

Tending the Flock

TEACHING LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO YOUTH



From an interview with President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, and Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

To some youth, adulthood seems a long way off. But before long, the rising generation will be leaders in their homes and in the Church. What can we teach them now?

Preparing the rising generation to build strong families, to lead the Church, and to return to their Heavenly Father is an important responsibility—one that involves leaders, teachers, and, most of all, parents. “The responsibility of building leadership in the Church belongs to the father and the mother,” Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explains. “As youth grow and mature through their teenage years and move toward adulthood, the Church picks up an important role in this process of giving youth an opportunity to lead, but it begins in the home.”

Here, Elder Ballard and President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, share 10 principles related to teaching leadership skills to youth, distilled from their own observations and experiences.

1. Start at Home

Teaching leadership in the home can be done in even the simplest of circumstances, such as when a parent is preparing a meal or repairing something around the house, Elder Ballard says.

“In my judgment, there is no substitute for fathers or mothers taking a child—even when the child is young—and showing the child what they’re doing and how they’re doing it. The child grows up knowing a lot about life and how to do things just by being at the elbow of his or her father or mother. It also helps the child feel like he or she is part of the family council process.

“There are situations where young people don’t have both a father and a mother in the home. We certainly understand that. But somebody is raising them, and that person is number one in teaching them how to do things and how to lead.”

Gospel learning can happen in the home even when youth are members of the Church but their parents are not, President Uchtdorf says. Ward or branch leaders can invite parents—regardless of



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whether the parents are Latter-day Saints—to be involved in their children’s Church activity. Some of the best methods are through tools that already exist.

“Leaders can take advantage of the established tools the Church has—the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet and the Duty to God and Personal Progress programs. The *Guidebook for Parents and Leaders of Youth* explains how we can help our youth succeed in these programs and develop leadership skills,” President Uchtdorf says. “Take those tools into the homes of the young people. Invite the parents to help their children accomplish the goals and tasks and the other good things that are offered.

“This will take special effort on the part of the leaders, but it will help these parents establish the leadership potential that is based on the family. It will also show them what we are all about. It will show them that the Church unites families and that it presents wonderful values—values that make us more Christlike. It will show these parents that we ‘talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ . . . that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins’ (2 Nephi 25:26). If we use what we have in place, we can help all of our youth become leaders.”

2. Teach in a Council Setting

Elder Ballard notes that it’s not uncommon for adult leaders to assume responsibility that actually belongs to the youth. “Leadership among youth grows when the leaders counsel carefully with their organization,” he says. “For example, let’s say a deacons quorum has five boys who are active and three who are not. Whose responsibility

is it to recover the three who are not active? Far too many leaders would say it’s theirs.”

Instead, a leader should bring the matter into a council setting with the members of the quorum presidency and ask, “What are we going to do, how are we going to do it, and who’s going to do what?” Elder Ballard says.

“If youth see a bishop or another leader who runs everything, who doesn’t involve others, and who doesn’t bring into council all the resources that he has, the youngsters are going to think that’s what a leader does. It’s a great tragedy when a bishop thinks, ‘This is *my* ward, and we’re going to do it *my* way,’ losing sight that it’s the Lord’s ward. We ought to be seeking to know what *He* wants us to do and how *He* wants us to bring resources together to make things happen.”

3. Provide Teaching Opportunities at Home and at Church

Having opportunities to teach—even simple ones such as bearing testimony, giving a thought on a scripture, or standing up for gospel principles in small discussions—are essential for young people, President Uchtdorf says. He adds that teaching is the essence of leadership.

“Often our young people are the only members at their schools, so they need to learn that they are truly valuable and that they know their religion. They need to understand that whatever they’re doing, they’re always teaching. If we provide our young people with teaching opportunities, encouraging them not to be ashamed of the gospel, we will help them greatly.”

The organization of the Church provides opportunities for not only spiritual growth but growth in other areas. President Uchtdorf says of his career in aviation, “Everything that

helped me to accomplish what I did in my professional life, I learned through the Church.”

He says he now sees the same thing happening with members of his family. “My grandsons are known as members of the Church, and they are known as the best presenters in their classes. Why? Because they have learned these skills at home and in the Church setting. They’re not even cognizant of that kind of learning—it just happens.”

4. Help Them Overcome Fear

When Elder Ballard was in his late 20s, he was called to be a bishop. “I faced great anxiety,” he recalls. “I’d never been a bishop before. Both of my counselors were old enough to be my father. I thought about all the bishops I’d ever had and tried to glean from their examples those things that I admired and thought were worthwhile. But ultimately *doing* the assignment, whatever it is, helps you overcome that fear.”

Fear is inherent with a new assignment, Elder Ballard adds. “A 12-year-old who is made the deacons quorum president will have some apprehension. He might wonder, ‘How do I conduct a meeting?’ Well, he’s shown how to do it. He may stumble, and it may be difficult. But after a few times, he knows that he can do it. He has taken a giant step forward. Once you know how to do something, all of a sudden you can lead without fear.”

