



EMERALD POINTS

ECOSYSTEMS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Pathways to New Programs

Dr. TRISHA A. SWED



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Pathways to New Programs

BY

DR. TRISHA A. SWED

Temple University, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to the unwavering pursuit of a better future,
empowering all voices, and moving our world forward, even in the face
of adversity.*

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INTRODUCTION

I realized something was broken within youth leadership development quickly into my career, but I did not comprehend the extent of the impact from this misguided system until a particularly scorching hot weekend during a high school leadership retreat. This retreat was about eight years into my career as a facilitator, program developer, and curriculum builder of experiences for young people. There was a moment where I stood looking out at the sunset over the landscape before me, the heat of the day finally breaking. Most of the participants were in their post-dinner program, and I was taking a break walking along the open-air tents. I love these moments, where I find some time to myself and get to take in the nature and landscape before me. This time, my moment was interrupted when one of the teens in my cohort ran up to me visibly upset. She explained that Lori, another teen, was not well and that she needed my help immediately. Together, we went to our tent, and I found Lori, sitting, sobbing, with a smattering of friends in other corners of the tent, concerned, but unsure of what to do. I went up to Lori, sat next to her, said “hey,” and waited. “What’s going on?” I asked, and she replied, “I don’t want to be here anymore.” With gentle encouragement to her, Lori and I walked to a private part of the camp where, between tears, she shared with me what was weighing on her mind. Mostly, that she was not a leader, and she was pretending.

She shared her struggles and shortcomings that she could not always be outgoing, she did not always want to be with people, and she could not keep up with the intense back-to-back programming. Most of all, never wanting to tell me this before, Lori revealed that she struggles with depression, and sometimes just wants to do nothing. She apologized for wasting my time and for pretending to fit in as a leader, and then admitted that she wanted to call her parents to go home. This encounter upended the peaceful feeling I had had two hours earlier. This felt like the opposite of what the intention of the weekend and the program was. What broke my heart most of all was the fact that right at that moment, in front of my very eyes, she was showcasing her immense leadership skills.

This program was built to help her build skills and empower her to act and create impact in her community. Instead, it was teaching her that she was not good enough. After speaking with Lori, we went back to the tent and were met by her concerned friends, all of whom were also skipping the current group program. “Why are you all here and not at the activity?” I asked. There wasn’t a clear response. The students skirted the question with a myriad of excuses. “Oh, I just came to get my water bottle.” For another it was her hat or her notebook. Was this leadership behavior? They were probably anxious about my reaction; I was a staff member of the program after all.

“It’s okay if you have something to say,” I encouraged them to talk and gave them permission to say what they wanted to say, with no repercussions, judgment, or damage to our relationship. Slowly, sitting on the dusty floor of our tent, we started to talk. It became obvious to me that this program was not meeting their needs. Of the about two dozen students in my cohort, a handful of them needed to step away from the group and decompress. This group also felt the isolation from their peers immensely. For them, to participate meant sneaking away or managing adverse mental health effects in secret or alone. I imagined at the time that these were just the brave souls who decided to walk away; I wondered how many of them were suffering in silence in that moment.

The obstacles the students described included intense programming with little downtime or alone time. When students needed to step away from large events or activities, they were given a red colored card and asked to sit in a designated area for the “sick” students. These students, even though they were not physically sick, needed to use accommodation intended for ill participants because they were overwhelmed, overstimulated, or needed a break. All of this was bringing back images of dunce cones from a bygone era. The structures and consequences of the youth development experience were supposed to be illustrating what it means to be a leader, or not, and how the participants fit into that expectation. That evening strengthened my resolve to understand the ways in which leadership development programs engage in communicating about who or what these young people should and could be. Unsurprisingly, through investigation, it has become clear that leadership development programs don’t only consist of their curriculum content. Programs are impacted by organizational structure, staff, programming, and distribution of resources. Each piece impacts how leadership rhetoric is constructed, taught, and internalized by young people and their communities.

MY STORY

I did not expect my career to end up in supporting youth leadership development and the intergenerational responsibility of community continuity. If you asked me when I was a teen what I wanted to be, the answer would have changed on the day. Some days I was going to be an astronomer, on others a meteorologist or a lawyer. One moment, my dream was even to be a CEO. I didn't really know of what – I just knew CEO sounded good.

