

# Making the Most of NATURAL LEADERS

By Greg Turk

Dwayne stood among his South Central Los Angeles peers. I wasn't more than two minutes into my opening words about how we'd be spending the next 10 weeks together. This relatively small high school for youth on probation had offered some relief to its teaching staff by placing all 30 "after-school" students in my workshop meant for 15. And there they all sat. Each student turned to have a clear view of Dwayne as he stood to address me. He spoke with ease and confidence, "Excuse me." An appropriate start, given that I was in mid-sentence. "Excuse me, man, but just so you know, we don't give a f#%\* about any of this sh#@. We don't even want to be here. Not to disrespect you, but just so you know."

Programs serving youth or young adults who are gang-involved and/or engaged in highly at-risk behavior do a fair amount of work to teach individuals to become leaders. But as important as that is, it is equally important for adults to work effectively with existing, organic leaders within these groups. And there he stood. Dwayne. He was already a skilled leader who successfully influenced those around him, including the after-school group I was supposed to influence. As a matter of fact, he seemed to be leading the group better than I was. How I related to him in that third minute of my time with the group would greatly affect our remaining 39 hours and 57 minutes together. I was faced with the question, "**How do I effectively work with existing leaders among gang-involved youth and/or youth engaged in highly at-risk behavior?**"

The work to develop young people into leaders is done with good intentions. But, at least in some cases, it seems that such efforts attempt to move "good" people beyond the influence of leaders who are deemed "bad." This approach can too quickly label and exclude someone with great potential. In other words, Dwayne, who has as much potential and need for nurturing as the others, could – because of his appeal and charisma within the group – be weeded out in order to allow the group to be clear of his influence. Weeding out a bad influence can simultaneously rid the group of one of its greatest assets: a leader who can help move the group and the individuals in it further along. Weeding out is losing an opportunity to assist a young person to become a terrifically positive influence on family, community and the world by helping him or her understand the power and potential of his or her own life and gift of leadership.

"So, let's just go home." I knew the kids had to be in school for the next two hours, but I was making a choice not to challenge Dwayne through confrontation. Instead, I wanted to relate to him, first, and see if we could then work together toward a common end. Dwayne told me that they couldn't go home. Then, he voiced his frustration with having to stay after school for two hours every day with nothing to do and with teachers who didn't teach, but just wanted the students' probation

officers to lock them up. (I later found Dwayne's assessment far more accurate than not.) I gained some understanding about why he and his peers would not "give a f\*&%", given their perception that others didn't care about them. For the next 10 minutes, I facilitated their free-flow conversation. Then, I returned to what I had to offer, given that they had to stay: movie clips, working on goals, some additional supports and opportunities. Now, it sounded better than sitting with their heads on their desks for two hours. Looking at Dwayne, I asked the class, "Why not let me do my thing? We'll see how it goes." He agreed, as did the others.

**In working with gang-involved or highly at-risk organic leaders, it is important to relate to them in a personal, caring, and healthy way.** In our initial conversation, Dwayne found that I wasn't going to confront him, "fix" him or put him in his place. I wasn't there to exclude or disrespect him, as other authorities had. I treated him with respect and care.

**Secondly, it is important to relate to at-risk youth leaders about their own needs.** This, of course, requires building a relationship in which information is freely given. Dwayne expressed a need for help in getting back to his previous school. In an exercise, he wrote of wanting to become a fireman. And, I noticed him speaking indirectly about his need for adults to help and care about him. Those are identifiable needs of a young person that I was able to respond to in a healthy and caring way. Assisting a leader in moving toward new hopes and goals makes it easier for that person to join and support the overall effort.

**Acknowledge that leaders have a great deal to lose.** Whether it is influence, friendship, attention, or something else enjoyed or gained from their role among peers, leaders reap benefits. A young leader's role can place him or her in a public light that brings with it an experience of vulnerability. Loss of position or status, including public loss to an adult, can strike deeply at a youth's social status and self-concept, drastically disrupting his or her life. Fighting to protect or recover such a social role when threatened can easily result in what may often be framed as additional delinquent behavior. Understanding this dynamic helps us relate to young people. If I push young leaders in public, they will, in some form, push back to protect themselves and their roles.

**Invite leaders to lead with you.** Once a positive relationship is established with an at-risk young person, make a private, personal invitation that acknowledges the person's leadership and solicits assistance. Before my second session with Dwayne's class, I arrived early to make sure I could greet him and overtly show interest in and respect for him. After that session, I asked him to hold up for a second so I could speak with him. I explained that I recognized him as a leader to whom others looked for guidance and influence. I could see he appreciated my framing his behavior with that understanding. I reiterated my intention in the class and the value of it. Because he had already bought in, he agreed. The next step was an easy invitation. "I need you to help me," I said. I asked him to be the leader that he is

by being a positive influence in our class. He agreed, and the “we don’t give a f#%\* about any of this sh#@” student became one of my greatest advocates.

Establishing a relationship may take a day, or it may take a year or more. **Once you have achieved a relationship, co-leadership is the next step.** Assisting someone with leadership has value for both the individual and the group. Although there may not be formal group leader meetings, there need to be check-ins. Parameters should be set by the adult and oriented toward the good of the group, but without supplanting the needs of the individual young person. Soliciting ideas about the group and the process is valuable: “What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?”, “How could this be better?” If necessary, I am clear at this point that the class or project is my responsibility, and that although I value input, I may or may not make changes. I am usually open about why I make the decisions I make.

Being open about why I make the decisions I make is part of mentoring. **Mentoring youth leaders to understand the power and responsibility of their influence is necessary.** However, it is crucial that this happen after a trusting relationship is built and that it happen as an effort to accompany a person forward to their maturation and success. Such a journey normally encounters great challenge, including coming to terms with one’s own influence and responsibility to self and others.

I find Dwayne and the vast majority of gang-involved or highly at-risk young leaders to be highly capable individuals who, like all of us, are in need of positive guidance and support. But because of their leadership strengths, regardless of their age and the sort of group they lead, they are different than other youth and young adults. Relating to them must be different as well. Adults should accept responsibility for creating an environment in which all youth experience success and nurturing. For those youth and young adults whose leadership actions challenge boundaries and authority, may we accept responsibility for finding a way to walk forward with them to their potential for leadership and personal greatness.

*Greg Turk works in South Central Los Angeles as Pastor of All People’s Christian Church and as Director of Exodus Urban Academy and Homie Accents, a soap and lotion company he founded to employ gang-involved individuals.*

