

Developing a Community of Youth Leaders

An important part of your mission is developing young people into leaders. How do you do this? What kinds of insights, skills, and experiences do young people need to become leaders, and how do you facilitate that process? The answer to these questions is the focus of chapter two.

These larger questions can be broken into four separate questions:

1. What are the developmental needs of youth that Exploring is designed to meet?
2. What are the goals of our relationships with youth?
3. What do we mean by *leadership*?
4. How do we develop leadership?

Question One: What are the developmental needs of youth that Exploring is designed to meet?

Adolescence is the process of becoming an adult, of finding a place within society and within a peer group. During adolescence, young people choose values and lifelong commitments. The difference between adolescence and adulthood is that these choices and commitments are still in the process of being made.

The following opportunities help young people develop habits, skills, and commitments for a developmentally healthy life.*

- ▲ To participate as citizens, as responsible members of society
- ▲ To gain experience in decision making
- ▲ To interact with peers and acquire a sense of belonging
- ▲ To reflect on self in relation to others and to discover self by looking outward as well as inward
- ▲ To discuss conflicting values and formulate their own value system

- ▲ To experiment with their own identity, with relationships to other people, with ideas; to try out various roles without having to commit themselves irrevocably
- ▲ To develop a feeling of accountability in the context of a relationship among equals
- ▲ To cultivate a capacity to enjoy life

The Exploring program is designed to help meet these developmental needs. As an Advisor, your responsibility is to recognize that, just like adults, Explorers are “works in progress.” What they are now is not what they will be next year, next month, or next week. Exploring provides a place where development happens. We can enjoy the company of the Explorers as they are now, while looking optimistically toward the future.

Question Two: What are the goals of our relationships with youth?

Another way of asking this question is: What do the young men and women in your post need from you? What kind of relationship promotes their development?

Think about how you would like to be treated by someone you consider a mentor and a friend. That is a model for the Advisor-Explorer relationship. Explorers are looking for a competent person who can provide a unique, interesting, challenging, and safe experience. At the same time, they would like to be treated as friends or peers.

Explorers need someone who will regard them as competent, even when they need help. Just like adults, they need to be trusted, they need respect, and they need you to listen.

Explorers are looking for signs from you that the program is fun. If you enjoy what you do, they are more likely to enjoy it.

*Conditions described in Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth by Gisela Konopka.

Question Three: What do we mean by *leadership*?

Leadership is one of the primary qualities that we hope is developed in Exploring. The word *leadership* has been used to mean many things. The way we use it in Exploring is simple.

Remember the mission of Exploring? The mission of the Exploring program is to provide experiences to help young people mature and to prepare them to become responsible and caring adults. Explorers are ready to explore the meaning of interdependence in their personal relationships and in their communities. The goal of all Exploring activity is the development of leadership in each post participant. As an Advisor, a post committee participant, or consultant, your role is the leadership development of the post officers. The officers lead by working toward the leadership development of Explorers.

Every Explorer post must decide what its goals are and how it is going to carry them out, and then actually do it. These activities require leadership of two kinds. One set of leadership skills is focused on getting things done. Explorers learn how to make decisions, how to plan activities, and what is involved in actually being responsible for doing a thing.

Another set of leadership skills is focused on relationships between and among Explorers and officers. A good leader learns the value of working cooperatively with other people, making activities fun, communicating well, listening, and all those qualities that make relationships work.

Question Four: How do we develop leadership?

The two best ways to learn leadership are to see others exercising leadership and to actually practice leadership. In Exploring, both are possible. Every Explorer sees other Explorers, officers, and Advisors exercising leadership. If this is done right, they will learn by exposure to excellent leadership role models.

The other way, learning by doing, is easy to imagine for Advisors and officers. By being placed in a position where they are responsible for activities and other people, they have to learn to be a leader.

But what about everybody else? Here is where we return to our understanding of the purpose of Exploring and the meaning of leadership. Exploring is about the development of post participants, specifically their leadership skills. To develop leadership in all Explorers, they must be provided with opportunities to be leaders—to plan and carry out activities and to make relationships work. Explorers

who aren't officers can be activity chairs or serve on activity committees. They also are responsible for supporting post programs by working on the development of relationships with other post participants and actively participating. While doing so, they develop leadership skills.

