

NEW LEADERSHIP FOR YOUTH THROUGH SPORTS: LEADING FROM BOTTOMS-UP

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally most leadership concept is about directing from the top down telling the subordinates what to do and how to do their job and perform their tasks. This form of hierarchical leadership assumes that people down the line in the organization are not able to carry out the job assigned to them without being told to do so. In this form of leadership, the leader at the top has a lot of control over those in the lower levels of the organization. However, the downside is that while the leader has a lot of control, those below are very much dependent on the leader at the top. Without that top leader, they are directionless and unable to perform their tasks. In this form of leadership, the concept assumed that people are a *deficit* to their society. While this form of hierarchical, top-down leadership is still relevant in this modern world especially in a large organization that deals with crisis situations or has many levels of organizational structure, in the world of youth development, it no longer applies. Youth development is about enabling and developing the potentials of the young people so that they can succeed in life. This is where the *asset-based model of positive youth development* (PYD) is now more relevant. The young people want to be empowered and dictate their own future direction in life, not to be dictated by someone else. Leading the young people is about acknowledging, engaging, ensuring, educating, enabling and empowering them to be established and excel in their future adult lives. To do so, therefore it has to be about pushing them to the limelight and top of the hierarchy, not suppressing them at the bottom. However, to do so, opportunities and platforms should be provided to express themselves and to showcase their capabilities. This is where sports and recreation activities are ideal for them to grow, develop, and succeed. Sports and recreation are fun activities that appeals to them to engage, ensure, educate, enable, and empower them to be at the top of the pyramid. Leadership is no longer about title and position when it comes to youth leadership development. In the sports and recreation arena, all players are equal. Therefore, the nature of sports and recreation are able to influence and enable them to lead in various capacities – directly and indirectly. Through these influences, enabling, and empowering, the young people could them grow, develop, and succeed. Leadership here is then about being a ‘servant’, an ‘influencer’, a ‘role model’, a mentor, a ‘facilitator’ and finally, a ‘transformer’. It is not a one-way top-down traffic of leading, but a two-way form of interactive leadership.

Keywords: New leadership, Youth, Positive Youth Development, Sports and Recreation

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Introduction

“Leadership is an essential element in any definition of youth development and its principles” and “... a central feature of youth programmes” (Delgado, 2002, p.227). It has however often been equated with leading an organization and based on the leader’s position in the organization. It can therefore be based on the person ‘ahead of the organization or group’ or that of one of the ‘functions of the manager in a group or organisation’ (Chelladurai, 2014). Chelladurai (2014) cited various leadership experts that in organizational leadership, there are, however, many definitions to leadership, such as a leader being one who influences others to attain goals, driving to make something happen which was not going to happen, a process of an individual influencing a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, an interpersonal process that involves attempts to influence other people to attain goals, and also the process of influencing others to facilitate the attainment of organizationally relevant goals. From these contexts, there are three significant elements of leadership: (1) a behavioural process; (2) interpersonal in nature; (3) aimed at influencing and motivating others (Chelladurai, 2014). The very essence of leadership therefore, is *influence* (Chelladurai, 2014; Sanborn, 2006).

Sanborn (2006) has suggested that leadership is not necessarily a title, and don’t need to have one. It can merely be someone who can help shape or influence the world around them with a *positive influence*. Hence, a leader need not be someone who is a manager, or who holds a top position and title in an organization. However, they can be someone who has a passion in their life to want to shape something in the world, to affect the quality of others, to inspire or influence others. And they do so with that passion for wanting to do what they do. They do it because they believe in what they do, through their relationships with other people, but not controlling others, collaborate rather than control, through persuasion rather than order, and get others to follow out of respect and commitment rather than fear and compliance (Sanborn, 2006).

And that is how the youth should be led if there is a passion for developing the young people or youth. The youth leader can be anyone regardless of their position, title or age. So long as he or she can influence the youth to develop and grow, he is essentially a *youth leader*. He is someone who cares about the youth and is passionate about facilitating the youth to move forward and upwards to meet the youths’ potentials and talents. So this perspective of youth leadership is not about controlling the youth, but guiding and facilitating them upwards with the leader being at the bottom. The youth, by nature, especially the current *millennial youth* does not like to be controlled nor be directed. The leader’s role is then to facilitate and empower them to be at the top and frontline, and to showcase their potentials and talents so that the youths can develop, mature as a responsible adult, and succeed in life. The leader’s job is ultimately to make them *better*.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is three-fold, that is, to:

- (1) Examine what leadership and youth development are;
- (2) Discuss the model for leadership in the context of youth development, especially, positive youth development; and,
- (3) Present a different form of leadership model compared to what is commonly practiced.

