

Engaging and Empowering Youth Workers

Engaging and empowering young persons is an important part of the learning curve which they are expected to experience. This contributes in a significant way to their growth and development. It would be faulty reasoning to suggest that young persons are not ready to be upskilled into leadership roles and to take on responsibilities, simply because of their age. More progressive thinking would suggest that it would be better to focus on the issue of maturity. However, maturity cannot stand alone, but should be weighed alongside the individual's competence, readiness for the level of responsibility, capability and capacity to get the job done.

Preparation is known to be a key factor in determining the readiness of young persons to assume any level of responsibility. This is the appropriate thing to do, rather than to take the risk of throwing the individual in at the deep end. There is support for providing opportunities for young persons, as this will facilitate their growth and development. Haste should never be the order of the day in trying to push young persons to take on key roles, which requires some form of previous exposure and/or experience. While there are exceptions to the rule, it is best that young persons are initiated and mentored.

Maturity has been advanced as a key ingredient for young persons who are to be placed on the front line in assuming leadership roles, where there are inordinate demands, expectations and responsibilities to be shouldered. The essence of maturity lies within the ability of the individual to make good decisions, choices, and the ability to demonstrate a sense of sound reasoning and stability. The ability to think rationally and not to be easily influenced or persuaded, are signs of what maturity is all about. Being dogmatic and not having a sense of objectivity, are certainly two things to be red flagged.

There is merit in the view that young persons should be allowed to grow into leadership roles. This is supported by Cooper, Healy, and Simpson ([1994](#)) who reported that students who possess leadership positions in student organizations achieve better than non-leaders on scales such as educational participation, career development, involvement in cultural and standard of living planning. The

conclusion drawn from this seems to coincide with the adage of 'Let children be children.'

The assessment of the readiness of young persons for leadership roles which in the main are occupied by adults, should basically concern itself with the ability to make decisions, set goals, communicate effectively, exercise good listening skills, possess people and problem-solving skills. The undertaking to engage and empower young persons in the world of work, requires that mentorship is a priority. Generally, providing mentorship is reflected in the process of work or job supervision. This sometimes begins at the level of work attachments.

The beauty of mentorship or job supervision, provides the opportunity to support young people, so as to enable them to play an active role in all decision-making, to be able to take their initiative and to be innovative. The benefit of this process includes that of having consultation with the young employees, with a view of acquiring their perspectives on matters. It ought to be recognized that young people have the least influence on policies. This should arouse the thinking of employers to the importance to be attached to facilitating the involvement of young people, and to consider how they can best improve their work with and for young people.

With the understanding that young employees have an interest in making quick progress, the need to provide mentorship is essential. Inasmuch that millennials don't have the experience to go straight to the top, there is a need for guidance to be constantly offered and support provided.

Workplace mentorship serves the interest of the young employee and the employer. The benefits include increase employee satisfaction, assist with employee engagement and can result in employee loyalty. This process which allows for knowledge sharing, becomes a mechanism which employers can use to develop future leaders as part of the organization's succession planning.

It is desirable that young persons aspire to reach for the top, especially at a time when there is a call to create positive social change. Though this is the case, their ability to respond to the challenges which are to confront those in leadership roles, as it relates to planning and making decisions, first requires that they have good self-

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confidence and self-awareness. It would be a mistake to believe the youth exuberance is all that is required to see the individual through.