Leadership is not something invested in just one person or a small group of people in the post. Each activity requires a variety of leadership actions. These different leadership functions can be shared among several post participants at the same time.

Learning Through Experience

Explorers learn by doing, by active participation. The best way to learn is by trying something, not by watching someone or being told about it. Explorers learn how to work on computers, how to teach, how to make paper, how to repair a fence—not by reading or hearing about it, but by doing it. Being involved means that they will be more interested, more challenged, better motivated, and more likely to remember the experience.

Explorers also learn how to be leaders, not by watching, but by doing it. Explorers learn to make ethical decisions, to plan an event, to communicate, or to encourage others by being in a position where those skills and actions are necessary.

Reflection

Why Do We Reflect?

We can make our experiences more meaningful and effective if we reflect on them. In Exploring, reflection is simply the process of the Explorers talking about their experiences immediately afterward.

Why is it important? Reflection helps make sure that Explorers learn from their experiences. If an individual is confused about what happened or misinterpreted an event, reflection helps correct the misunderstanding.

Reflection provides an opportunity for everyone in the group to have input into what happened and into the next event. Unless we plan times during which everyone gets a chance for input, it is possible that those individuals who are less assertive or confident might never say anything, even if they have valuable insights.

Reflection allows everyone to hear another's perspective. Even though the group participants might have done the same activity, each individual will have a little different insight or experience about that activity. By sharing that with other people, Explorers learn to be confident in their own contribution. They also learn to listen to and think about the way other Explorers think and feel.

Reflection provides opportunities to develop skills in thinking about and making moral and ethical judgments. Because the topic of a reflection often is the relationships between group participants, moral issues frequently arise. Explorers must learn to think about the ethical implications of their own behavior, and their responsibility to others.

Reflection improves the quality of activities and experiences. Because post participants have the opportunity for input, each activity will be more successful than the last, if the suggestions are taken seriously.

Finally, reflection helps develop a caring community in the post. Through listening to others and understanding them, post participants will be more likely to care about one another's well-being.

How Do We Reflect?

Most groups find it helpful to sit in a circle during a reflection. One person facilitates the process by asking questions. The first few times it is easiest if this is an adult. Eventually, the Explorers will become competent facilitators.

As the facilitator, it is important that you pay attention during the activity. You might notice things to which you will later want to draw the group's attention. Look for demonstrations of skills and positive actions as well as potential problems.

There are three simple steps involved in reflection:

First, ask questions about what happened. We do this because not everyone might have experienced the same event in the same way. Ask questions like "What kinds of leadership were exercised here?" or "Who took leadership?" and "How did decisions get made?" Discuss the task

or activity and how the Explorers worked together. This is the content part of reflection.

Second, ask questions that lead to making a judgment about what happened. Using the answers to the question of what happened, direct the group's attention to specific skills or ask broader, open-ended, questions. Ask questions about the good things first, like "What was good about the way decisions were made?" or "What did the group do well?" Then you can ask about more negative things: "What was the problem with the way you were communicating?" or "Were there any problems with what happened?" This is the evaluation part of reflection.

Third, ask questions that involve setting goals. Ask: "What skills did we use today that we should continue to use?" or "Is there anything we did that we should stop doing?"

In the Appendix, there is more information about the kinds of questions you can ask during a reflection. The Exploring Advanced Leadership Development Workshop offered by Learning for Life also teaches how to conduct a reflection.

A Safe Environment

The development of Explorers must take place in a safe environment.

Learning for Life has developed a Youth Protection program. It is described in the Appendix of this handbook.

You should go further, however, than protecting the youth in your post from abuse. Every Explorer should be emotionally safe—safe from put-downs, intimidation, hazing, harassment, and exclusive peer groups. Many young people experience the world as a harsh and cold place. Exploring should be a place where they are accepted, where they can be themselves.