Objectives

The objectives for this paper are:

- (1) Demonstrate that leadership need not necessarily be a top-down process;
- (2) Highlight a different perspective of leadership that relates to youth development;
- (3) Present the new leadership approaches in developing youth positively.

Scope

This is a concept paper based on literature about developing youth leadership through sports and recreation as a platform and approach to develop leadership upon the youth. It is not research-

research but discuss how leadership could be developed for the youth positively through sports and recreation programmes.

Youth and Youth Development

Who the ‘youth’ are is a controversial and subjective concept where there is no universal definition nor common definition for it. They are sometimes termed as late childhood, adolescent, or young adulthood. Nonetheless, the general understanding is that of a phase of life when a person transits from childhood to adulthood. However, even then, it is very difficult to determine when because different people transit differently. Some become independent and matured at a relatively early phase such as in their late teens of around 18 to 20 years. Others would do so when they pass their 30 years. But to resolve this subjective concept, most countries who have definition of youth, will define it based on chronological age range (which is more tangible and easier to understand). In Malaysia, for example, the Malaysia Youth Policy 2015 defined it as in the range of 15 to 30 years (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan Malaysia), whereas, in the United Nations, it is 15 to 24, while the Commonwealth’s and United Kingdom’s definition is in the 16 to 24 years age range (Lee et al., 2018). However, a legal age may still not be the same as the youth age definition. For instance, in Malaysia (where I come from), you have to be 21 years before you are considered an adult and allowed to make independent decisions regarding your life without the consent of parents or guardians, and also allowed to vote in mainstream elections, and most importantly, accorded full legal rights. Besides, at 17 years, a young person is already allowed to earn a driving license but provided he/she undergoes a training period and subjected to passing a driving test before he/she can be issued with a driving license.

Whatever that is, programmes to develop the youth or young people, and that includes their leadership attributes will be related to those age group that they are categorized as. Youth development, and youth leadership programmes can come in many forms. But take note, that youth development programmes and youth leadership development programmes can be mutually inclusive, yet exclusive. It is inclusive because, leadership can be an area of youth development, but youth leadership development can also stand alone exclusively without being part of youth development. Youth leadership is only one component of the bigger area of youth development.

The Commonwealth Secretariat (2017) pointed out four attitudinal approaches to youth where youth programmes are to focused or relate to: the **deficit approach** where youth is a ‘problem’ who needs to be corrected or rehabilitated such as those in drug abuse, crime, illiteracy, sexual misconduct and so on; **youth for development approach** (or **instrumentalist**) where young people are seen as ‘instruments’ for broader national development through self-empowerment and building connectedness; **equity and welfare approach** that focuses on basic human needs and their social and economic welfare; and finally, the **asset-based** model as assets and with potentials to transform themselves and shaping their social, political and economic development, as well as being active agents of change through focusing their development on their strengths while overcoming their weaknesses. And this last approach where this paper will confine itself on because the asset-based model is also where positive youth development takes place.

A point to note though is that most youth development is either on the deficit or asset-based model (which is a relatively new concept). In the professional field, the deficit model is addressed by those in social work, whereas, in the asset model, it is addressed by professional youth work practitioners or human resource development practitioners. This is because positive youth development is also part of developing human resources as it relates to developing knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills.

Positive youth development (or ‘PYD’) is about teaching, developing, and unleashing the youth with skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for them to succeed in their lives while as the same time, teaching them to stay away from negative influences that prevents them from at-risk behaviours (Danish et al., in Adams & Berzonsky, 2006). It is recognizing the youths’ strengths, reduce the likelihood or impact of negative experiences on the youths, and promote their healthy

development and well-being, as well as their resiliency; and is basically focused on their asset or strength, rather than their deficit or problems so that the youths thrive positively (Caldwell and Witt, 2018). PYD is based on the model proposed by Lerner and colleagues of the *five Cs* – competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring, with a 6th C, i.e. contribution when the other 5 Cs have been established (Caldwell and Witt, 2018). However, in the broader context, these 5 and 6 Cs will manifest when the internal and external strengths and assets have been developed that have been outlined by Search Institute (2017).