In high school, I was known for being on the debate team, in the choir, and a member of the dungeons and dragons club. I bounced around to the spaces that brought me joy on a whim. However, as engaged as I was in extracurriculars, school, and dreaming, I threw myself into these things because I felt like I had nowhere else to go. I was the daughter of divorced parents who constantly fought with each other rather than paying attention to their child. I lived with the stress of seeing them struggle to pay essential bills, and I was desperately searching for a way out of this maelstrom. Enter youth leadership development.

Youth leadership development makes amazing promises, mostly shrouded in the idea that if you become a leader, you will be successful in life. How do you become a leader one might ask? According to most local programs, youth should follow this six-point program, attend an 8-week camp, or become a part of this club. I did them all. I followed the regimens, I made vision boards, mission statements, attended programs, and even won awards for my ability to follow through with these leadership development plans. As a result, a piece of feedback I get even in adulthood is “you are really good at following directions”; I often want to respond, “I didn't have a choice.” These programs, these plans, helped me rely on others to help define what type of leader I should be. I learned how to behave to get what I needed from people to get along – survive.

In college, I was able to keep the momentum up, collecting “program completion” certificates, to the point where they had lost all meaning to me. However, doing it and learning about all these different methods to be a leader felt rewarding. Going along with the status quo seemed ideal until I studied abroad in Japan, an experience which helped me realize, I needed more from my relationships, communities, and life. During my time living in Tokyo, Japan, I experienced the massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami in 2011 which impacted the east coast. In that time, I witnessed a community not looting, or taking advantage of their neighbor's misfortune, but working together to be sure their neighbor had enough. I came home needing change, and my mentor said to me, “life is too short to do what you suck at.” I took it

to heart and decided to focus on the one thing I knew I was good at: leadership development. I quit most things, changed my major, and decided leadership was going to be my new focus. It has been my focus ever since; however, my relationship to leadership development has changed drastically from my first moments in a program to writing this book today.

I have worked in leadership program development for the past 14 years. Most of my experience has been working with nonprofit organizations seeking meaningful ways to engage the community, develop leadership programs, and plan for growth that focuses on inclusion. As a director for several years, I witnessed various leadership development programs and their impact on youth and their communities. I have developed some of these programs personally, and others were national or international curricula implemented locally. One of the organizations I have worked with, called Honeycomb, emulates how quality programs can connect youth to communities and build new relationship between organizations, which will be discussed further later on in this book.

In these spaces, I witnessed many behind-the-scenes decisions being made. These included judgments being passed and assumptions being acted upon instead of asking questions, all this impacting the resources and opportunities of the local young people they were promising to serve. Once in a program, because of funding insecurity, the parent organization leadership could not agree on the number of interns to hire, which was reflected in the interview process for the interns. This resulted in the complete mishandling of the interview and hiring experience. The lack of clarity on decision-making, assumptions about the role youth leaders play in the program, and a lack of communication across the parent organization ultimately took away from what should have been a joyful and honorary occasion of choosing interns and caused new tensions with an active funder.

Throughout my career, there were times when I was reprimanded for allowing students with learning disabilities to apply for leadership positions. I also had to investigate why a parent would write a negative reference letter for their child, as well as looking into why coach staff members would possibly openly call their emotionally distraught participants “cry babies.” More times than not, these cultural and often organizational behaviors sought to restrict the power and presence of the young people they were serving. These judgments surround youth who enter these spaces, from professionals to their parents to the passing comments of community members. Not once but on multiple occasions I had parents calling me to say, “my child isn’t a leader, here is why, you may *not* want to consider them for this program.” These were the toughest calls, often listening to stories parents shared explaining how

“quiet” their child was and why they were uninterested in running for student counsel. Some mentioned that their child spoke with a stutter. In these moments, I had two reactions. One, I wondered what would make parents react to the young people in their lives so strongly and in what ways this could be impacting those young people. Two, I was motivated to create more spaces for young people to explore leadership possibilities largely uninhibited by adult sensibilities on what leadership and youth “should” be.

