

On my way in to work this morning, I had the opportunity to visit with my best friend (not to worry - we both have Bluetooth!) We discussed the many roles we have and how our ever-developing leadership skills have been called on in those various roles.

Having leaders in our schools, communities, work place, and even our home is critical to the operation of everyday life. The importance is obvious in both the workplace and educational setting. In the past several years, U.S. higher education institutions have incorporated leadership training programs to offer students coursework that will help develop leadership skills and professional marketability. Most companies and organizations provide additional leadership development trainings to help mold new employees into the type of professional they require for the business. An idea that used to be prevalent in our culture, "Leaders are born, not made" has transformed into the idea that "Leaders are born, made, and molded." Our society recognizes the importance of developing individuals with leadership skills that further capitalize on their specialized skills. The benefits have proven to be worth the investment.

One major benefit of having leadership skills is that you become more marketable to employers. The College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota lists leadership as one of the eight most important qualities employers look for. However if you look at the other 7 qualities they identify, you will see that they are all directly associated with effective leadership. These qualities are: communication and interpersonal skills, intelligence, enthusiasm, flexibility, high energy level, maturity, and skill. A person who has strong leadership skills most certainly has to have all the other qualities employers are looking for.

Another significant benefit of having leadership skills is that it promotes a more positive self-esteem. As leaders gain positive experiences, self-esteem will snowball in the forward momentum called "success." Working and living around people that have self-confidence makes daily living more comfortable. If you have a colleague that struggles with self-esteem, you will find that much of your energy is used in helping them feel successful. As a leader, you can use your energized self-esteem to inspire and motivate others who may be struggling with their own skill set.

A third benefit I would like to point out is that you gain respect from your colleagues and peers when you demonstrate effective leadership. People desire to have purpose and direction – both of which are typically offered by someone they live with, they work for or work with. It is no surprise that people you may never meet will see you in your leadership role and look at how you handle situations. As a parent, this may happen at the baseball field with other parents watching. In the workplace, your co-workers glean information from what they see, hear, and feel. The leadership provided directly effects the work environment.

Why all this talk about leadership skills? I am not sure that individuals realize the power they have to help create effective leaders. I believe the development of leadership skills begins at home in the family setting. As a parent, I find that it is sometimes difficult to be intentional in helping my children develop these skills. What actions can be taken by parents, like me, to help children become positive leaders?

Let them make their own decisions. – Yikes! This means we have to step back as parents and not feel like we need to control every aspect of our child's life. As kids get older and they develop abstract thinking skills (necessary to understanding cause and effect), parents need to loosen their hold on making all the decisions for their children. Admittedly, when I allow my kids to make their own decisions, they often come up with ideas and perspectives that I would never consider! More often than I would like to admit, they come up with some great ideas and solutions that flew right by me.

Let children experience the power of natural consequences. I often wonder if my children's teachers question our parenting style. One of our morning rules is that you feed your 4-H animal first, before eating your own breakfast. Our explanation is that the animals can't get their own breakfast out of the feed bin or fresh water out of the hydrant, so the boys need to take care of the animals first. The natural consequence for our youngest "piddler" is that he got only a bite or two of his own breakfast before the bus arrived in our driveway (he got his milk down, though!) Knowing how important breakfast is, I don't like to do it this way, but it seems to be a great reminder to him on why he needs to keep on task.

Younger children need choices. Young children may be overwhelmed with too many options or simply not be able to think of what the options actually are. In terms of leadership development, you may ask them if they want to set the table or get the cheeseburger condiments out of the refrigerator. Eventually, they will understand that both need to be done as well as have the capacity to initiate the task with little direction.

Becoming a leader is a journey not a destination. It begins at birth and continues throughout our lifetime. Helping our children develop their leadership skills has proven benefits. If we set the foundation, they can take on more of the responsibility as they mature. For more information about child development and parenting ideas, feel free to contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!