

# LETTERS TO LEADERS



## Letter 5

## Your Role as Teacher and Leader

- How to put yourself in the learner's position.
- Characteristics of different age groups.
- Ways to say, "Good job."
- Different approaches to your leadership role.

### Dear Leader,

On the good days, being a 4-H leader is tremendously rewarding. On the less than perfect days, when members don't pay attention, don't see the value of what they are learning, or do not follow through on their responsibilities, it is good to step back, regroup and remind ourselves that sometimes trying to teach new things can be challenging. Here are some ideas to help you survive those challenging times.

### The Child-Centered Approach

4-H uses a child-centered approach to learning. By child-centered we mean focusing on the needs and interests of the youth learner. For example, a hammer in the hands of an adult is fairly easy to use, and we can hit the head of the nail most of the time. In the hands of a 10-year-old who is just beginning to develop her psychomotor skills, the hammer can be a heavy and unwieldy object. Trying to hit the head of a nail, even using two hands, can be a daunting task.

In our roles as teachers, mentors and 4-H leaders, we need to remind ourselves from time to time that what seems obvious and logical to us adults can be confusing and confounding to kids.

In 4-H we encourage members to dare to try new things – ideas, values, life skills and leadership tasks. The best way to do this is to try to do it! So we encourage members to set individual and club goals, make plans to reach those goals, carry out the plans and assess their progress.

Learning by doing is not always easy. As the adage goes, "The difference between success and failure is trying one more time." That's where you, the volunteer leader, come into the picture. It is through your guidance, understanding,

encouragement and reinforcement that members learn how to set goals and achieve them. Many times it would be easier to tell members what to do, even do it for them. But that doesn't help members develop critical thinking skills. Covering for members' lack of following through doesn't teach responsibility.

Think with, not for, your members as they set their goals. Provide support for your members when the going gets tough. If members fail to live up to their responsibilities, let them experience the consequences. Then let them know you still care about them, help them learn from the experience and grow from it. Developing new skills, attitudes and understanding often happens a step at a time. Applaud them every step of the way. Did you know there are more than 100 ways of saying, "very good"? People thrive in a climate of love, so give family, friends and 4-H members plenty of praise, warmth and signs of affection. People need smiles and approval. Look for the good behavior you want to strengthen, and then say, "very good" to people in a variety of ways. Here are some suggestions:

- "I'm proud of the way you worked today."
- "Now that's what I call a fine job!"
- "You're doing a good job."
- "You did that very well."
- "You've just about got it."
- "You must have been practicing!"
- "That's the best you have ever done."
- "Fantastic!"
- "Congratulations!"
- "You're really improving."
- "I knew you could do it."

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- “Right on!”
- “That’s quite an improvement.”
- “Superb!”
- “Now, you’ve figured it out!”

## Helping Members Learn

4-H leaders wear many hats, but the encourager hat is the most important. You help members feel like they belong and are accepted because they are viewed as capable by someone with high expectations for them.

When a group of 4-H alumni was asked what they learned from their 4-H leaders, alumni reported the following:

- Their leaders helped them become more responsible.
- They learned leadership and life skills.
- They tried new things.
- They contributed to their communities.
- They set meaningful goals.
- They learned how to get along with others.

Each age group has different characteristics and unique developmental needs. These characteristics and needs are good to keep in mind.

## Ages 6 to 8: Characteristics and Implications for Us

- Are at a period of slow, steady growth.
- Use active learning experiences.
- Learning how to use their bodies by mastering physical skills. Use small and large muscle activities.
- More interested in process than product. It’s okay for 6 to 8 year olds to work on a project rather than completing it.
- Thinking is concrete. Use the senses to help the child experience things.
- Enjoys doing. Provide lots of opportunities for young people to be active.
- Learning to sort things into categories. Have youth collect things and sort in various ways.
- Learning how to be friends. May have several “best friends.” Provide small group activities.
- Mixed genders may enjoy playing together. Involve all genders in the activities.
- Peer opinion is important. Small group activities are

effective. An adult is needed to share approval.

- Seeks adult approval because they are not confident enough yet to set their own standard. Offer support to the young people.
- Likes to play games but not ready to accept losing.
- Emphasize cooperative games in which every child wins.
- Learning coping skills is important. Point out reasons behind failures and offer suggestions for improvement.

