

Keeping Your Leaders Leading: Helpful Hints On Managing Leadership

by Kyle Wiemer

It is the age old tale. We have all seen our students so excited about earning a position of leadership. At tryouts, they would do literally anything to serve you and your program. This feeling, however, does not last very long. These once inspired leaders become unmotivated and frustrated. Their enthusiasm to lead is not sufficient to overcome the enormous responsibilities of their position without the help of you, the educator.

Reality can be a sobering, if not overwhelming, condition for students to handle. Perhaps they did not realize the pressures and expectations associated with leadership. Maybe they find themselves emotionally and physically drained and can no longer be an effective leader. What do we do in these situations? The following contains helpful information to keep your bright leaders from losing their "spark".

INITIAL SUPPORT

I believe the most crucial time for leaders is in the beginning of their tenure. It is a time of adjustment for not only them, but also for the organization and you. In an effort to avoid frustration and confusion from the onset, it is your job as a director to establish a sense of trust. It is important to empower new leadership giving these students the opportunity to be innovative in their position. Naturally, you may set some guidelines and expectations, but do not be afraid to embrace ideas even if they are not yours. This gives leaders a sense of trust and ownership in your program. In addition, be careful when you critique a new leader. Do not chastise him/her in front of the entire group. Save it for a private conversation. If our leaders clearly see that you are behind them in front of the rest of the team, their chances for a successful tenure are greatly enhanced.

Most new leaders are confused about the parameters of their role. What is their job description? What are they allowed to tell other students? Are they allowed to discipline? How far should that discipline go? Will new ideas be welcomed? Personally, this is the hardest adjustment when stepping into a new position. I encourage you to define every facet of their leadership roles and have them clearly explained

in writing. Also, conduct a meeting with your entire leadership team so everyone is clear on their duties and responsibilities. An established chain of command is essential as well. Although all of these aspects are important, however, they don't mean anything if they are not enforced. The execution of this plan is often where leadership fails. For example, this article is great to read, but if nothing is incorporated into your thinking, what was the point of reading it?

STARTING ON THE RIGHT FOOT:

- ◆ Establish a sense of trust.
- ◆ Be open to new ideas.
- ◆ Critique with sensitivity to timing and location.
- ◆ Define job descriptions in writing.
- ◆ Hold an initial meeting to discuss everybody's role.
- ◆ Establish a chain of command.
- ◆ Consistently execute your leadership plan.

I cannot stress enough the importance of instituting these initial steps. You will lose most of your leaders' motivation in the first few weeks if you do not. For a successful season, jointly work through the adjustment period, communicate, and define roles. These are the keys.

COMMUNICATION:

Communication between directors and leaders is ESSENTIAL. Your leaders will work better if an open communication channel is emphasized. As a director, you must be the one to establish these lines of communication. Quite often, students avoid communicating in an effort not to bother their director. Or, it may be they don't feel their director is approachable.

However, if the advisor initiates the conversations, in a short time, these student leaders are likely to feel more comfortable with them and with their own position of authority.



ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION:

- ◆ Initiate conversations.
- ◆ Be approachable.
- ◆ Demonstrate an interest and ask questions.
- ◆ Schedule weekly meetings and include your goals, evaluations and critiques.
- ◆ Listen to your leaders.
- ◆ Gauge feelings.
- ◆ Remain open-minded.

Communication in the initial weeks is crucial. At this stage, initiate conversations with your leaders **DAILY**. Don't wait for them to come to you! Most new leaders do not want to show signs of weakness. However, if you are the one to initiate communication by asking questions and demonstrating a real interest in the development of your student leaders, they will also become comfortable you and more likely to seek your guidance and opinions.

Once the season begins, have regular scheduled meeting times with your leadership team at least once a week or more. These sessions need to begin with you sharing information. This information should include: the goals for the week, your evaluation of the recent successes and failures of the leaders, and suggestions and guidance for the future. Then, open the discussion to the entire leadership team. Everyone in the group should give a report on the same things you have spoken about. This is key! If your leaders feel as though they are accountable and that their opinions are important, they are more likely to remain committed week after week. After everyone has spoken, perhaps focus on more personal questions like the groups' general feelings and issues causing any dissension or frustration. The more you can discern about how the group is really feeling, the better.

These meetings will not only provide useful information, but also give you some assessment on your management and performance skills as a director. One of the most valuable assets of any good director is to remain open-minded. You will learn just as much from your students as they will learn from you.