Leadership through Sports and Recreation

According to Danish et al. (ibid), sports participation can be a factor in the adolescents' development of their self-identity, self-esteem, and competencies. Sports is a platform for learning the skills for developing character values, responsibility, conformity, persistence, risk taking, courage, and self-control. The nature and environment of sports are what entice the youth to spend their time constructively and from there, that experience facilitate their development. However, their experience from their participation in sport is also a critical factor to determine whether sport has a positive or negative outcome (ibid). And this is where leadership plays an important role in ensuring and determining that the sporting experience will contribute positively to youth development.

Sports and recreation are popular with young people because they are fun, enjoyable, challenging, and recreational, and therefore attractive to them. Consequently, it contributes to their physical, social, psychological, and achievement-related behavior and development from where their positive development can take place (Holt; Zarrett et al., 2008). Sport can also foster development in leadership opportunities such as involvement, participation, self-leadership development through self-assessment, motivation, problem solving, assuming leadership role in a sport activity, serving in sports organization, being team captains, etc. (Mull et al., 2013).

Sport participation is also a contributor to learning where youths acquire values, work habits, and life skills which are essentials of youth development. It is through learning that a person develops and change. And where habits, knowledge and attitudes are acquired (Knowles, et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2018). Leadership skills that can be developed through sports as found by recreational sport researchers include respecting the rights of others, being sensitive toward diversities in people, understanding the consequence of one's own actions, relating well to opposite genders and others, identifying personal values; as well as risk taking, creative problem solving, critical thinking skills, facilitation of productive meetings, long-term goal setting, management of organization, and communication (Mull et al., 2013).

The nature of sport and recreation is that they are characterized by meeting personal needs of freedom and choice, for reflection, self-enrichment, holistic well-being, meeting constructive goals, challenge, achievement, competence and self-worth, personal development, purposeful, learning, provide healthy and constructive experience, and results in intellectual, physical, and social growth (Torkildsen, 2005; Edginton et al., 2003). And therefore because of these characteristics, sport and recreation will be able to engage with the youth positively to facilitate their development and leadership qualities and attributes.

Discussion

In issues of leadership, positive interaction with the youth by the coaches have been found to facilitate positive caring and trusting relationship when the coach demonstrates physical, social, and life skills to increase competency level (Danish et al., 2006). This comes about when the sporting youth is given the opportunity to play more, enjoy the game, has a greater desire to play, and their performance are rewarded. But it must be meet realistic age- and skill-level expectations for them to thrive and enjoy the experience. Sport leadership should therefore be about developing those leaders effectively, as well as delivering sport programmes that teach life and sport skills together (ibid).

In facilitating learning, a programme that was studied (cited by Larson and Walker in Witt and Caldwell, 2018), found that rewards are more effective than punishment in shaping behavior, with the progressive use of positive reinforcements over a series of steps to shape complex patterns of behaviour. Relating to Bandura's "Social Learning Theory", the researchers observed that the most effective reinforcements occurs through role modeling and watching others. For every little improvement or progress, there are little rewards that can be as simple as praises or encouragements or correction of mistakes from the teacher. When learning becomes rewarding, the student continues to improve.

Another popular and long-standing youth development programme is the *Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People* that was founded way back in 1956 by Kurt Hahn (who was also the founder of the Outward Bound School) and Britain's Duke of Edinburgh (who is currently the husband of Queen Elizabeth II) where the programme engages adult leaders to mentor and guide the young people who participates in the programme to meet their goals in the programme sections outlined for them. This programme is now in over 150 countries worldwide with millions of participants as well as those who have 'graduated' from it and became very successful in their careers and adult life.

Leading the youth or young people is not about leading them towards organizational goals and objectives. It is more individualistic – shaping them individually based on their personal needs and interests, and in accordance with their personal strengths, potentials, talents, and positive assets. To develop, the youth need supports, opportunities, programmes, and services (Caldwell and Witt, 2018). These, as well as positive orientation, safe environment, autonomy, and to become and belong; and be engaged, empowered, participate, explore, experiment, and build competencies (Edginton et al., 2005). Therefore, to lead the youth, leaders should acknowledge the *7Es* of youth engagement - *embrace, engage, ensure, educate, enable, empower*, and finally, their *establishment* in their social, career, and family lives (Lee et al., 2018).

