

Strategies for Transformational Leadership Development Among 4-H Youth

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Introduction

As more wicked and complex problems emerge, there has been an increase in the search for how transformational leadership skills can be developed in formal and informal settings to inspire hope, trust, and corporation, and to adapt to the present-day global dynamics (Andenoro & Skendall, 2020; Anselmann & Mulder, 2020). Identifying new approaches for fostering transformational leadership development among youth is critical and timely (Farahnak et al., 2020).

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

- The American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE, 2023) has prioritized leadership research.
- Existing literature suggests youth transformational leadership behaviors consist of two main behaviors: vision development and persuasive communication (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2023).

Vision Development
involves a relational approach of identifying what followers are motivated by and then creatively developing a shared and compelling goal (Aguas et al., 2017; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015).

Persuasive Communication
involves the artistic and charismatic presentation of a shared vision and persuasion of followers to achieve the vision (Williams et al., 2018).

- Youth transformational leadership development emphasizes youth striving to create connections and engagement with followers, thus increasing their motivation to perform above expectations (Bass, 1985).
- Beyond these insights, though, an important research question remains:

What youth development programs and strategies are most aligned with transformational leadership development?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore strategies to transformational leadership development (TLD) among intermediate and senior 4-H youth. Snowball and convenience sampling 4-H Extension agents from the Virginia 4-H Extension, the Southern Region Program Leadership Network 4-H Committee, and the National 4-H through the USDA. Participants were recruited based on interest and further referrals from initial respondents, allowing access to a wider network within the 4-H community. In total, 15 individuals participated in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Verbatim transcripts were coded and analyzed using line-by-line analysis with Atlas.ti.

Results/Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four strategies for fostering transformational leadership development:

Themes	Selected Quotes
Youth-Adult Partnership	“It’s about creating a developmental relationship with the youth. Adults need to be aware and intentional about creating that relationship, so that the youth feel safe and can feel like their voice can be heard.” (Kasie) “Help youth by being their guide into whatever change that they are trying to make and support them as those young people see fit.” (Claire)
Developing Capacity of Adult Leaders for Transformational Leadership	“So many of the programs that I have been able to attend as an agent, I come back with a beautiful manual to adopt in the communities where I serve, specifically for youth-related programs.” (Kate) “I think we need to focus a little more on training for our adults, some of whom are volunteers....I think a strategy for 4-H is to be more mindful of the fact that we need our volunteering adults to understand that they are instructors and teachers, and that you give them not just a lesson plan but guidelines in plain languages.” (Luke)
Enabling Youth to Solve Complex Problems	“We can support youth by giving them authentic experiences in 4-H—not just talking about it but actually putting the youth in leadership roles.” (Kasie) “When our communities are looking for youth participation, encourage the youth to step up. We have town meetings here in our county where the community leaders decide on specific issues... Put the youth at the table and engage them in the decision-making process so that they can model positive behavior.” (Blakes)
Building Effective Transformational Leadership Development Programs	“Being more intentional in the way we market our programs and where we market them is important.” (Idris) “If the youth find the transformational leadership program fun, they are going to come back with the feeling that they are a part of something huge.” (Luke)

Conclusions

- The study presents four important conclusions:
- 1) It underscores the importance of adult leaders learning about and embodying transformational leadership (Sundgren, 2019).
 - 2) It amplifies the importance of enabling youth to solve complex problems (du Plesis et al., 2024).
 - 3) It recommends tailoring transformational leadership programs to be accessible by youth across cultures and communities (Khan, 2022; Song, 2022).
 - 4) It underscores the importance of youth-adult partnership as a valuable skill for fostering transformational leadership development among youth (Camino, 2000; Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2024).



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