

Answering the "What ifs" of Mentoring Young Leaders

There will be a whole new set of leaders in your organization in the next few years. The leaders of today will be long forgotten. Some will have retired, others moved on to new callings and others simply dropped out of ministry. Regardless of the reason, the reality is the leadership picture of your organization will change. **If we care about the long-term effectiveness and impact of our mission then leadership development must be a priority today.** That means we need to be looking among the next generation to see who can take up the mantle of leadership and give them the coaching and experience they need to lead well.

So what do tomorrow's leaders look like today? This is an important question because while we may have a few good years left, our job is to identify and develop the leaders of tomorrow. So back to our question- what do tomorrow leaders look like today?

They're idealistic – Many young leaders haven't had their first big humbling failure yet. So they're idealistic, have all the answers and quick with an opinion. They believe they have a better way. The only problem is they haven't worn the shoes of leadership long enough to really know. Once they get a few good failures under their belt they'll be all the wiser. But that's not a good reason to hold them back from trying. Why not allow them to get some "failure" experience under the watchful eye of a wiser experienced leader? I love young idealistic leaders, they stretch me, and they challenge my thinking. They remind me to trust God rather than logic. They remind me not to say, "We've never done it that way before." Yes, idealism can be dangerous, but it can also has its advantages. They tend to think, "What if?" more than a seasoned leader. So what might happen if you intersect the wisdom and experience of a seasoned leader with the enthusiasm and idealism of a young leader?

They're raw and unpolished - Have you ever gone gem mining? When my kids were young they loved going to the mountains of Tennessee to dig through the dirt looking for these hidden treasures. They would spend hours digging, sifting, searching until they would discover the rare gem among the rubble. It didn't look impressive at first but once they spent some time cleaning and polishing they held a shiny prize in their hand that they would proudly display in their room. Young leaders can be raw and unpolished. It's easy to judge them for their lack of discernment and discipline. It's tempting to put them aside deeming them unready. But those who invest development time and energy when these unpolished leaders are young will discover a strong leader they can trust and empower in a few short years.

They're unproven - Young leaders don't have much of a track record. They're experience is minimal and not well rounded. They may have a success or two but can they repeat it?

However they do have energy, ideas, gifts and strengths that make them a high powered package of potential. What if we saw it sooner rather than later? What if we developed it today rather than tomorrow? What if we went to work shaping them immediately rather than eventually? What if we got ahold of them before they were ready? What if we gave them opportunities that were never given to us at that age? What if we exposed them to great places, great organizations and great people while their minds are still moldable and impressionable?

What if we shared some of our leadership responsibility with them, passed along some of our

credibility and shared some platform? When you invest in a young leader this way you not only help them build their character and competency but you're also helping them establish their leadership credibility.

I'm always amazed when I think about how young some of the great biblical leaders were. Joseph stepped into leadership as overseer of the Captain of the Guard in Egypt at age seventeen ([Gen 37:2](#)). Josiah was only eight when he became king! Okay that may be a little too young, but he reigned for thirty-one years and *"walked in the ways of his father David and did not turn aside to the right hand or the left"* ([2 Chron. 24:1-2](#)). We don't know how old he was but Timothy was a young man when Paul began to entrust him with leadership.

So what are you looking for in young leaders? If you're looking for maturity, perfection, experience, consistency, reliability you may not find it. But if you look for their strengths, gifts and passion you can develop the other qualities that will one day make them great leaders.

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