

# What Educators Should Know About Student Leadership Development

## *An Executive Briefing*

By Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D.

Educators are the best-positioned professional group to change society at large, but not for the reason you may think. The single most significant impact on history is leadership, good and bad. While education is vital for individual and cultural growth as a whole, social psychologists recognize that leaders make up a small percent that wields a disproportionate amount of influence. By identifying and developing leaders while they're moldable, educators can multiply social transformation as a part of the educational process.

At midlife, I came to the realization that investing in adult leadership development was a low-return investment. Adults rarely change significantly. So we began prototyping an executive-caliber leadership training system for young leaders, discovering that kids exhibiting aptitude were cognitively developed by the age of ten to learn sophisticated social skills of leading.

Schools are poised as potential leader incubators, since they provide the most significant environment for leaders to influence their peers. The key is for administrators to look beyond typical academics (and even arts and athletics programs) to also use them as a means for young leaders to learn how to exercise their influence gifting.

Accomplishing this requires educators to think more like leaders themselves and less like managers. In the classic article "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?", Abraham Zaleznik delineated the psycho-graphic differences of those adept at leading from those good at managing (Harvard Business Review, 1973). While both are needed in organizations, the two strengths are rarely found in the same individual. Because of the sheer administrative complexities of schools, most principals and deans find themselves inundated with managerial tasks as opposed to leading.

Managers by nature tend to avoid risks, focus on steadiness, and seek compliance and compromise. Leaders, on the other hand, often embrace risk, tend to disrupt status quo, and are non-compliant by nature. Personal and professional wiring are neither good nor bad, but do impact the process of student leadership development in schools.

Here are three ideas for educators who are interested in developing student leaders, regardless of their demeanor.

1. *Recognize the importance of specifically developing students gifted at leading.* Education may be your main purpose, but don't overlook the importance of specifically developing students with enhanced leadership aptitude. Multiple intelligence advocates recognizing diversity in aptitudes and gifting. Seize the opportunity to identify and develop leaders while they're moldable. Although it may not be in your job description or fit in the normal curriculum requirements, find a place to intentionally develop your budding leaders.

2. *Understand that merely calling something leadership does not make it such.* Because the term leadership is culturally popular, we're afraid of being left out if we're not gifted at leading. This is unfortunate. Character, self-esteem, and presentation skills are valuable qualities for everyone to have, but they are not in and of themselves "leading." Of the 700 books I owned on leadership, only a few even defined the term. Most "leadership" programs I've seen are primarily service, character education, community, and team building, but not leading.

3. *Develop a robust leadership training program that is continually improving.* The field of leadership development has exploded in the last three decades. Unless you've trained specifically in this area, you may want to investigate professional resources. While being a step in the right direction, home-grown leadership programs typically lack depth and efficacy. Take the time to become educated on the best materials available.

Educators are in a unique position to change history by intentionally developing those gifted at leading while these influencers are still moldable. Finding room for this during school hours and facilitating robust co-curricular enrichment programs that target social catalysts is strategic. Typical academic curriculum, arts, and athletic programs do not provide what young leaders need to develop their unique potential. *If you want to change the world, focus on leaders. If you want to change leaders, focus on them when they're young.*

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