



PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Student Leadership: Hit or Miss?

by Dave Sippel

One evening my son came home from youth group with an application to become part of the student leadership team. He was excited and a little anxious, too. I encouraged him to fill it out, as I believed that he would learn a lot from the experience. I offered my support as he worked his way through the application. One of the questions was, "How active are you in the youth ministry?" He wrote his answer down very quickly. When I asked what he had written, he read it back to me. He had confidently stated, "I have been to everything so far!" Here's what I haven't told you. This was the first month of my son's 6th grade school year. He had been in the youth group for only three weeks, and he had been to everything so far. What a great answer!!

It's been four years since that day and he continues to participate in youth group and on the leadership team. I've enjoyed watching him grow and lead others. Over the years I've worked with lots of different student leaders and used several different leadership models. Leadership initiatives are typically born out of sincere intentions, but many of them are doomed to fail. I've consulted with nearly 100 churches over the last six years and I can't tell you how many times I've heard a student share, "We used to have leadership teams. I am not sure what happened to them."

Here are four thoughts on student leadership that I think are important:

1. **Student leadership is wallpaper, not concrete.** Leadership teams are born out of healthy systems. They are not a strategy to become healthy. Adult youth leaders tend to give leadership back to the youth when things aren't going as well as they should. It is as if we're saying, "Let's ask the kids what they want. That'll work." That's like asking someone who has never been married to teach a marriage workshop. Thank goodness our schools don't hand education back to the kids in the classes. Feedback from the youth is often helpful, but this strategy will not lead an unhealthy ministry to restoration. The reason most student leadership initiatives fizzle out is simple. There is not a healthy foundation in place to implement new ideas or even facilitate regular meetings with the new student leaders.

2. **Welcoming and atmosphere should be the primary focus of a new student leadership initiative.** In the book *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries describes atmosphere as, "The culture, climate, and ethos that sustain the health of an organization."^[i] Most leadership initiatives tend to foster or nurture the current climate of a youth ministry. In other words, if your ministry is not very welcoming, a leadership council is not likely to change that. The ability to welcome others is a basic Christian principle that can modeled and replicated. This is where real leadership ought to begin. Most of the time leadership initiatives begin with an application or an election when really it should begin with observation. When we observe that one of our youth can repeatedly step outside of themselves to welcome others, we can then ask that youth to step into other leadership roles. Mark DeVries sums this up quite well in *Sustainable Youth Ministry*:

"The most profound student leadership programs happen not when students are asked to plan the calendar or evaluate the quality of this or that program, as a student council might. Traditional approaches to student leadership might give students power, but they fail at a basic level. They fail to provide students with the life-on-life, uncomfortable ministry experiences that allow them to feel awkward enough to inspire their growth and effectively catalyze a culture of welcome in their youth ministries."^[ii]

3. **Student leaders tend to form a clique when left unchecked.** The last thing your youth group needs is another clique, even one with good intentions. When we ask youth to become part of a special team we have, in a sense, asked them to set themselves apart. We need these leaders to stay engaged with the general population at youth group, but they will instinctively seek each other out when they attend activities. We all do this, adults included. Your leaders will just need a frequent reminder of the chief role that they play. They are climate-change experts, and we need them to strategically share that gift with others.

4. **Allowing students to plan an event will lead to them being more invitational.** When they're ready, and when your ministry is becoming more welcoming, feel free to ask your established student leaders to plan an upcoming event. Give them the tools that they'll need and some parameters to work within. You'll find out that they are more likely to invite their friends to events that they've planned. Inviting a friend to an event is risky business. If it's not fun they lose some credibility with the friends that they dragged to the event. They naturally trust their own efforts more than they trust ours. So, when they're ready, give them something fun to work on.

Before sending his disciples into the world, Jesus sat for a meal with his followers and then proceeded to wash their feet. Jesus knew that his followers would be more effective missionaries if they understood a key leadership principle. Extending ourselves to meet the needs of others is where leadership begins. Our youth need to understand this principle, and they may need to see it for themselves. Your youth ministry can grow through student leadership initiatives, but they must be constructed in the right progression. Ask them to care for the least, last, and lost. Only then will they have the impact that you're looking for.

[^{\[i\]}](#) Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 53.

[^{\[ii\]}](#) DeVries, 173.

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