BURNOUT:

Leadership, by its very nature, places a great deal of stress on students. Think of how much stress we endure as directors. Then, imagine having to deal with all the struggles of adolescent years. This is the reality of what happens in our programs. We often think our students are invincible and expect them to demonstrate a great deal of enthusiasm every day. **WRONG!** Realistically, you cannot expect our leaders to be in great spirits every moment. If you do, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. However, if you incorporate some of the points of this article, low morale and burnout in your group will be reduced.

GOAL SETTING:

Do all of your students know your intentions for the group? If they were asked, would more than half respond with the same answer? These are eye-opening questions most directors don't think about. It is also a great way to motivate your leadership and enhance your program.

First, every program must have a mission. What is the overall objective of the group? Every student, teacher, parent, principal, janitor, and grocery store clerk should know why your program is so important to the students and community. **EVERY** student should know this mission and should be able to recite it at any moment of the day, literally! Post this mission all over your classroom, make t-shirts, bumper stickers, and posters reiterating this mission. Why have a program if it doesn't have a purpose? Constantly recite this mission to keep students motivated and remind them why they are in the program.

Second, your program needs goals for the year. What things do we want to accomplish as a team? This can range from the simple to the most complex. There are two things to keep in mind. One, make sure that each goal is realistic and obtainable. If your program placed last in a competition out of 50, for example, it is not likely that you and the students should set the goal to win this year. Be more realistic, perhaps top ten or twenty is more practical. Second, make sure **ALL** of the students, not just leaders, have input when goal-setting. They should not be only your goals but reflect everyone's ideas. This facilitates "ownership" and commitment. After all, this program is for the students! Again, post these goals along with your mission statement everywhere you



can. Make a chart that will indicate progress made throughout the year. This chart is tangible evidence showing the group leaders and members how much they have accomplished, or how much harder they need to work.

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known is vital.*

Finally, make sure to include “short-term” goals that should be accomplished on a weekly or monthly basis. Too many times, team objectives, although identified by the director, are not realized simply because the director has not ensured that his/her students fully know and understand them! The team members and leadership cannot be expected to accomplish goals that have not been internalized by them. Each one of these daily and weekly goals should work in tandem with your yearly goals. One could say “This week’s goals are _____, because it will help us accomplish this yearly goal.” When students understand the “why and how” of goal-setting, they are much more likely to appreciate the importance of these objectives and work toward reaching them. This will also eliminate the age old question “why are we doing this?” As I have said two times before, making these known is vital! Create a list and have students check them off every day. This allows the group to follow its progress every day, not just at the end of the semester or school year.

If all goals are set by the group with the guidance of your leadership as a member of the board, students in your program will become committed to their attainment. Keep leaders and team members involved with this process as much as possible. Remember, communication is the key.

SHOWING GRATITUDE WITH SPONTANEITY:

Too often, we get wrapped-up in our normal daily routine and forget about the importance of providing a much needed spark of excitement and enthusiasm. Weekly meetings, while extremely helpful, need a little spice every now and again. This is the time for the unexpected to “kick in”.

As directors, we need to encourage ourselves and leaders to step outside of our comfort zone. We often don’t show our students that we have a human side to our lives. It is essential to occasionally take a break from the norm and do something our students do not expect. This can be accomplished in many

ways. As a teacher, you must use your skills to keep students motivated. It can be as simple as rehearsing things in a different order or at a different time of the day/night or even conducting a silent rehearsal where no one including the director can speak.

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Have you ever considered doing something nice for your leaders or group? Something as simple as surprising your students with food and a movie instead of having that extra evening rehearsal can make the difference. For the daring and bold, perform a funny skit with the rest of your staff for your students. I have even seen directors take a pie in the face from all of the team members. Spontaneity is a good thing. While I’m not encouraging taking a pie every week, once in a while, a little craziness can be very beneficial.

The suggestions I have addressed are the most valuable advice I can give you. They will serve as great motivators for your leaders and all of the members in your program. The most difficult task as a director is providing the commitment it takes to stick to them. Remember, the initial spark of leadership and motivation comes from you! Sometimes reading the goals of the group, communicating with students, and spontaneity can motivate us just as much as our students.

SETTING GOALS:

- ◆ Define your mission for team and community.
- ◆ Set realistic and attainable goals.
- ◆ Rely on entire team, including leaders, to help set yearly goals.
- ◆ Chart progress.
- ◆ Set short-term goals (daily/weekly) to aid team in internalizing main objectives.
- ◆ Make it fun.