Confidence also comes in understanding who we are, President Uchtdorf adds. “Take Moses in the Pearl of Great Price. He learns that he is created in the similitude of God and that God has a work for him to do. When you know you’re on the Lord’s errand, it’s different. That’s why our young people need to know who they are and that the Lord will be with them.

“When I was a teenager, a missionary

was teaching our class because we were a small branch. One thing he said hit me hard: ‘When God is with you, who can be against you?’ This kind of confidence gives you the power to do things even if you’re afraid, even if you feel you’re not qualified to do them.”

5. Let Them Learn Their Duty

Leaders may be inclined to conduct, provide the music, or pray at a youth fireside or other meeting, but they should be “shadow leaders,” overseeing the youth who perform these functions, President Uchtdorf says.

“This can be a challenge for parents and leaders because they know that they can probably do it faster or better. It takes patience to let the youth do it. Sometimes that involves letting them stumble. The scripture says, ‘That my people may be taught more perfectly, and *have experience*, and know more perfectly concerning their duty, and the things which I require at their hands’ (D&C 105:10; emphasis added).

“You set the example and let them learn. Consider the Savior. He lets *us* do *His* work here in our different callings. He is patient with us. That is what we need to do with our young people.”



Elder Ballard relates as an example an experience he shared with a returned-missionary grandson who wanted to hang some things on the cinder-block walls of his apartment. Elder Ballard went to his grandson's apartment to show him how to drill holes and put in anchors.

"I did one and then asked him where he wanted to put the next one. He showed me, and I said, 'OK, put it there. You saw me do it. Now you do it. Here's the drill.' So he did it. And he did the rest of them too. He went slowly because he was nervous. I could have done it twice as fast. But now he knows how. It built his confidence. If he wants to hang something else, he'll just come borrow the tool. I hope he brings it back!"

6. Give Them the Big Picture

It's important to explain to youth that one of the reasons they're asked to obey and to serve is that they will lead families and the Church in the future. But their obedience and service will do more than prepare them for their future family and Church responsibilities; they will also prepare them to fulfill their personal missions in life.

Focusing on the big picture blesses not only the youth but also their leaders, President Uchtdorf says. "Sometimes I think we focus too much on details. If our adult leaders bring the big picture of our purpose and potential to the

hearts and minds of the young people, the details will be easily managed."

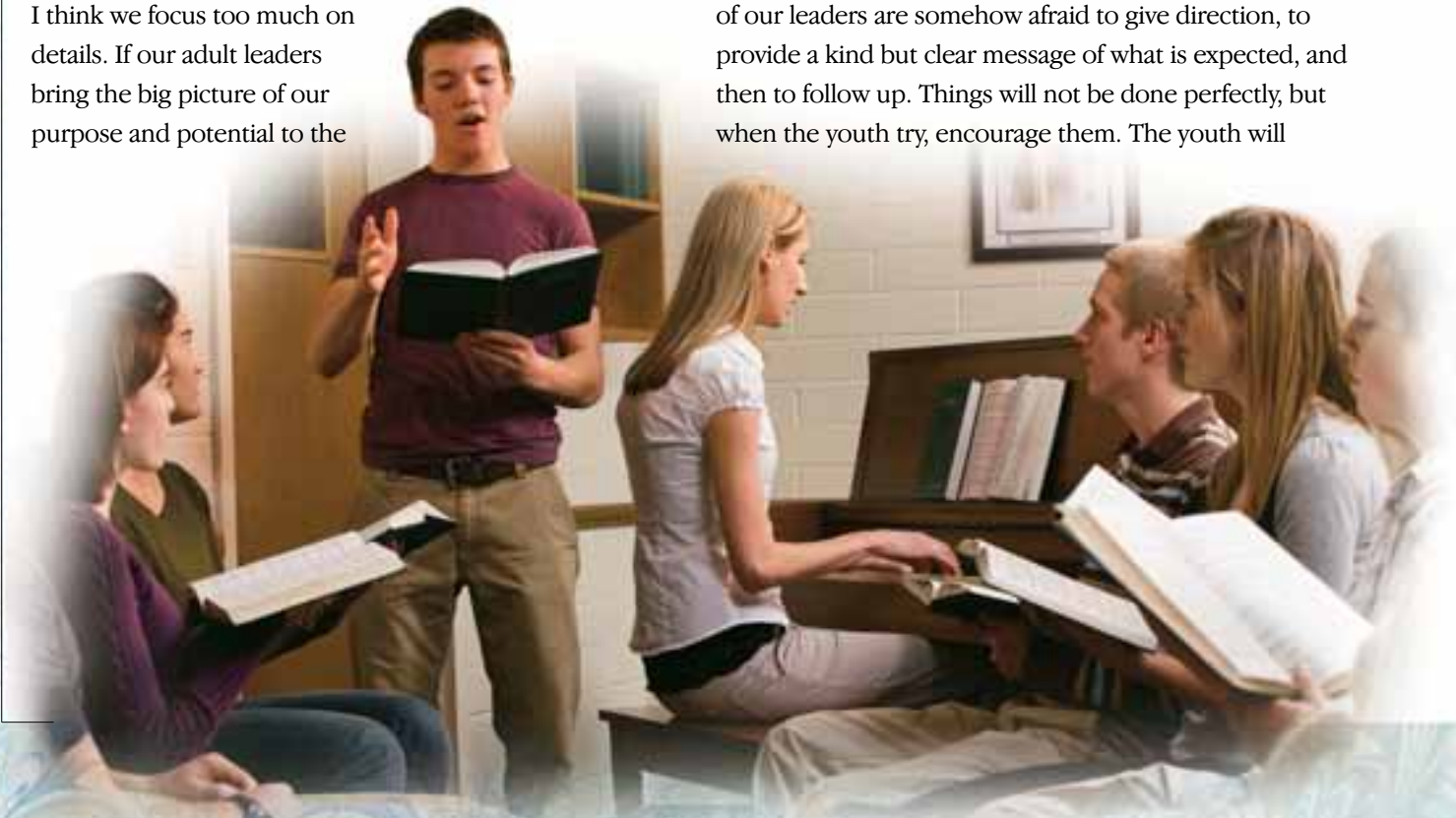
Understanding and communicating clearly and kindly with youth are also critical, he adds. "When I was 13, I was called as the deacons quorum president. Our branch president took a few minutes to find a classroom and meet with me, out of the hallway, and tell me what I needed to do. He gave me wonderful instruction of what was expected of me, both by him and by the Lord.

