

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS USEFULNESS TO THE WORKSHOP MODEL

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“I’m not too worried about knowing the material because I took the course last year and I’m taking a course beyond it now. What I’m not sure about is whether I’m capable of being a good leader. I hope I can be the kind of leader the students in my group are going to be able to relate to and like.” Such thoughts often go through the minds of students new to the role of workshop leader.

Trainers of peer leaders can help assuage the fears of both beginners and experienced leaders with the introduction of the Relational Leadership Model. This model, proposed by Komives, Lucas and McMahon (1998), suggests that effective leadership skills are not inborn, but can be learned. This simple, straightforward model can comfort the peer leader in knowing that good leadership is a relational process and is the responsibility of all members of the group, not just that of the leader.

Relational Leadership is a shift in paradigm from the traditional view of a leader as someone who has natural abilities to be charismatic, persuasive with people, and able to exert power and influence. If peer leaders assume this to be true, it is no wonder that they may feel intimidated.

The Workshop Model and Relational Leadership are particularly compatible because the role of the workshop leader is to be a group facilitator of learning and problem-solving rather than a junior instructor repeating the professor’s lecture. A workshop group can establish itself as an effective community of learners by using this model.

Borrowing from Gardner’s (1989) view, this community of learners will share a common vision and commitment to:

- effective internal communication;
- shared leadership tasks;
- group teamwork, maintenance and governance;
- development of all members;
- inclusion of all participants, their needs, weaknesses, diversity, and strengths;
- a group culture with resulting interpersonal bonds and shared experiences;
- accomplishment of the purpose of the group, the purpose being, “. . . for the student participants to construct their own genuine knowledge of the discipline by working through real issues.” (Roth, *et al.* 2001)

As Komives, *et al.* state, Relational Leadership is a framework that connects five key elements:

1. *Inclusion*: Understanding, valuing and actively engaging diversity in views, approaches, styles, and aspects of individuality such as gender and culture. This fosters a sensitivity to disabilities, differences in learning styles and personalities, and so on. Group participants are not invisible, they affect the group by influencing the whole with their distinctive behaviors, whether they sit quietly or take an active part in the process.

It is not always easy to take an inclusive view of group dynamics. As one student leader states, “Being inclusive is difficult because you must step out of your comfort zone to expand your organization or vision. Inclusive means sharing ideas or beliefs rather than selling or telling.” (p. 73)

2. *Empowerment*: Leadership is shared; participants *must* assume responsibility for the group outcomes because, in reality, they simply *are* responsible. There are two interrelated dimensions to empowerment. First, *each* participant assumes ownership of the outcome of the group process, by asserting him/herself, and expecting to be included in every way. Secondly, such an environment promotes the full involvement of all participants, no matter their current degree of understanding of the content, or what personality or learning style factors they may bring to the group.

The individual says, “I have a legitimate right to be here and I can say what I feel and think. I can ask ‘stupid’ questions, if that is where I am.” The group in turn says to the individual, “You should be involved in this; you have the right to be here and say what you feel and think. You join the rest of us in being responsible for what happens in our group.”

3. *Purposefulness*: Committed to goal or activity. Each person will have a very individualized effect on the group, but the group’s purpose will be unified if there is a shared vision or purpose. “Being purposeful requires having an attitude of hope, an ability to make a commitment; it builds on a sense of personal and group empowerment.” (p. 87)

4. *Ethical Behaviors*: Leadership driven by positive values, a commitment to that which is moral in nature, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The Golden Rule allows for people to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good. Individual honesty, integrity, and good will are important values in any leadership/group situation.

A student offers some excellent advice on the subject: “To handle ethical dilemmas, the single most important quality to remember is to be honest with yourself and others. Tell the parties involved honestly and openly how you feel about the particular issue. One other important aspect is listening and not jumping to conclusions.” (p. 93)

5. *Process-Oriented*: Occasionally, the group can neglect the humanity of its members by becoming too task oriented. The group must be alert to the possibility that the process can overshadow the purpose/mission of the group, or devalue the people involved.

If there is a tendency toward this, the leader and members need to step back, reflect on the procedures that have developed in the attempt to accomplish a task, and check to see that these are congruent with the other key elements of Relational Leadership.

What better model for leadership and group dynamics could be incorporated into the training of peer leaders than the Relational Leadership Model? Several key processes are essential to both: inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment of all group participants; community building; a profound dedication to understanding and appreciating others; and, a personal commitment of each member to the goals of the group. The Relational Leadership Model can assuage any peer leader's fears regarding his or her effectiveness as a leader for a workshop group.

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References

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