

Students helping students: advice, examples

You talk about being a leader, not a follower. How do I know if I am a leader?

Leaders have the following characteristics:

They contribute to their classes, families, and schools. They are always part of helping, not hurting.

Instead of tearing down others, they build them up. While others start fights, they settle differences.

They are in control of themselves.

They care for others.

They walk their talk.

They are not bossy, so people can look to them for creative solutions to their problems.

They know right from wrong.

They ask questions, without fearing those who might call them dumb.

They stand up for the less fortunate.

They have great compassion for the hurting.

They usually believe in causes more than their own enjoyment.

How many of these qualities do you have?

I'd like to tell you about one leader. A couple of years ago, Josh McDowell, who has spoken to more college and high-school students than anyone else alive, invited about 100 speakers to be part of his "Why Wait?" weekend retreat, in California. He taught us creative ways to show teens why they should wait until marriage to have sex.

We all arrived at the retreat site in a twenty-hour period. Guess who carried most of our bags to our rooms? Not the bellboy, but the man who had a million things on his mind that would make the conference a success--Josh McDowell.

Now that's leadership!

Guess where Josh McDowell got his idea of leadership from in the first place? The answer is the same one you'd give to the question, "Who washed His followers' feet about two thousand years ago?" You've got it: *Jesus!*

Being a leader means being a servant. If a person has too much self-importance to serve others, he or she is no leader. That means you do dishes and clean your room before you clean up your town.

Leadership doesn't mean you wash your dad's feet, but it may mean you help wash his car. How can you wash your little brother's feet? (That's a weird thought, isn't it?) Maybe you do it by being nice or at least not trying to get even. Though being nice to your brother may seem like a radical thought, I think it's what Jesus had in mind.

I know someone who is hurting, but he won't tell me what the problem is. How can I help him open up?

You cannot force anyone to share with you, but you can open the door, gently and quietly. Begin by following these guidelines:

1. Develop an icebreaker. When a professional counselor first sees a family, he may have a parent share all the problems she has with the child. After Mom lists the sixty-nine things John has done wrong, the counselor turns to the child and says, "I bet you're delighted to be here today, aren't you? You probably couldn't wait to get out of school and rush in here with your mom, so she could tell me about these things you do to upset the family life."

If that doesn't raise a chuckle or let the child know the counselor is open to his side, he might add, "It's tough raising parents today, isn't it?"

When you counsel with a person, you, too, need to let him know things are not one-sided. Build up some hope. Perhaps you can have the teen answer the question, "What things would your mom or dad say are wrong with you?" After the teen lists five or six things, bring in creative humor to show him there is some hope. Get him to laugh and realize the moment will pass.

2. Ask him to define the problem as he sees it. More than likely this will be very different from Mom or Dad's point of view.

3. Encourage him to seek possible solutions to the problem. Ask what he has tried in the past. Make a list of things that have and haven't worked. The more clearly the person you counsel sees his problem on paper, the easier he will find it to understand. In addition he will be able to see that he *can* get through this.

4. Offer additional counseling. You may discover that another counselor could better help this person. Maybe you know someone who has lived through his problem and has discovered steps that work. Don't be afraid to refer him, if you know more help is available.

I know I need help, but I just can't seem to tell anyone. How can I develop the courage to ask others for it?

No matter what problem you have, sooner or later you will have to deal with it. You can wait, and the problem may get worse, or you can tackle it now, while it's smaller.

By admitting that you have a problem, you have already shown wisdom, but you need to take action. Begin by focusing on the fact that talking about your problem will get it out in the open, where you can deal with it. Don't put your eyes on the difficulty of speaking, but on the benefits that may result from sharing your trouble. Find solutions, people, ideas, encouragement, and hope. You don't have to live in the middle of something that's too big to deal with alone. Learn to live free from worries. Get help!

I'm concerned about someone. I know he is hurting, but how can I approach him so he won't take it the wrong way? He hasn't let me help before, but things seem to be getting worse.

The fact that you want to help your friend shows you have feelings, empathy, and a desire to help. Those are all good. They will help you as you try to give this friend a hand.

Here are some other things to remember.

1. Chances are that your friend is crying out for help. He just doesn't know how to express his need. Put yourself in his place. What has it been like to hurt in your own life? How have others helped you? You seem willing to help him now.

2. You may be the only person who can feel his hidden pain. Don't let fear keep you from becoming part of the solution. Later he may thank you for taking that first step.

3. You could wait too long. Don't let his story be part of the daily news; then it will be too late. He shouldn't have to slit his wrists before anyone has the courage to offer help. Go to him. If you feel uncomfortable doing it alone, find someone who can help you, and go together.

