Exemplary Youth Leadership Series: Challenge the Process[1]

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Introduction

This publication series is designed to outline strategies and experiences to expose youth to and engage them with leadership concepts. In this publication, students will try on aspects of the third practice of exemplary leaders: challenging the process (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). Two quick, low-cost activities are included for implementation with youth and adults working with youth. These activities are best suited for students ages 10–18. However, modifications are included for each of the activities to allow for different group sizes, ages, and abilities of the youth involved.

Challenge the Process

Leaders are often the individuals to step up and tackle great challenges. The ability to identify and accept challenging opportunities is a key component of challenging the process (Kouzes & Posner, 2018).

The first commitment of this practice has leaders "search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve" (Kouzes & Posner, 2018, p. 14). Frequently the best experiences are those sparked by adversity. Identifying a problem, issue, or oversight in one's life or community takes ingenuity. Once leaders have identified a problem, they are often inspired to find a solution. Leaders seldom wait for specific instructions before implementing their original solutions. They take charge and create a better solution based on the task at hand.

Leaders must also "experiment and take risks by consistently generating small wins and learning from experience" (Kouzes & Posner, 2018, p. 14). The implementation of innovative solutions requires a team. Leaders must present grand challenges in small, accomplishable tasks to maintain a productive team culture. Once followers are on board and understand the direction, they must be reassured success is possible through achievable goals. The best way to do this is by learning from experience. Learn what has been done in the past, adjust for the situation, and prepare for a positive outcome.

Activities

Community Challenge—Students will identify a challenge their community faces and propose solutions.

Materials: Paper and pen

Group size: Divide a large group into sections of three or four.

Instructions:

1. Allow students three minutes to think independently about their community and the issues they see.

2. Have students brainstorm together to create a comprehensive list of challenges they have identified in their community.

3. Ask students to discuss the following question: What does our community do to combat these problems? (Students can use their smartphones to research community programs, or they can ask adult leaders if they are unsure.)

4. Finally, direct students to talk about how they would solve one of these problems that exist in their community.

Wrap-up Questions:

1. Shout-out some challenges we have noticed in our community.

2. How do we think our community does in solving these problems?

3. If we do not step up and tackle these challenges, who will?

4. What are some solutions we thought of to help combat these problems?

Facilitator Notes: This activity illustrates the importance of reflection when dealing with challenges. When leading the debrief, it is important students are aware that each community and experience has a unique set of challenges. It takes leaders to step up and ensure the challenges are being addressed. A potential point of difficulty with this activity is that some challenges are not able to be fixed by just one person or people in general. Be prepared to explain how grassroots change is possible and what can and cannot be impacted on an individual level.

Path to Success—Students will practice implementing immediate feedback.

Materials: 40 paper plates or pieces of paper

Group Size: Any can work, but fewer than 20 is best.

Instructions:

1. Place the paper plates or the pieces of paper on the ground in an 8×5 grid.

2. The goal of this activity is for students to walk through the "path to success" on the ground.

3. There is only one path to get to the other side successfully. As the leader, you will tell students when they have stepped off the correct path.

4. Students may step from plate to plate left, right, ahead, or diagonally.

5. Only one student can walk across the path at a time. Once a student steps on the wrong spot, they must go to the back of the line.

6. Students will need to pay attention to the people ahead of them so that they do not step on the same incorrect plate as the person in front of them.

7. This activity must be completed in silence. The only person who can speak is the person facilitating this exercise.

8. Once the path has been solved, all students must cross the path successfully.

9. Ensure that as the facilitator you have a copy of what the correct path looks like. An example solution is:

O X O O O

O X X O O

O O X X O

O O O X O

O X X O O

X O O O O

O X X O O

O O X O O

O = plate

X = path

Modification: If a student has a mobility challenge, they can have a designated stepper who will follow the path they vocally instruct.

Wrap-up Questions:

1. How did that go?

2. What did we notice about each person trying to get across the path?

3. How did it feel when we made a wrong step? What about the correct step? What about making a wrong move that someone else had already made?

4. How can we make sure our team is on the same page when we are tackling a challenge?

5. Why is it important for each person on a team to be working together to achieve a goal?

6. What are some ways we can work better as a team when trying to accomplish a task in the future?

Facilitator Notes: This activity demonstrates the power of teamwork when addressing complex challenges. When debriefing the activity, be sure that students understand their role in the activity as one small piece of a larger challenge. Some students may be confused with the role feedback plays in this syndicated scenario. Often in real-world leadership challenges, we do not immediately know if the choices we make are correct. A potential point of conversation could surround how we receive feedback in real-world scenarios.

Summary

Students will engage with the third practice of exemplary leaders—challenging the process. Leaders often find challenges, but they must implement solutions. These two activities help students illustrate the idea of identifying challenges and working with others to solve the problem at hand.

Reference

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2018). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for becoming an exemplary leader.* San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.