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## Engaging Youth as Influencers in Leadership Event Planning

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## Engaging Youth as Influencers in Leadership Event Planning

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*Contemporary youth development requires a new approach to involving youth in more active, engaging, and influential leadership roles. Teens and youth program professionals recognize the need young leaders have for more mentorship and accountability from adults to grow into their leadership potential. This paper specifically addresses how youth development professionals can engage student leadership teams in co-designing experiences for teens through the role of influencers. In this role, young leaders radiate their influence both laterally among their peers and vertically among adult leaders, developing stronger networks and gaining valuable experience. This paper draws observations from two state-level programs, the Missouri FFA Leadership Camp and the Missouri 4-H Youth Civic Leaders Summit, as examples of effective and productive practice. The authors provide recommendations on how adult practitioners can gain buy-in from other adult coordinators, incorporate youth as influencers in leadership event planning, and foster positive youth development in the process.*

*Keywords:* influencer, positive youth development, youth-adult partnerships, soft skills, pedagogy, andragogy, middle management

### Introduction

Founded upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, positive youth development recognizes the role of adults in creating positive environments that engage, challenge, and support youth to thrive. Yet, positive youth development also acknowledges the role of youth in contributing to their own development and the development of their communities. Positive youth development offers an asset-based approach to designing programs and working with young people.

National youth leadership survey results indicate that youth are optimistic about using their leadership skills in the future, but say they need more confidence, hands-on experience, and mentorship from adults to realize their full potential (Harris Poll, 2016). Seven out of ten youth surveyed see leadership as a skill they can practice and work to improve, but only three out of ten said they are prepared to lead.

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Leadership, as described by MacNeil (2006), is a combination of the ability to positively influence with the authority to do so. Youth development professionals have articulated various ways in which young people can be empowered with authority and work in partnership with adults, becoming co-creators of their environments as planners, advocates, or advisors (Illinois 4-H, n.d.). These opportunities also move young people closer to the goals (or 5 Cs) of positive youth development, which include competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection, and lead to the “sixth C” of contribution (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008).

4-H and FFA are both organizations with longstanding ties to rural communities. They share complementary (but not entirely overlapping) missions of fostering leadership, life skills, and community/civic engagement, equipping youth to be lifelong learners and leaders in their communities and the world (Hoover, Scholl, Dunigan, & Mamontova, 2007). FFA is linked to the U.S. Department of Education, while 4-H is part of the Cooperative Extension Service of the Land Grant University (LGU) system. Both organizations draw from a non-formal community-based educational model, with a focus on career development and civic engagement. FFA programming involves a formal educational component, as well, delivered through classroom-based high-school agricultural education (Hoover et al., 2007).

In this paper, we draw upon our experience as 4-H and FFA professionals who have coordinated adult teams in planning and conducting statewide leadership events with high school students. We share a commitment as youth development professionals to foster youth voices in planning and to accomplish our work through youth-adult partnerships. We address how youth development professionals can engage student leadership teams in co-designing and delivering youth development experiences for teens. We draw observations from two state-level programs, the Missouri FFA Leadership Camp and the Missouri 4-H Youth Civic Leaders Summit. We highlight how student leadership teams can bolster the goals of positive youth development and conclude with implications and recommendations for practice.

### **Youth Leadership and Today’s Workforce**

Leadership events are a key component of high school education, spanning both curricular and extracurricular involvement. From our observations, leadership conference planners often set goals for leadership experiences to align with goals of formal education. They seek to impart knowledge to students, have students gain competency in subject matter, and demonstrate mastery through leadership roles, contests, and competitions. Learning objectives for such events are framed in terms of knowledge or skills participants will gain to become better leaders. Content and method decisions are based on teacher-led classroom pedagogy. This traditional way of planning and conducting leadership events reflects a pedagogical approach, where the focus is on developing the individual capabilities of each student.

Learning “how to learn” and how to connect with others to learn are essential skills for today’s leaders (Marsick & Watkins, 2015). Today’s real-world workforce is an increasingly collaborative environment where knowledge lies less with the individual and more between workers and within networks (Hoffman, Casnocha, & Yeh, 2014). To be effective, leaders must be able to navigate relationships within complex systems, gain access to knowledge, and apply it to problem-solving (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). In the area of career readiness, soft skills are of growing importance to employers seeking new hires (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.). Soft skills, as differentiated from hard skills involving technical knowledge, are personal qualities, like teamwork, flexibility, and commitment that make an individual a contributing member of any group (National Soft Skills Association, 2016). In our view, traditional approaches to youth leadership development have not gone far enough to prepare students with the soft skills they need for today’s workforce.