New Leadership Model in Youth Development

In leading the youth, the leader should not be in the limelight at the top unlike in traditional leadership models. This is because the leader has to facilitate the growth and development of the youth to meet and achieve his goals in life, regardless of whether it is in his career, family, relationships, or anything he has set for himself.

But before he can guide the youth, he has to understand the individual he is developing. Then he has to develop a relationship in order to gain trust and respect, without it he would not be able to influence the youth. To develop, a youth has to learn and be educated through non-formal approaches such as mentoring and coaching. Once the youth has learned, the leader partially withdraws his involvement by empowering, enabling, and unleashing the youth to decide and pursue his, i.e. the youth's own goals. And finally, when the goals are met, the leader should acknowledge and recognize in whatever means he deems fit – can be medals, awards, certificates, titles, praises, tangible or intangible rewards. At the same time, the youth who have succeeded should be given respect.

While leading the youth, the youth leader could provide support and opportunities for the youth to develop his potentials through attractive sports and recreation programmes/activities and services that are youth-centred to meet developmental and educational needs of the youth (Caldwell and Witt, 2018). This will enable them to thrive and grow.

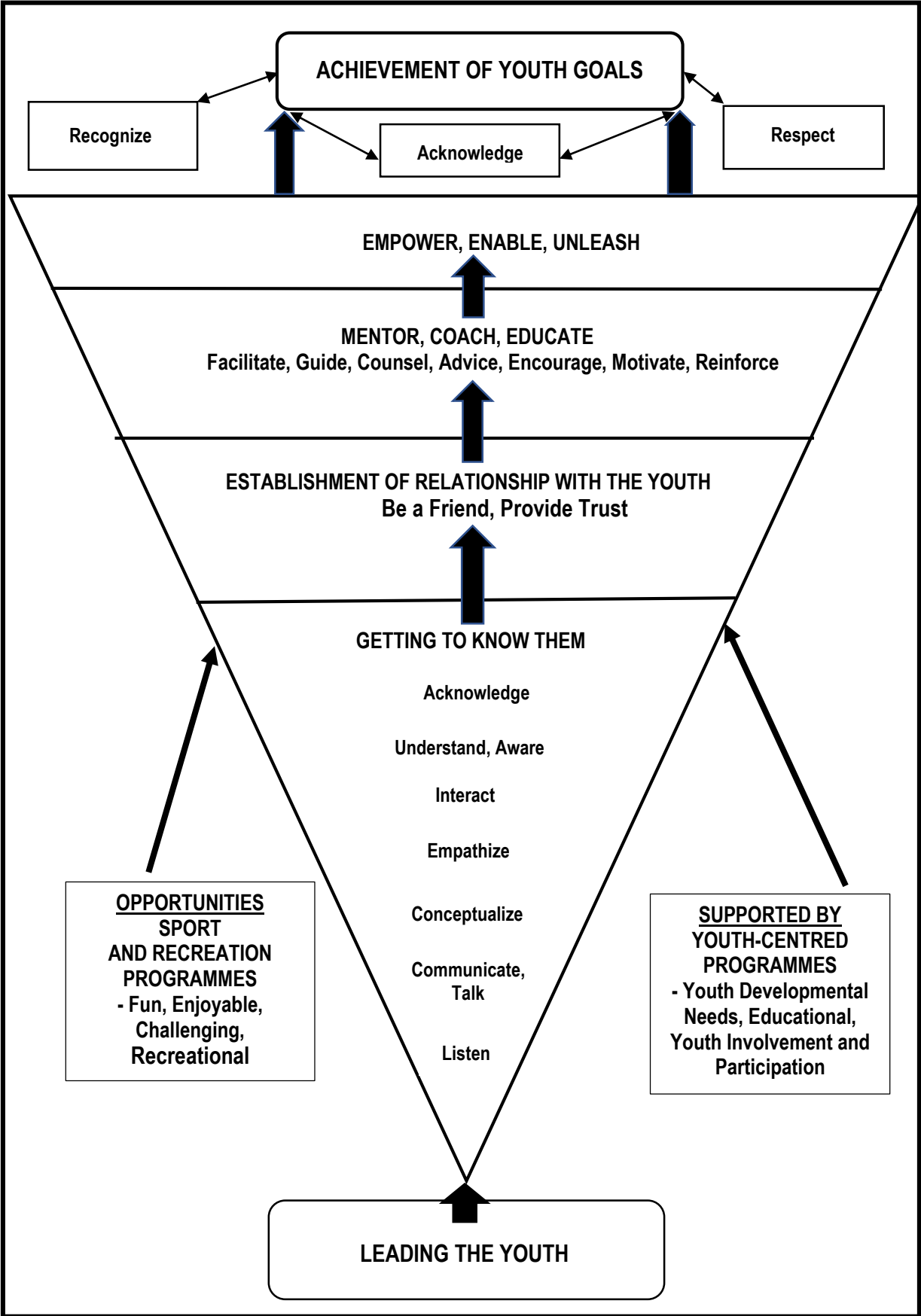


Figure 1: Leadership Model for Leading the Youth

Leadership is a process that cannot take place by itself. It can only be practiced as a feature in programmes as pointed out by Delgado (2002). And sports and recreation programmes with their attraction and popularity in youth participation, with its characteristics of fun, enjoyment, challenge, freedom of expression, and where it develops life skills and values are ideal platforms to provide that opportunities for the youth to engage in positively. However, since such activities can lead to many different outcomes, it has to be supported by programmes that are youth-centred, that is, geared towards youth developmental needs.

The leadership process should be based on “G.E.A.R.S” (Lee et al., 2018). This stands for: “G” – Guided (towards development of leadership qualities); “E” – Experiential (through participation, the youth learns from their experience of how to be a leader); “A” – Action-oriented (leadership should be practiced through active involvement); “R” – Reflection (looking back each time to review and improve), and “S” – Self-understanding and Self-discovery (learning and reflection on the experiences contributes to understanding and discovery of how leadership works and could be practiced).

Conclusion

