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A Blueprint for Action

Service Learning Coach's Manual

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ENHANCING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

A Guide for Adult Coaches

Overview of Service Learning

The teen years are some of the toughest children face growing up. Teens are expected to act responsibly but often are given little for which to be responsible. Opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways can be elusive to young people who are caught in a "holding pattern" until that magic 18th birthday when they cease being kids and become legal adults.

The opportunity to be of service, to make a difference, to do something important and to contribute energy, ideas and self to one's community has always been important for youngsters--- making tray favors for a rest home on holidays, cleaning up the litter in a park, hauling off our Christmas trees. Raising well-established teen service to a higher plain is the idea behind Service Learning. Service Learning connects meaningful community action/service with academic learning, personal growth and civic responsibility.

Service Learning is broader than making tray favors or picking up litter-- it offers teens the opportunity to explore community issues in-depth; plan and initiate appropriate action to tackle issues; and to make a real difference in their community. The power to make a contribution that is truly needed by a community is an authentic task for teens looking for entry into adult-like roles.

What is My Role as the Adult Leader?

The role of the adult leader in a Service Learning Project is to be a coach. In *A Passion for Excellence*, co-authors Nancy Austin and Tom Peters define coaching as "the process that encourages people to step up to responsibility and continued achievement, and treats them as full-scale partners and contributors". The Service Learning coach is not the same as a sports coach but does have overlapping practices. Service Learning Coaches:

- ✓ clearly express the purpose of the activity
- ✓ are ethical, respecting rules and procedures
- ✓ communicate well and continuously
- ✓ model qualities they ask of their team
- ✓ see or envision the "big" picture for the team

They are learners as well as teachers--they learn from their team members.

"The best coaches set in motion a continuing learning process--that, we find helps people develop a tolerance for their own struggles and accelerates the unfolding of skill and contributions that would not have been possible without the 'magic' attention of a dedicated coach."

Nancy Austen & Tom Peters, *A Passion for Excellence*

As a coach, a critical task you will perform is to provide your teens with appropriate and timely feedback. Teens may perceive a lack of feedback as a lack of care or concern about the project. Constructive feedback is vital to the success of your project. What is feedback?. It is a process that gives teens input about how you see them as a member of the team. Feedback is best when it is:

- ✓ heard from you first
- ✓ given as soon as possible after an activity or task is completed
- ✓ specific
- ✓ given honestly and with constructive suggestions for future efforts
- ✓ given equally to the team members

How do I go About Being an Effective Coach?

Exhibit a supporting attitude with your teens. Help as needed but do not do the work for them. Work with your teens to break down barriers and encourage their efforts at problem solving. Teens may express fear or hesitation and it is a challenge knowing when to act and when to stand back and let the teens explore and even struggle a bit. Know your teens and their maturity level so that the learning experiences are appropriate to their abilities. Listen and talk, ask open-ended questions that promote reflective thinking, and work *with* the teens to find answers. **Foster teamwork**, where there is an expectation of everyone contributing and participating in the success of the project, over individual achievement.

How do I Help Youth Start a Service Learning Project?

Once a team has been formed, provide your teens with an overview of the project and let them know your expectations and ask them what expectations they have. Present group-building activities and ice-breakers to strengthen the group and foster teamwork.

The next step for the team is to **brainstorm** (come up with ideas) for 5-10 minutes to identify problems and issues in the community. The following rules need to be understood and followed by the group for effective brainstorming:

- ✓ all ideas are OK (defer evaluation of ideas until end of process)
- ✓ build on other people's ideas
 - ✓ after listing ideas, check for understanding and eliminate duplications by combining them and improving them to form better ideas

After the brainstorming process is completed, the teens can insert their ideas into the workbook ("Brainstorming I") and further develop favorite ideas. The group should then carry out the "**Gathering Information**" activities. It is important to first gather information about the potential project to avoid duplication of services and to promote collaboration. Following is an example of how important it is to do the research before developing a plan of action.