"Do you know how many deacons we had in our class? Two. But he still took the time to prepare himself and prepare me. That was 50 years ago, and I still remember how it touched my heart. He wanted me to succeed. He gave his personal attention and time. He gave kind but direct instructions, and he followed up."

7. Establish Accountability

The Lord doesn't need admirers; He needs followers, President Uchtdorf says. "You learn to be a leader by first learning to be a follower. The scripture says to 'act,' not to be 'acted upon'" (2 Nephi 2:26).

"The next step is to follow up. That's what we learn in the temple—the return-and-report principle. But some of our leaders are somehow afraid to give direction, to provide a kind but clear message of what is expected, and then to follow up. Things will not be done perfectly, but when the youth try, encourage them. The youth will



remember that. They may not remember the words, but they will remember the feelings.”

8. Know That You’re Entitled to Inspiration

When Elder Ballard was a young bishop, a rowdy nine-year-old boy caused his Primary teacher a lot of angst. After several weeks the teacher escorted the boy into the bishop’s office and said, “Bishop, here’s one of your flock. Tend it.”

Bishop Ballard wasn’t sure what to do. But at that moment an impression came: ask the child to report every week about his behavior in Primary. Bishop Ballard issued that challenge, and it changed the boy’s attitude. The child saw that he could do things differently.

“I didn’t have that idea of accountability in mind before he landed on my doorstep,” Elder Ballard says. “But the Lord, by the power of the Spirit, inspires a worthy and a righteous teacher or leader to know what to do and what to say to bring the best out of anyone, in particular our young people.”

Incidentally, that nine-year-old turned out to be “terrific,” Elder Ballard says. He served a mission, married in the temple, and became a great leader.

The spiritual preparation required for inspiration takes work, President Uchtdorf says, but it is essential. He learned a similar lesson during his career as a pilot. Flying 747 airplanes was fun, he says, but the preparation required to get the 747 off the ground was a lot of work. “For a teacher or leader, the work part is prayer and knowing what the individual young man or woman needs. Leaders also need to ensure that the youth program is not fun and games only but a wonderful, joyful occurrence to help them progress in their young lives and become what they’re meant to become.”

9. Take It Back to the Home

Ultimately, leaders—particularly bishoprics—need to be responsible for appropriately advising and teaching parents about what is going on with the youth of the ward. Bishops and branch presidents should not betray personal, confidential matters, but they *can* teach collectively about general concerns.

“If I were a bishop today,” says Elder Ballard, “I believe I would not hesitate to go to the priesthood and Relief Society discussion on the fifth Sunday and talk to the parents about some of the concerns I had about the youth. I would tell them, ‘What I know about your youngsters as a result of the interviewing I’ve done over the years is between them and me, and they know that. I won’t betray their confidences. But in general we’ve got a problem. You parents need to know about and deal with this. . . .’ Some parents may be afraid to hear the real issues going on. But they need to know.”

10. Realize the Eternal Potential of the Youth

“We have raised the bar,” says Elder Ballard. “But that doesn’t raise it just for the youth. That raises it for the parents, who have the primary responsibility for teaching their children principles. That raises it for the leaders. That raises it for the teachers. We’ve all got to take a step up in a world that is unraveling as fast as this one is.

“We see that they love the Lord,” he continues. “Remember that He loves them. Inside the little body of that young man or young woman you’re teaching is an eternal spirit. These young people belong to our Heavenly Father, and He has great interest in the lives of all His children. We need to keep the fire of that testimony burning in them.” ■

Although fear is inherent with new assignments, Elder Ballard says, doing the assignment helps us overcome that feeling and gives us confidence to continue.