*“Leadership is not something you do to people. It is something you **with** people.”*

- Ken Blanchard (2007, p.140))

Leading the youth is not about instructing or telling the youth what to do, but instead to learn, to understand, and to discover, and in relation to what Blanchard says, ‘**with** the youth’. Basically, it is showing them the pathways that they could pursue to achieve their own individual goals, and then let them walk it their own way. It is empowering and enabling them to make their own decisions regarding their own lives and destiny.

In accordance with the asset model and positive youth development concept, they should discover their own strengths, and potentials to enhance and improve, while acknowledging the weaknesses they have that they should address and overcome. The leader’s influence is therefore primarily to facilitate and guide. But decisions have to made by the youth himself.

This form of leadership is not about leading a youth to meet group or organizational goals where the leader directs the group member or employee to relate, and to conform to the norms and perimeters of the group or organization. This is *upside-down* model is merely for the leader to help and support the youth to chart his own course in life. In fact, it relates to Greenleaf’s *servant leadership* model in which the primary motivation of the leader is to help others, i.e. the youth in this case, and it involves empathy, listening, awareness, conceptualization, et cetera as depicted in the model above (Hughes et al., 2019). Sincerity, altruism, humility are therefore important traits for this form of leadership.

This model here may not however apply to other situations and contexts where leadership is required. So, it is not necessarily be suitable for other cases. The traditional top-down approach and form of leadership, for instance, is still appropriate for a hierarchical organization where meeting organizational goals are paramount and takes precedence over individualistic goals like this; or those dealing with security and emergency situations where quick and immediate decision-making is required. Leadership approach or model is therefore situational.

A final message therefore is: *“Remember the difference between a boss and a leader: a boss says, ‘Go! – a leader says, ‘Let’s go!’”* – E.M. Kelly (Hughes et al., 2019, p. 4). So, “Let’s Go with the Youth!”.

Recommendation for further study and practice

This is a concept that was observed, experienced and hypothetical but needs further research study so that:

- 1) It can be tested empirically for it to be validated to ensure that in practice it can deliver what has been conceptualized
- 2) Once it is confirmed that this leadership concept is validated, it can then be introduced for practice by youth leaders and leadership practitioners

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