

Cool Copy Cats: Placing Youth and Young Adults as Ministry Leaders

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Abstract

Place youth and young adults as ministry leaders. Adults serve as mentors, but also as those who call young people to leadership. This includes preparing and doing ministry together, as Jesus did with His disciples. It also includes stretching young people as they catch the vision of leading beyond their capacity by relying on the Supernatural. Programs serve as a catalyst to marshal young people to lead. The process must exceed the task of merely creating a program. Instruct adult mentors to create ministry teams that also serve as spiritual communities. In such a setting, all young people are called to lead in some aspect by discovering their places in the Body of Christ.

This model for youth and young adult ministry lives out the word “model.” Placing young people in leadership takes Christian mentoring and applies it to leadership in ministry, like Paul’s admonition, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” 1 Cor 11:1 (NIV). Although it may seem obvious, the need far exceeds the practice and the benefits can expand well beyond maintenance or perpetuity. As important as mentors might be, the most important element is to simply place youth and young adults in ministry leadership, regardless of whether or not such a title or position exists. Instead of expecting youthful leaders to mimic their mentors as copy cats, placing them in

leadership roles needs to push them beyond their developed talents and to rely on God in addition to helpful human mentors.

A Little Explanation Please

At times we limit leadership opportunities to existing roles, and we primarily think of high profile ones such as pastor, head elder, church board, conference president, or some finance position in a hierarchy. Merging youth and young adults with such functions results in resistance from adults and a sifting that results in an occasional super star or future pastor getting a head start as a “junior elder” or a token youthful board or committee member.

In contrast, this model calls for virtually all youth and young adults to function as ministry leaders, each sharing the load by taking responsibility for specific tasks or functions that contribute to the overall ministry of the Body of Christ (Bruinsma, 2009). These may start small and might be new avenues of ministry. They can also be existing services such as a youth group leader or teacher, an outreach coordinator, or serving on a worship or social committee.

Children's ministry relies on adults to lead and the children to follow. By the time a person reaches the age of youth with the onset of adolescence, let there be an expectation that the young people will do some of the leading themselves. This doesn't necessarily mean that adults have no part to play; nor does it mean that everything should be handed over to unsuspecting or even promising youth. But develop a youth culture through words and actions that places young people into leadership roles.

Ideally this takes place by means of a simple structure of adult leaders with youth assistants to begin. Take a functional role like a youth group leader. An adult in such a position becomes responsible not only for the youth group meeting, but also to recruit, train, and empower young people on the youth group team. The team carries the responsibility to create and conduct the program for a given youth group meeting. One person might be the initial impetus and organizer, but the team develops with an overt task of providing the program and a covert task of developing leadership and teamwork for ministry. There might be two-to-four youth group teams that rotate on an agreed upon schedule. The same system could be utilized for various areas of ministry, such as Sabbath School, Friday evening vespers, AY, service activities, etc.

As young people show aptitude and responsiveness, move them into a co-leader role with the adult leader. As development continues, the youth can become the leader and the adult moves into an assistant role, supporting the youth in leadership. The theoretical progression goes from 1. I lead and you follow; 2. I lead and you assist; 3. You and I lead together; 4. You lead and I assist; and 5. You lead and I follow. In reality, there is more likely a "three steps forward, two steps back" process. Just because someone shows great skill in one particular place or time doesn't guarantee consistency, perspective, or internalization. Celebrate the positive, correct the negative, and continue to paint the vision as you support young people in their new leadership.

As you follow the ebb and flow in the lives of young people, your leadership teams will need to anticipate and adjust accordingly. Holidays, vacation periods, major school or church events, and the way life happens demand some level of flexibility. Some leaders will poop out, pop out, or move into other leadership roles perhaps at school or work or other areas of church ministry. In such situations, instead of being bitter for losing someone to whom you gave a start, celebrate that they have been launched into a lifetime of service. Since you don't expect youth to stay youth for their entire lives, always be recruiting, training and celebrating.

Benefits

The immediate result of involvement stands out as a major benefit of this model. When this occurs for young people, mentoring gets better traction because the focus on the program instead of on the person ironically makes the person more open to growth and change in the process. When such developments continue through the youth years, by the time young people reach the young adult stage they sense no need for

adults to make the plans for them since they have tasted leadership in ministry by this time. Instead of continuing church attendance primarily as critical consumers, these young adults make things happen themselves.

Some models for ministry depend on a core group or key leaders for success. This model seeks a place for each person. The need for the Supernatural quickly becomes obvious. Structures and organizations still have their place, but this model functions best as a living organism, adding and dropping different types and forms of ministry based on who is part of the organism, not based on a program that might be in place or desired by adults on the outskirts.

This model works best inter-generationally, although it can work within a single generation. Either way, leaders get trained to do ministry in the moment. But there continues to be an expectation that people will eventually leave, and they will initiate and step into ministry roles wherever they happen to go.

