

Seizing the Teachable Moment

There are two types of student activity advisers: those who look at themselves as sponsors of activities and those who think of themselves as teachers of leadership development. The former view their job as working with student leaders to sponsor events and programs. This type of adviser generally considers it his or her responsibility to make sure that all the events and activities on the group's schedule go smoothly and successfully, often spending more time *doing* than *advising*.

Activity advisers who view themselves as teachers of leadership look at the larger picture: the *cocurricular* nature of student activities. These advisers consider it their responsibility to teach student leaders *how* to plan and carry out events, not do the planning themselves. Rather than a goal-oriented philosophy of activities—the important thing is to have the event or program—they have a process-oriented philosophy—the planning process and the carrying out of the program are the important elements, not just having it.

For these advisers, the fact that

you held a dance or a pep rally isn't the most important thing. The process of having student leaders plan the event, pull together the elements needed to make it a success, communicate with the people involved, resolve conflicts, conduct the event, and evaluate its success—that's where the learning occurs.



Skills for Life

Teaching goal setting, project planning, communication skills, conflict resolution, time management, evaluation, and the host of other skills needed to pull an event or program together isn't an easy task, but it is one that will benefit students for the rest of their lives. Students who participate in this type of learning experience gain confidence and leadership skills that will affect their future every bit as much as what they learn in a classroom. Educators who see things like pep rallies as an intrusion on the education process, or as an extra element that is nice but not absolutely necessary, are not seeing the bigger picture. These types of activities are an integral part of the education process.

And just like other parts of the education process, students won't always get it right. Because planning student activities is a learning experience, inevitably something will be done wrong, slip through the cracks, or fail in some way. Goal-oriented advisers usually step in at this point and fix it—the show must go on! Process-oriented advisers usually seize the teachable moment and work with the student leaders to help them fix it.

As Kadi Judd Pojeta, coordinator of student leadership services for the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, puts it, "It's not my job to clean up their mistakes—it's my job to get them to think of plan B on the spot and be creative. I let them figure out—sometimes with some heavy guidance or hints—how they can fix their mistake/error/omission or whatever it is."

Every leader needs to learn the consequences of his or her actions, or lack of action, and to accept responsibility when things go wrong. Sometimes students learn more from an activity that doesn't go well than from one that succeeds, and learning how to deal with failure can be a valuable lesson.

When Do You Step In?

There are times, however, when you as a professional educator can't stand back and let an activity

fail just so the students involved will learn from the experience. There are several factors to take into consideration when deciding whether or not to step in.

How will this affect the school?

If the event is a major production that many students beyond your group are involved in, chances are you won't want to let it fail. You don't want hordes of angry students demanding where the DJ is for the Homecoming dance, or angry crowds waiting for a parade that never comes, for example. If it's a smaller activity that won't be much noticed if it doesn't happen, you might want to let it go if student leaders drop the ball.

How will this affect the students involved? Some students will be devastated by any public failure on their part, while others will shrug it off and move

on to the next challenge. Take the emotional impact the failure will have on the students involved into consideration when deciding how much to step in to save a project that has gone wrong.

How will this affect your own professional evaluation? After all, advisers are also evaluated on the success or failure of the activities their groups sponsor. Most people view student activities more from the product-oriented philosophy and don't realize that planning the activities is as much about the process as the product; they judge on what they see as the end result. If your professional evaluation includes your work as an adviser, be sure to discuss with your evaluator your philosophy about student leadership development, so he or she knows that failures are sometimes part of the plan.

Processing the Experience

The valuable lessons learned through failure will be lost unless you take the time to evaluate what went wrong and draw tips from the experience that can be applied to the next endeavor. Be sure to sit down with your student leaders and process the experience—what went wrong, why, and what would you do differently if you had it to do over again are good questions to ask. Also consider the elements that went well, if there are any.

Finally, help the student learn from the mistakes made by asking, "what can you learn from this experience that you will apply to future situations?" Processing the experience in this way will build self-assurance from defeat and enable your student leader to face the next challenge with aplomb.

On Failure...

Failure seldom stops you. What stops you is the fear of failure.

—Jack Lemmon

Forget past mistakes. Forget failures. Forget everything except what you go to do now and do it.

—William Durant

Failure? I never encountered it. All I ever met were temporary setbacks.

—Dottie Walters

Don't think of it as failure. Think of it as time-released success.

—Robert Orben

Trying is the first step towards failure.

—Homer Simpson

If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate.

—Thomas Watson, Sr.

Persistence can change failure into extraordinary achievement.

—Matt Biondi

A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent in doing nothing.

—George Bernard Shaw

One of the reasons mature people stop learning is that they become less and less willing to risk failure.

—John W. Gardner

One who fears failure limits his worth. Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.

—Henry Ford

If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down, but the staying down.

—Mary Pickford

Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.

—Robert F. Kennedy


There is no such thing as failure. Mistakes happen in your life to bring

into focus more clearly who you are.

—Oprah Winfrey

It's hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed.

—James Thurber



The image shows two planners. The top one is titled 'THE DIFFERENCE MAKER' and 'PROGRAMMING THE BEST YEAR EVER For Leaders'. It features a gear graphic and the Herff Jones logo. The bottom one is partially visible and also has 'HERFF JONES' and 'Home Year' on it.

The DifferenceMaker Calendar/Planner: A Pro-Active Life Planner for Student Leaders.
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