We propose an approach that practitioners can take in youth leadership event planning that better meets the developmental needs of young people preparing for today’s workforce. This approach encompasses both the goals of education and, more broadly, positive youth development. Within this context, young people work as *influencers* on student leadership teams in roles designed to support their personal development, as well as the development of other youth.

For purposes of this study, we are defining influencers as youth in leadership team roles who influence both adult event planners and peer event participants. Influencers vocalize youth needs and desires to adult event planners and team leaders and influence youth participants by exemplifying actions and attitudes. As influencers, leadership team members build connections with adults and with each other and strengthen networks between youth event participants. They may occupy planning, advocating, advising, teaching, mentoring, and other leadership roles all at the same time. In this sense, influencers radiate impact up and down the channel of event planning, leadership, and participation. They point themselves and the other young people they influence toward attaining Lerner et al.’s (2008) sixth C of contribution.

### **Planning Events with Youth Influencer Roles**

Student leadership teams at leadership events are typically comprised of high school age students with superior leadership ability as individuals, but relatively little experience as large event coordinators or group facilitators. As such, they start at the ground level when stepping into influencer roles, which gives adult planners and coaches the opportunity to initiate new thinking strategies and to introduce more mature and professional concepts, such as performance feedback, middle management, and networking. This situation is desirable for three reasons that relate to positive youth development.

First, student leadership teams engage youth in real-world settings that support soft skill development (Gates et al., 2016). Youth can practice and learn how soft skills like attitude, responsibility, communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution impact real-life events and

people around them (ODEP, n.d.). Team experiences combine elements of the professional world and youth leadership development. Students stepping into influencer roles reflect a middle management approach to conference and event planning, as students function as quasi-middle managers or intermediaries between youth and adults. They are delegated tasks with specific parameters and outcomes, asked to represent lower and lateral level interests, and report to upper managers on needs and concerns. They receive coaching and feedback on performance, but also have the discretion to choose unique pathways to accomplishing goals.

Second, student leadership teams require adult planners to use a hybrid of pedagogy and andragogy methods to engage youth (Choy, 2005). This hybrid methodology combines strategies of both youth and adult education in training, coaching, and support (Anderson & Sandman, 2009; Delahaye, Limerick, & Hearn, 1994). Recognizing that teens are cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically in the “middle ground” between childhood and adulthood requires practitioners to remain flexible while using a mixed-methods approach. Teens respond positively when adults meet them where they are and engage them as “adult leaders” and learners (Tomek & Williams, 1999).

Finally, using student leadership teams as influencers supports the development of young people as leaders (Camino, 2005). Whether through the power of position, knowledge, reverence, or coercion, leadership is a direct representation of influence (Maxwell, 2007). When affirming and recognizing youths’ influences on event planning on multiple levels, we enable youth to progress along the path of influence and, in turn, grow their leadership ability.

To illustrate these points, we present case studies of two state-level programs utilizing young people as influencers: the Missouri FFA Leadership Camp, with the state FFA officer team, and the Missouri 4-H Youth Civic Leaders Summit, with the Summit youth host team.

Previous research has shown how case studies can be a useful approach for studying complex programs involving youth-adult partnerships, especially when identifying promising practices is the goal (Camino, 2005). Based on our personal observations, follow-up interviews with youth and adult event planners, insights and experience of other practitioners, and corroboration between the two state-level programs, we chose a case study approach. Advantages of this approach include an in-depth look at the details of program settings and youth/adult interactions. Limitations of this approach may include generalizing the findings to other settings. Research that involves more direct data collection from youth and adult planners and participants would enhance our understanding of how youth influence the process and the outcomes.

### **Case Study 1: Missouri FFA Leadership Camp**

The Missouri FFA Leadership Camp is a 5-day summer camp for high school agricultural education students. The camp is offered six times for six consecutive weeks each summer, with a rotation of five state officers working with a Camp Leadership Director and other support staff

to host the camp. Approximately 150-200 students attend each week, along with chapter FFA advisors, chaperones, and guest speakers.

The state officer team consists of 17 FFA members entering their senior year of high school or first two years of college. A panel of former state officers and current agriculture educators/FFA advisors select the state officer team annually to serve a one-year term. The Missouri FFA Leadership Camp provides the state officers with one of their first large group facilitation, motivational public speaking, and sustained member interaction experiences, just a few weeks after their election.

While at the FFA Leadership Camp, the state officers take on the role of influencers under the purview of the camp leadership director, who is responsible for assigning duties and giving feedback on their performance. The state officers are required to deliver short motivational speeches to campers and engage in multiple coaching sessions with the director before delivering the speech. In this sense, the themes of soft skill career development and blended teaching methods are highly evident.

