evident than ever that leader character affects the bottom line. It is a stewardship issue. The time to develop leader character is while it is still malleable.

Although we are just beginning to investigate the dynamics of young leader development, we believe that if the world is to have enough effective and ethical leaders, serious leadership training and development must begin at a much younger age than is currently the case.

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