This unraveling of leadership expectations and education within communities and in service of the next generation of leaders became a passion of mine. If we do not cultivate spaces where young people can experiment and practice the skills of leadership within their own frameworks, we are doing future generations a disservice. Through experiential and youth-led programs, I have witnessed many young individuals with various abilities and backgrounds engage in meaningful community activities like philanthropy, grant-making, organizing community events, creating nonprofits, and lobbying to change local, national, and global policies.

Even in the most well-meaning of programs, which have provided spaces for young people to advocate for great change, I have watched experts create and implement decisions that have caused youth to disengage from their community and leadership altogether. One program I supported in a west coast community was undergoing a transition which required hiring new staff to support the organization’s teen programs, when the organization brought in a new staff member who was described as “temporary” the students felt discouraged, ignored, and resented not being a part of the process to choose the new adult staff. While not everyone, students ultimately left the program and disengaged from the organization. There is a disconnection between how leadership is taught and how youth need to engage with leadership, which is perpetuated by parents, facilitators, community leaders, and curriculum developers. Sometimes even the most benign adjustment relating to budgets and personal can have a dramatic impact on the experience of a young person in a program. Raising the capacity for youth voices and identifying where these programs do not fully meet developing youth’s needs is vital to serve and prepare all young people. By co-creating programs that serve youth and drawing on research in positive youth development, leadership development, and community engagement, we can foster innovative and inclusive program models. These models address the evolving needs of our generations and communities.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF STUDY AND STORY

This book is based on my academic research and study on youth leadership development as well as my professional experiences supporting nonprofits, designing programs that work for wide groups of youth, and developing strategic initiatives to support youth leadership development. The study and model primarily discussed throughout this book is the basis of my doctoral dissertation work. Its goal is to bring to light the voices of young people who have been negatively impacted by youth leadership development. It focuses on creating a space where participants can discuss their personal experiences and design a program that would better meet their needs. While there are numerous studies on youth leadership development, many do not recognize or address the needs of youth who report having a negative experience of youth leadership development programs. Often, little attention is placed on the feedback or needs of these students.

Overall, the purpose of this study was to learn how youth leadership development programs can include more young people, promoting a broader range of leadership values, qualities, and behaviors. Specifically, this study focuses on young people who have been disaffected by leadership development programs. It provided a creative space for youth to engage in meaningful conversations about their evolving concepts and expectations of leadership. By engaging with students who did not feel they fit the qualifications to participate in leadership or had been involved in a leadership development experience that affected them poorly, this study gained insight into the following research questions:

- What are current youth leadership development practices that can disaffect youth?
- How can current youth leadership development programs better reflect the needs and values of the youth and communities they serve?
- What would the content and structure of a leadership development program, created by youth who have been disaffected by leadership programs or discourse, look like?

Doing this work with any group of individuals is challenging, but stewarding teens through this type of experiences has proven to be rewarding for everyone involved. With the help of young leaders, this work contributes to the ongoing understanding of youth leadership development and critical leadership practices while providing youth development practitioners and educators

with tools to critique and expand their own initiatives. From this study, the Leadership Development Ecosystem was developed, which considers the needs and experience of youth alongside the systems of organizational and community systems.

SUMMARY

My lifelong journey with leadership development, from primary school into adulthood, was one that impacted me dramatically – leading me to ask more and more questions about “who is a leader” and “what makes a leader.” A large part of what I discovered in this journey is that you cannot talk about leadership development in the United States without talking about race, the impact of colonialism, power, systems, and the toll these ideas take on our communities. This book is about providing a road map for practitioners and scholars to engage differently with the young people in their communities. Those engaged with this work need to understand the values and decisions which impact the experience of young people, and not just the young people who seem to thrive in these environments.

The chapters within this book are divided into four sections and provide information and knowledge on how programs, organizations, and communities can ensure more young people can exercise leadership and participate in the community. Section 1 discusses the history and foundations of leadership development and youth. Section 2 outlines the study of this book its methodology. Section 3 reviews student outcomes from the process. The last section – Section 4 – will introduce the youth leadership development ecosystem approach and present examples of this model in action. In the appendix, you will find a copy of the ecosystem model along with a worksheet to help guide practitioners and community members in this work.

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