In a school-based after-school program in San Jose, children identified graffiti as a community issue. As the group gathered information they found out that the student council in their own school was also working on the same issue!! Hence they joined forces and together discovered that the City of San Jose has a graffiti program and provides groups with helpful hints and paint. Each youth group then targeted different parts of the community in their action plan so they could have more impact.

You will then guide the team through the process of gathering information about the project idea. Questions to ask the group include:

- ✓ what else do you need to know in order to plan your action?
- ✓ who else in the community may be working on this issue?
- ✓ who might be able to answer these questions?
- ✓ when you talk with people, what do you want to ask them?

The group should generate a list of community people to talk with and then go talk! Surprisingly, even the most self-assured teens may find it difficult to call or visit community people and talk with them about the planned project. The workbook provides some tips and interview formats. Nonetheless, it is well worth the effort to spend time role-playing interviews and phone calls. Begin by having the teens practice in pairs and then each teen should "perform" before the large group. Be sure to include problem situations such as an encounter with a grump or overly cautious receptionist who may want to screen all calls.

What Happens Next?

Once the teens have gathered adequate information about their community and the issue they will be able to **brainstorm** again ("Brainstorm II") and select a project on which to work.

The **planning** activities can now begin. Why is it important to plan? Planning the project keeps the group focused, provides teens with a road map of action, and allows them to know when they have completed a task. A project plan should be detailed enough so everyone knows "where they are going and how they will get there" but flexible enough to allow for "detours" in reaching the final destination.

How do I Coach this Process?

To begin the planning process, write the proposed project on butcher paper and ask the teens to brainstorm for 5 minutes (more or less) steps needed to accomplish the project. Review brainstorm rules with the teens and record all ideas. From the list, the youth then choose activities they will conduct.

Divide a second piece of butcher paper into three columns, labeled "What", "When" and "Who". In the "What" column the youth will record (in chronological order) the activities they have chosen to conduct. They should then suggest dates for activity completion and write these in the "When" column. In the "Who" column they will list the names of all youth who will conduct the specific activities.

Check that individual teens do not have too many activity assignments and that the deadlines are realistic. In creating an action plan it is important to remember to be flexible in developing the "When" column. It is a good idea to suggest to teens that they add a day or two to their timeline in case they encounter unexpected obstacles. The teens then transfer their butcher paper plan onto the "Plan of Action" page in the workbook.

Throughout the project, your role is to advocate for the teens as they carry out their action plan. With the teens, regularly review completed activities to identify what worked well and how to make the process better. Support the teens by celebrating small and big accomplishments since this will re-energize them and encourage them to keep going. Periodically review the action plan and adapt it according to new information and unexpected events.

How Should the Project be Evaluated?

Project evaluation needs to be a part of every plan. This allows the teens, collaborators and funders to know if the project met its goals. However, project evaluation does not have to be complex or prove that the project solved a large societal problem such as the elimination of homeless pets. Instead, evaluation shows what happened as a result of the team's efforts. As coach, you may need to help your team choose realistic evaluation methods and guide them as they carry out the evaluation. The workbook gives some examples to help you.

How Can I Help the Team to Succeed?

The good coach not only provides encouragement and advice but also *takes active steps* to help ensure the success of the project. When using the word "success", we mean that the project is a positive learning experience for your team and (hopefully) benefits the community in some way. Following are some areas you, as coach, can influence which in turn will promote success:

Foster Teamwork: Job developers tell us that future jobs will go to those people who can effectively work in a team. Nonetheless, most teens continue to be rewarded primarily for individual competitive efforts. It is important that teens

"gel" as a team before embarking on a community project. There are many ways to encourage team building. Examples include: start each meeting with a fun icebreaker; participate in an adventure ropes course; plan, make and eat a meal together; problem solve as a group. Common elements of these activities are get-acquainted-time, communication, shared responsibility and fun. There is no magic formula, however. Teams gel when there is mutual trust which takes time and continual work to achieve.

