

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Positive Youth Development Domain

Leadership is the ability to influence and support others positively toward a common goal. Young people are more likely to become competent leaders when volunteers intentionally take the time to create an atmosphere that includes the skills and characteristics necessary for leadership roles¹. Leadership is something you learn, develop, and put into action. It requires a person to have the character, habits, actions, skills, and mindset to cultivate positive change in the community². Volunteers should encourage participation in leadership roles that align with the interests of the youth, and then provide support for them along their learning journey.

Youth in 4-H practice leadership through assuming roles as club officers, committee chairs, and other significant positions. Through teamwork, teens collaborate to put on conferences, tackle community issues, and conduct research projects. The options are limitless, but their involvement should include careful planning, mentoring, and empowering strategies from the volunteer for the best outcome³.

Finding a Leadership Role

Developmentally, teens need to balance living in the present and thinking about the future. Adult mentors should help youth find a role that best fits their talents and interests; their spark should drive the practice. Other considerations for finding a meaningful leadership role include the value and potential impact of the service, as well as the level of contribution and resources required. Bouillon Diaz and her colleagues

from the University of Illinois⁴ suggest that youth can share their voice in these six ways:

- **Advising** – involvement in decision-making at all levels
- **Advocating** – select a community issue of importance and make a plan to improve that specific situation in the community
- **Mentoring** – encourages others to grow as a person and as a 4-H'er
- **Planning** – improve 4-H by working with others to carry out events
- **Promoting** – present a positive image of 4-H in the community
- **Teaching** – lead workshops or lessons on a specific subject (team or individual choice)

A key component to developing leadership skills is giving youth a safe space and freedom to try, fail, and try again. This process helps youth gain confidence in knowing what to do in a particular situation and contributes to their success in obtaining the seven thriving indicators in the 4-H Thriving Model⁵.

Skill Training and Guidance

Youth advocacy and workforce readiness start with skill development. Volunteers can teach leadership competencies in a variety of ways. A volunteer should provide activities to aid participants in the self-discovery process to find their own voice and improve their capabilities. Ensuring youth are ready to execute real-world tasks includes providing a natural progression from participant to teen leader⁶. These skills will ensure youth are ready for work and life⁶. 4-H programs around the country



encourage teaching skills essential for leadership such as⁷:

- **Leadership Basics:** style, self-regulation, goals, resilience
- **Relationship Building:** trust, accountability, interpersonal skills, diversity
- **Communication:** listening, public speaking, body language, facilitation
- **Organization:** planning, time management, brainstorming, critical thinking
- **Group Process:** working with others, problem solving, decision making, conflict management
- **Career Readiness:** work ethic, accountability, interviewing, technical skills

Effective leaders know how to bring groups together for the greater good of all who take part. As expectations for the leadership role get more advanced, the training should progress as well.

Create Meaningful Involvement

How 4-H programs are planned and led makes a tremendous difference in the program's impact on youth. Although there are different strategies of leadership engagement, young people develop as leaders most often when caring adults take the time to appreciate their individuality, provide ongoing emotional support and provide meaningful feedback⁸. In order to have the biggest impact, volunteers should follow the youth program quality principles based in 4-H Thriving Model when implementing positive youth development experiences⁹.

Teen Leadership

Volunteers should plan leadership programs with the developmental needs of teens in mind. Unlike younger 4-H members who

focus on learning content related to their 4-H projects, teens need different programming; programming that supports the things they are naturally exploring at this stage in their lives like personal identity, greater autonomy, leadership skills and career exploration¹⁰. Several sources^{3,8,11,12} point to key features in leadership programs. Successful programs have adults who do the following:

- Engage in frequent and regular contact with youth; they model kind behavior and provide ongoing validation of the youth's active involvement.
- Provide opportunities to belong in a safe, motivating climate.
- Designate time for having fun, building relationships, meeting new people, and going to new places.
- Do not appoint youth to a committee with numerous adults and expect a youth-adult partnership. Avoid tokenism.
- Have youth involved in the process from the beginning. Do not involve them after adults have made all the decisions. Respect and support young people as equal partners in planning, decision making, problem-solving, and implementation.
- Provide developmentally appropriate levels of challenge and expectations.
- Share ideas with youth but do not overshadow their participation. Expect diverse ways of thinking and empower them to act accordingly.
- Create agreed upon timelines. Youth will develop stronger leadership abilities if given the opportunity to succeed as well as fail, thus, teaching them to see and accept the consequences of their decisions. Be considerate when they need help.



VOLUNTEER

Research Knowledge Competency

- Continue to offer specialized training and practical applications or “real world” hands-on experiences to strengthen their club and community.
- Offer self-assessments and activity debriefings. It makes everyone aware of their skills and interests and encourages all to understand themselves and connect deeply with peers.
- Seek out educational opportunities for your own leadership skill development.
- Elevating youth voice and leadership are key to helping young people become and stay civically engaged.

Their involvement in local community initiatives and access to community leaders help youth feel a stronger connection to their community, which is a protective factor for many youth. Everyone has leadership potential, and volunteers should encourage those who are less likely to join leadership programs because they may be the ones who benefit the most¹³. Life and career skills don't come naturally to many young people. Your dedication to building the youth-adult partnership in support of leadership is fundamental to their success.

References

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