The state officers also facilitate portions of a leadership workshop for large groups of campers and debrief with the team and camp leadership director shortly after. As part of this process, the camp leadership director incorporates elements of professional performance review, such as asking officers to self-evaluate, identify areas for improvement, or solicit feedback from peers. The review is not entirely student self-driven. The camp leadership director provides constructive criticism and facilitated reflection. This approach represents an andragogic approach of self-motivated learning, supported by a lesser, but no less valuable, pedagogic approach of walking the student through the process.

Despite a long-term trend separating management from leadership across public, private, and civic sectors (Drucker, 2001), the FFA Leadership Camp sustains the connection and even the integration of the two. The state officers are both leaders who influence campers and the camp leadership director, as well as managers who coordinate small groups and plan event logistics. The state officers take on the middle management role by becoming responsible for the performance of their student groups, including a student reflection team, weekly elected camp officers, and informal small groups during workshops. They report to the camp leadership director, addressing issues and presenting positive outcomes, to fuel the conversation of growth and maturity among these state officer leaders. These experiences parallel the responsibilities of middle managers in real-life organizational settings and offer opportunities to reflect on soft skills such as group dynamics and critical thinking.

Planned interactions between the state officers and Leadership Camp participants over multiple days build and extend statewide networks. The state officers commonly form connections with specific chapters or members during the Leadership Camp and continue building those relationships throughout the year at other events. Relationships with the camp leadership

director and other camp guests (i.e., speakers and presenters) expand the state officers' professional networks, connecting them with industry leaders, teachers, and mentors who become viable options for future role models.

### **Case Study 2: Missouri 4-H Youth Civic Leaders Summit**

The Missouri 4-H Youth Civic Leaders Summit is a statewide leadership conference organized by Missouri 4-H. Teams of youth, ages 14-18, attend with local 4-H staff members or volunteers as team leaders. Youth and adults participate together in teambuilding activities, a high ropes course activity, workshops, and action planning, emerging from the weekend with new partnerships and plans to engage their communities and world.

Summit objectives include increased knowledge of leadership styles, teamwork, awareness, and acceptance of differences, belief that youth and adults can work together, skills for civic engagement, and motivation to engage others.

Each year, the event planning team, made up of 4-H youth development and community development specialists, selects a youth host team from among county-based 4-H groups who apply. The youth host team must show a track record of teamwork and service and demonstrate readiness to help plan and lead the statewide conference.

The youth host team, with support from local 4-H staff or adult volunteers, joins the adult planning team in overall event planning to ensure decisions remain grounded in youth perspective. With adult guidance, youth host team members weigh in on event decisions and prepare for leadership roles they will step into during the conference.

The planning stage offers many opportunities for youth host team members to develop soft skills, including teambuilding, professional communication, consensus building, decision-making, and conflict resolution. The youth host team members collaborate fully with the adult planning team, mainly through the youth engagement associate (graduate assistant) and the lead organizer (state 4-H youth development specialist). The youth engagement associate is a graduate student who acts as a liaison between the youth host team and the adult planning team, and helps organize and facilitate youth host team meetings. Youth host team members generate ideas, weigh diverse opinions, and construct plans to implement group decisions. Exposure to virtual meeting platforms, online facilitation, and web etiquette offer youth host team members opportunities to learn technology skills for career readiness.

Youth host team roles and responsibilities reflect a blended approach to engagement involving andragogy and pedagogy. Youth host team members influence adult planning team decisions, including theme, keynote speakers, and workshop tracks. At the same time, they assume ownership and group decision-making for many conference details, including t-shirt design, food



menu, site decorations, meet and greet activities, group skits, plenary session speaking parts, breakout presentations, and recognition of teams at the closing assembly.

Youth host team members receive coaching and support for these roles from their 4-H staff person and adult volunteers, as well as the youth engagement associate and lead organizer. The youth engagement associate offers guidance on self-management, group facilitation, skit design and delivery, and reflection. Using a youth-learner approach, the youth engagement associate leads discussions on how youth host team members can prepare for their leadership roles and be ready to execute planned activities, and what the consequences of not being prepared would look like. Tip sheets and orientation materials balance between being fun and lighthearted, and informative and thought-provoking. Applying an adult-learner approach, the youth engagement associate uses context-setting questions with youth host team members to reflect on their experiences with event planning and leadership activities and to generalize these experiences to other roles and situations.

During the conference, youth host team members model how to be managers and leaders at the same time. They move between facilitating meet-and-greet activities, to socializing and interacting with youth participants, to working as a group to lead skits and workshops, and back again. Youth host team members carry the unique challenge of navigating professional performance expectations of adults, and remaining relatable and connected to their youth peers throughout the event. This dynamic role between adolescence and adulthood, between managers who get things done and leaders who inspire others to follow, causes youth to flex their influencer muscles.