Don't expect copy cat leaders just because of mentors (Elmore, 2009). You aren't trying to merely replicate what exists. Instead, you are seeking for God to develop young people to lead with their God-given talents, the gifts the Holy Spirit gives them, and in their current context. With this model, leaders are part of an organism that can claim originality as a characteristic. Put another way, these are *Characteristically Original, Organic Leaders*—COOL copy cats!

Where is Jesus?

Rather than asking, "What would Jesus do?" let's ask, "What *did* Jesus do?" When it came to choosing leaders, he chose rejects, specifically those the honored rabbis of his day rejected (Bell, 2005). I must admit that this is the first of two problems I have with the model Jesus utilized. The second problem is

that Jesus sent out his disciples way too soon! There was no way that they were ready to go even two-by-two, and certainly not ready for any attempt to "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons." Matt 10:8 (NKJV) But that's what He did; and that's what they did!

Those young disciples, quite likely only teens (Chris L., 2008), found themselves in leadership roles and in the midst of spiritual warfare. This occurred merely after "being called" and observing Jesus and hearing that famous Sermon on the Mount. And while most students of the rabbis went through 12-18 years of training (Chris L., 2008), the disciples had merely three years before their rabbi left them with these words, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matt 28:18-20 (NKJV). The Supernatural would continue with them (Nielsen, 2009).

The need for the Supernatural for the three-year intensive is as obvious as the need for the Supernatural after Christ returned to heaven. The same should be true for us as we place youth and young adults in leadership. There might be "baby steps" in some instances, but we have Christ's example of going well beyond manageable progression to exposure and immersion into establishing the kingdom of God.

What training and time frame would you require from a healed demoniac before sending him as your representative? Passing at least one standardized test? A closely monitored internship? An accountability partner? Therapy? Although the cleansed demoniac begged to follow Jesus, Christ sent him immediately back home to proclaim the

Good News of what had happened to him (Mark 5:18-20).

Christ's healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda and the man born blind leave both in awkwardly jubilant and inappropriate situations (John 5 and John 9). And why did Jesus have so few contact hours with his disciples between his resurrection and ascension 40 days later? Perhaps more seminars or visioning sessions would have prevented their ridiculous final question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Acts 1:6 (NASB). Why didn't Christ hover over them more?

This same seemingly reckless abandon for leadership training, depending on a miraculous infusion for the leader, can be found in other places in Scripture. Noah's one quality for building an ark to save the world before the flood can be summarized in one word: grace! Gen 6:8 (KJV). Gideon as a leader would probably elicit words such as "pathetic" and "pitiful," yet God chose him to lead (Judges 6 and 7). Moses received his call to lead Israel out of Egypt following 40 years with sheep rather than after his training to become Pharaoh. Little boy David didn't even get invited to the family presentation to Samuel, until God overruled Samuel's initial perceptions on who should be anointed as the next king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:4-13).

Similar examples can be cited after the time of Christ. The assessment of Peter and John when they appeared before the Jewish high council was, "As they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus." Acts 4:13 (NASB). Philip conducted an intensive Bible study with the Ethiopian eunuch, and baptized him; then the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, leaving the Ethiopian to carry the Gospel alone (Acts 8:26-39)!

Paul set up leaders in churches he started, although his own stay proved to be somewhat limited to the point that he re-visited those churches and also wrote letters to them, which seemed to be sorely needed. And Paul even split with Barnabas when the youthful John Mark didn't follow through with his responsibilities (surprise?). Yet Paul later took young Timothy under his wing as well as noting to him that John Mark was "helpful." 2 Timothy 4:11 (NLT).

A consideration of spiritual gifts indicates that each person who follows Jesus receives a supernatural gift from God to be of practical benefit. "Each person is given something to do that shows who God is. Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful." 1 Cor 12:5-6 (Message). Most humans and institutions do just the opposite—they place a call to those who have demonstrated the best talents. Will we follow the way of the world or the way of God when it comes to placing youth and young adults in leadership? As many preachers have orated, "God doesn't call those who are equipped; He equips those who are called." If this is really true, then we should place young people in leadership and pray for God to equip them (and join in the miracle process ourselves).

Drawbacks

While copy cats who mimic existing leaders might ensure maintenance or image, it's the cool copy cats who follow an invisible God who manifests Himself in people of all ages and abilities. But the risk is great. It goes against common sense and common practice. It relies on the Supernatural instead of on proven and controlled human experience. Seniority and status get thrown out the window, as do financial resources and politicking.

Young people will cause disappointment, due to inexperience, lack of follow through, unrefined people skills, quitting, letting ego replace calling, failing to adequately prepare, a dimming of spiritual fervor, and getting distracted when the urgent overshadows the important.