- **Debrief the Experience:** Equally important to project success are regular opportunities for teens to "debrief" their activities. In fact, successful coaches tell us that team building and debriefing are the two elements most critical to a project's success. Debriefing allows teens, buoyed by success, to share positive activities and also allows the team to support one another through difficult times. It is a time for everyone to praise one another's hard work. As coach, you should limit your participation to active listening and/or facilitation of the group discussion. Ask open ended questions. Avoid giving advice.

One method of debriefing is to hold a "round robin" in which you ask a question and each youth gives a response which is recorded on butcher paper. Once an answer has been given, another youth cannot give the same answer. Continue asking for answer

until all ideas are recorded. Following are sample questions you may want to ask:

- what worked best when you conducted your interviews?
- what would you do differently next time?
- why do you think (fill in blank) happened?
- how do you plan to get the information you need?

- **Involve Parents and Guardians:** Your greatest ally and sometimes (YIKES!) your biggest headache is parents. However, their support is paramount to a successful project. *Now*, teens will express lukewarm enthusiasm about their parents being part of their activities *but*, communication with parents can be critical to your team's success. KEEP YOUR TEENS' PARENTS INFORMED. Newsletters or written notes and occasional phone conversations will go a long way toward gaining support as the project leader. Parents need to know what their children will be doing and provide written permission for their children to go on an outing or to participate in an event. Parents are most responsive when you let them know what you expect of them.

- **Use Community Resources:** There are resources in your community to help your team plan their project. This is a tremendous learning opportunity for your teens-- help them identify resources, don't contact them yourself. Locating and tapping into community resources can be the jumping off point for the project and the spot where the team really begins its "teamwork." What are community resources? They can be as simple as a next-door-neighbor willing to talk or as challenging as an Internet search. Resources are all around you -you just need to help the teens tap into them. Examples include:

- Local newspaper
- The library
- City officials
- Neighborhood associations
- Churches
- Schools
- Chamber of Commerce
- Cooperative Extension

- Historical Societies
- Museums
- The phone book
- Senior citizens

How do I Avoid "Swamp Monsters"?

Beginning a Service Learning Project can be very exciting -- so much to plan and so much to do to make the plan become real. Before you begin, however, you need to prepare for some of the possible "swamp monsters" that may rise up and try to bite you. Following are some tips that will help you overcome potential obstacles such as swamp monsters:

- **Play it Safe:** Even with "almost adult" teens, safety will be a concern. Unfortunately, the incidence of child molestation and harassment has created a need for all adults and teens to protect themselves. When teens are out on a fact-finding expedition or canvassing their own neighborhoods they should always travel in groups or pairs. For your protection, when meeting with a teen, another adult or teen should always be present. If possible, hold your meetings in public spots, such as the library, a community center, a church or school. Transportation is a problem for some teens. Locating your meetings near a bus or light-rail stop may promote safety as well as increase attendance at meetings.
- **Resolve Conflict:** As the group works together some conflict will arise. In fact, those who study group dynamics tell us that "storming" is a normal part of the group decision making process. *Expect it!!* As coach, it will be your job to help guide the group in resolving conflicts as they arise. The workbook includes "Win/Win" Guidelines from the *4-H Spaces* curriculum to help you.
- **Pay Attention to "Nuts and Bolts":** When teens are tired, hungry or worried about missing their bus they won't do their best work. Providing a snack, scheduling meetings around testing, and/or ending in time for teens to catch the bus are examples of small acts that will ward off big problems.

Some Final Words of Wisdom ...

Although you may feel a bit overwhelmed by all this advice, we think you will be a great coach. Research tells us that caring, supportive adults, high expectations, and opportunities for real participation are three key factors in fostering resiliency. Your willingness to support your team and your expectation that your team will perform a valuable service for their community means you are already contributing to their healthy development! The rest will follow. *Really!*