By setting the prevailing tone for the event through careful planning, and then executing on-site leadership roles, youth host team members become as much in charge of the conference as the adult planning team. By co-creating an atmosphere of energy, interaction, and engagement, youth host team members influence the learning environment for 150 youth and adult participants at the Summit. In that regard, the role of youth host team members is indispensable to achieving the youth development objectives of the event.

### **Recommendations for Event Planners**

How can 4-H and FFA professionals apply this approach to their work? We recommend five ways:

- 1) Utilize youth leadership teams as influencers in event planning, beyond existing roles they may already have in organizational leadership, facilitation or public speaking. Incorporate youth voices (i.e., state officers, youth hosts) in planning discussions, including long-distance communication and virtual planning, as these experiences help youth gain soft skills and collaboration skills needed for the workforce. To make engaging youth leadership teams more manageable, break event planning down

- into smaller parts. Focus on those parts of the process that are most conducive to having youth influence. Support youth with influencing the process through working in committees and work groups. For example, five FFA officers were assigned to each week of camp (rather than the entire slate of officers), creating a smaller working group to oversee and be accountable for that week's events and camper experiences. Similarly, the 4-H youth host team used subgroups to accomplish various tasks such as t-shirt design, skit writing, and team project presentations. In both cases, youth leadership teams realized they had made significant contributions, and adult event planners saw better results than if youth had not influenced the outcomes.
- 2) Help other adult leaders see and support youth as influencers. For adults involved in event planning, youth in middle management roles may be a new practice. While eager to show support, adults may need practical steps they can take, such as redirecting group discussions to youth, encouraging peer networking at events, or highlighting ways youth influenced a decision or outcome. Set clear group expectations for equal participation from youth and adults up front. Make frequent "check-ins" with youth about their perceived level of influence on the planning process. Recognize youth in person and in public for the influence they have on decisions and outcomes. If an FFA officer's idea resulted in the most highly ranked camp activity, make sure everyone (including the officer) knows it. If a 4-H youth host team member's suggestion leads to the securing of a speaker, announce it from the podium, or invite the young person to introduce the speaker.
  - 3) Identify influencer roles youth can fill on-site at events to both grow individual leadership competence (human capital) and foster team development and networking (social capital). Along with subject matter/content, create environments that maximize youth networking, collaborating, peer role modeling, and adult support. Identify roles for youth that stretch their individual leadership capabilities (such as an FFA officer organizing a team to plan and present a large group workshop or skit at camp). Also, challenge leadership teams to collaborate on new levels (such as 4-H youth host team members working together to facilitate welcoming activities and large group games with their peers).
  - 4) Engage influencers using a blend of andragogy and pedagogy. Recognize that youth contributors are at a developmental crossroads between adolescence and adulthood. For young people not yet fully adults, but exiting childhood, a blended approach ensures their involvement is developmentally appropriate. Design orientation activities for youth that draw upon their previous leadership experiences, as well as impart new leadership knowledge and skills. To help youth prepare for leadership roles, "push" new knowledge toward them as well as "pull" prior experiences out of

- them, coach youth through planning and leadership roles with realistic expectations. Balance schedules, performance expectations, and accountability for results with needs young people have for unstructured time, social interaction, friendship, and fun. Ask a variety of reflection questions that cause youth to think back on their own conference experiences, as well as put themselves in the shoes of others to understand how others experienced the process or event.
- 5) Recognize the role of youths as influencers as a realistic middle ground on youth participation. Time and other organizational constraints may create barriers for involving youth in full decision-making. On the spectrum of youth participation, influence is an attainable goal, which benefits all (MacNeil, 2000). Even though youth may lack the time for the entire speaker selection or hotel contracting process, influencers can still have a major sway on those decisions. FFA and 4-H professionals play a key role in elevating youth to the point of influencers in event planning. Acknowledge that young people will have as diverse and varying degrees of influence on the process as they are as diverse as individuals. Look for the “tipping point” at which individuals or groups find their voices. Help young people connect their involvement in event planning today to their pursuit of longer-term goals for college, family, and career later.

### Conclusions

Today’s youths convey optimism about using their leadership skills but recognize their need for more confidence, experience, and adult mentors who can draw out their leadership potential. Educators, youth development professionals, and youth advocates can design youth leadership events with these goals in mind.

As collaboration and soft skill development become more important for college and career readiness, incorporating youth influencer roles into event planning provides opportunities for youth to stretch their leadership skills and interact with peers and adults on multiple levels. By doing so, event organizers can apply principles of youth-adult partnerships to the entire process of event design, implementation, and evaluation. With student leadership teams engaged as influencers, planners can reap the benefits of their positive influence on the environments they create, while offering young leaders opportunities to develop and sharpen skills sought by employers, communities, and the world.

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