## Ages 9 to 12: Characteristics and Implications for Us

- Are quite active, with boundless energy. Emphasize active learning experiences.
- Enjoy group activity. Emphasize group learning experiences.
- Have interests that often change rapidly, jumping from one thing to another. Encourage many brief learning experiences.
- Usually do best when work is laid out in small pieces.
- Use detailed outlines of the learning experiences.
- Need guidance from adults to stay at a task to achieve their best performance. Work closely with 4-H’ers in this age group through the life skills approach to leadership development.
- Admire and imitate older members. Encourage apprenticing with older 4-H’ers.
- Are easily motivated, eager to try something new.
- Provide a wide variety of learning experiences.
- Do not like to keep records and do not see the value in them; need assistance and close supervision.

## Ages 13 to 15: Characteristics and Implications for Us

- Are concerned about physical development, being liked by friends, social graces and personal hygiene and appearance (even though they don’t like to admit it). Encourage learning experiences related to understanding yourself and getting along with others.
- Desire a sense of independence, yet they want and need their parents’ help. Encourage working with adults and older teens to complete learning experiences and apprenticing.
- Are self-conscious, with many needing help to get

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over inferiority complexes. Concentrate on developing individual skills.

- Want to get outside of their own community to explore. Provide learning experiences outside of the community.
- Are getting over the age of fantasy and beginning to think of what they will do when they grow up but are often unclear of needs and values. Relate leadership and life skills to career choices.
- Are interested in activities involving all genders. Encourage learning experiences involving all genders.
- Are interested in sports and active games. Encourage active, fun learning experiences.
- Encourage deeper exploration of leadership roles; encourage more detailed record-keeping of leadership experiences.
- Are ready for in-depth, longer learning experiences.

## **Ages 16 to 19: Characteristics and Implications for Us**

- Social needs and desires high. Put more emphasis on personal development wherever possible (mental and social).
- Want and need a strong voice in planning own programs. Provide suggestions and several alternatives rather than detailed instructions.
- Want adult leadership. Emphasize guidance and counseling from adult leaders rather than directions. Recommend liberal use of discussion method.
- Quite interested in coeducational activities. Provide many opportunities for all genders to work together.
- Areas of interests are more restricted; patterns of interest becoming more definite. Project work can be considerably more in depth.
- Need vocational guidance. Include suggestions and information of a career exploration nature.
- Developing community consciousness. Recommend civic projects of a service nature.
- Beginning to think of leaving home for college, employment, marriage, etc. Put emphasis on economics (management, budgets, record-keeping, credit, etc.). Many who go to college will not return to their present community after graduation.
- Interested in travel and adventure. Trips rather than medals and ribbons should be provided as incentives.

## **What Kind of Leader Will You Be?**

Equally important as your teaching role is your leadership role. How much leadership and ownership your members feel for their club depends on how much you give them. Here are some examples of different leadership roles you can fill with your club.

- **Us-and-our club.** The leader knows the individual members well and is interested in them and in what they do. The club belongs to all the youth, and the club will be most successful when it exists for the members' benefit. The leader says, "Let's go," "Let's find out," "How shall we best do this?" The leader takes an active part in club affairs but does not control them.
- **Leader-alongside club.** The leader moves along beside the club and with it. The leader watches the progress, offers suggestions and actively helps do the work. The leader is genuinely interested and enjoys being a leader, but does not have a feeling of owning the club. He or she sees that the job is done.
- **Leader-out-in-front club.** The leader is out in front and draws the club behind. Soon the leader speaks of "my club," which may make it appear to others that the club belongs to the leader. Programs may be planned, but they reflect only the leader's wishes.
- **Hands-off club.** The leader is in the back, makes no decisions for the group and forces the group and the individuals to chart their own courses. Good as well as bad decisions, plans and programs are permitted to develop. Strong clubs get stronger under this type of leadership. Weak clubs may fall apart.

Which relationship is right? No one style of leadership is the "right" one. In fact, depending on the situation, each one could be "right." The trick is to find the one that works best for you in your group. You'll probably find yourself most comfortable and the members happiest in one of the four types of relationships. As interests and experience change, so does the relationship. For example, in a new club starting with young members, you would probably be most effective "pushing or pulling" the club along. Would this still be the "right" relationship after the members and club have had a year or two of experience? Probably not. The 4-H club experience provides valuable learning for leaders as well as members.

While the members learn by doing, you can learn by leading! Have fun!

# WHAT IS 4-H?

**How I plan to use the information in this letter:**

**New activities to incorporate into our club program:**

**Other people who could help us and how they might help:**

**Questions to ask LSU AgCenter extension staff and other leaders:**



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