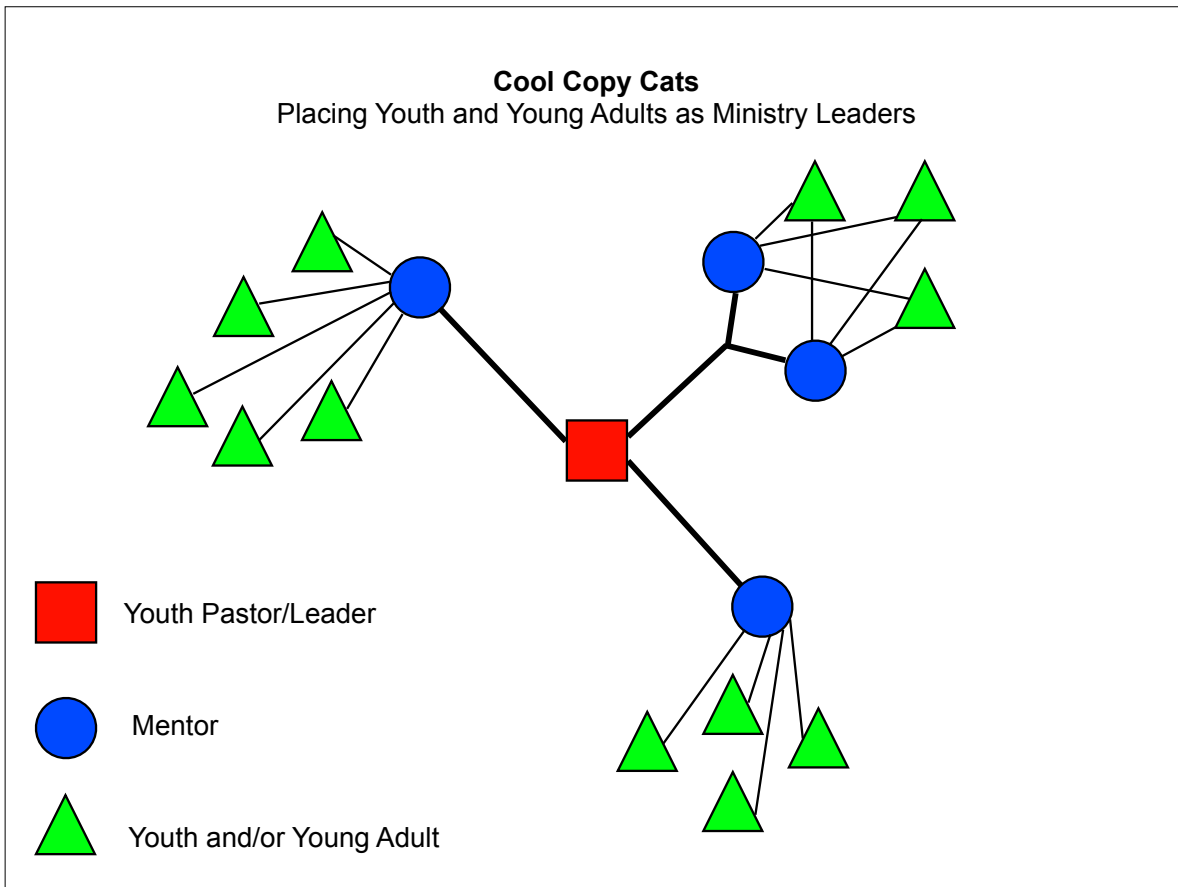
Re-read that previous short paragraph about the drawbacks of placing youth and young adults in leadership. Couldn't the same be said for adults? We will all need to repent as well as confess, sometimes privately and sometimes publicly. And then we will have to return to God and ask for Him to act in us and through us again. Choose any Bible translation and read 1 Cor 1:26-31.

Some may fall into the routine of merely assigning names on a flow sheet to theoretically place leaders onto a template plan for ministry. No wonder some argue against programming (Belcher, 2009, Kimball, 2007, and Oestreicker, 2008).

When adults call young people into leadership and mentor them, community and spiritual growth exceed programming and put it in its proper place (Rainer and Rainer, 2008, and Root, 2007). But the process takes much more time than just doing it on one's own. Program planning simply becomes a catalyst to bring small groups together to grow in their faith and to find ways to communicate it and give it away. That process is at least as important as the actual product called a program.

Putting It Into Practice

Occasionally a young person will catch a vision and step into leadership without adult initiative. This model calls for adults to constantly recruit, train, encourage, support, and deploy youth and young adults for leadership in varying degrees. Instead of an adult leading alone, pull young people into the process, not to become a copy cat, but to



be a cool copy cat—characteristically original, organic leaders.

What role or function do you play in the Body of Christ? Recruit others to join you! If you do music, switch from solo and track accompaniment to group and live accompaniment. If you plan programs, get a focus group and varieties of input and action. If you work behind the scenes, recruit one or two young people to assist you. If you're up front, share the spotlight and coach others while challenging them to live up to what they publicly proclaim.

And keep looking for young people to recruit. After all, your cool copy cats get older each year and they will move on. Prepare to get excited, disappointed, challenged, and wowed as God's actions supersede the best-laid plans and purposes of humans.

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