I know what it's like to be in that kind of situation. Several years ago I waited too long to help a friend whom I knew was hurting. He hanged himself, and to this day I regret not acting on the intuition that told me to help him.

You can't help someone who will not let you. If he still remains closed up, you cannot push him. But leave him with the message that he can turn to you if he changes his mind.

If the situation seems impossible, keep these guidelines in mind:

1. If he will not share with you, leave him with hope. Share the truth that there is an answer to every problem. Give him some reason to believe that life can become better.

2. You may need to share the need. If you have reason to believe this is a life-threatening or extremely harmful situation, go to an adult and tell what you know. Don't carry too heavy a burden on your own shoulders. *Do not* spread the news around among your friends. **You are not a trained counselor-get help.**

A girl came to me for help, but her problem is too big for me to handle. What should I do? Should I tell her to come back later or send her to someone else?

When someone comes to you with a problem that you cannot provide counsel for, don't simply tell her to come back, unless by doing that you will be able to provide the help she needs. Instead stick with her until you can connect her with others who *can* provide assistance.

Even if you can't solve all her problems, you can still help her by:

1. Listening. Show her that you care enough to be there when she needs you, to listen without interruption, to concentrate on and understand what she says. Listen to her the way you would like someone to listen to you when you have a problem. Don't jump in with possible solutions before she has finished telling the story. *Listening* means "open ears, close mouth."

2. Admitting your limitations. If you can't provide counsel, don't fear admitting it. Let her know, though, that you can put her in touch with someone who will help her.

3. Contacting another counselor. Take her to an older, wiser person—a school counselor, a caring teacher, or someone trained to find an answer.

By taking these steps, you will let her know her situation is not hopeless. Together with caring counselors, you can find an answer.

How can I convince people I will keep their stories and problems confidential, if they share them with me?

Are you a peer listener or just a friend who wants to help others? If you are a friend, follow these guidelines:

1. Don't be a blabbermouth. If you spread a person's troubles all over school, no one will want to share with you. After all, you wouldn't want an embarrassing story about you to become public knowledge. How much less a person with a serious problem wants it known.

2. Earn the trust of others. Even if you don't have a reputation for talking about others' problems, you need to let them know you will be openhearted and trustworthy. Until your friends know you won't broadcast anything and that you will not be overly judgmental, they will not feel secure.

3. Know when you've reached your limits. As a friend, you can offer an ear. Listen carefully and support the other person, but do not provide advice when the situation has gone beyond a friend's control. Instead refer your friend to a trained counselor who can provide in-depth help. By listening, you have done right, but you cannot solve everything alone.

If you are a peer listener, the above truths are for you, but so are a few more.

1. Understand your school's policy. Know what you can and cannot do. Adults should have set the rules, and counselors and trained professionals should provide advice. Abide by their guidelines.

2. Keep things confidential. The confidentiality rule is twice as important for a peer counselor. Only discuss a person's problems with your adult advisor and possibly another peer counselor, if he or she needs to know something. *Never* share such problems with your friends. Even the most juicy story should remain in confidence-remember, your talking could have serious consequences for the person who shared the problem.

3. Know when to break confidentiality. Whenever you counsel someone, begin with this rule: I will keep everything confidential, unless it means you or someone else would be at risk in the situation-in danger of abuse or suicide. If you must break confidentiality, tell only a trusted counselor who can help the situation.

If you become trustworthy, people will open up to you. Strive to keep these effective-counseling rules.

I want to become a peer listener and help other teens. How can I convince the rest of the school even just a few kids-that I can help and that I can help them?

Is there a peer counseling program in your school? If so, join it; if not, you may want to help start one. However, you will need the cooperation of your school, in order to do it there. Establish a good relationship with the administration, teachers, and the proper professionals. Their backup becomes essential if you run into problems you cannot handle. Do not seek to do it with students alone.

1. Begin by getting the proper training. Once you have done this, let other students know you are a peer listener and have been trained to listen and initiate help.

2. When you start, gain small successes. Help those with small problems first, to gain some background. Don't take on the largest problem in your school, because failure at that may stop you in your tracks.

3. Ask the school what problems they most need help with.

Form a committee of adults and students; put out a survey to find out where the student body needs you most. Let your school know you are for real and that there is hope. You can be part of the solution to hopelessness among your peers.

Forming a peer-counseling network or becoming part of an established counseling team may not be easy, but stick with it. You'll want to convince students that you have an answer they may not have found elsewhere. Above all, remember you are a listener, not a trained counselor.