

The Nature of Youth Leadership

Lessons from Gen Z

Jackson Fellows Project

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Your Beginning = Leadership

It is amazing how the smallest interactions can shape the biggest parts of our lives. Every interaction, starting from the moment we start our travel outside our mother's womb, shape what we believe, how we feel, how we say things and most importantly how we get things done.

You are probably thinking where am I going with this? Well during my first year of being a Jackson Fellow, the idea of 2020 was definitely not the reality of 2020. The world was rocked by unprecedented events. From the Covid-19 pandemic to the racial injustice protests to our historic presidential election, and even the chemical blast in Beirut; made me realize the root of not only these issues, but all issues throughout history – leadership.

But it goes even deeper. It is the roots that extend from the main root which are our lived experiences as youth. Think way back, way back when you formed your first memories. Can you remember the first time someone judged you? And when you watched your first argument? Or when you felt love? How about the first time you met someone who was different than you?

I believe the older we get, the less we remember how important interactions are and we stay in this bubble. Our bubble of pre-made decisions. We decided on our circle of humans we will interact with, how we present ourselves to the outside world and our routines from how we brush our teeth in the morning to how we lay in our beds at night. As we become so called “adults”, we tend to forget that our childhoods are forever tattooed on our brains. It is our job as to decide how we embrace these tattoos. If we want to be better, we do not let others define our tattoos for us, but we bring others to understand them, so everyone becomes better. That is leadership.

Leadership = Leaders

We can all agree that leaders make decisions. Then, that means everyone is a leader in their own right. Yet, what makes a leader great?

I wanted to serve as a Jackson Fellow because of what I read about Senator “Scoop” Jackson in the Nature of Leadership. Yes, I did not have much in common with Senator Jackson in many ways, as he was an older white man in politics who grew up in suburbia Everett, Washington, while I am a young black woman from urban south Seattle, Washington working for a small non-profit with no interest in a political career. Yet, what we do have in common is our shared thinking on leadership (and both being University of Washington alumni – Go Dawgs!).

The foundation to all great leadership are the actual humans serving in leadership. According to “The Nature of Leadership: Lessons from an Exemplary Statesman”, Senator Jackson was inquisitive, visionary, diligent, pragmatic, open, honest, determined and inspiring. I would agree that those characteristics are a recipe for a

great leader, but one thing I learned from Senator Jackson is if you don't have the right people in the kitchen, your recipe will only look good on paper.

In my leadership roles at youth development organizations for the past 12 years, I learned more than I did in my 16 years of schooling. It is amazing how being around young people teach you so many things about life. It seemed almost inevitable that I would center my Jackson Fellows project around youth. I wanted to go back to the roots and see what young people thought made a good leader. Over the past year, I interviewed individually several of our high school youth at the Service Board, some who would consider themselves leaders and others who not necessarily call themselves leaders but assured me they could spot a great leader. I wanted to get their take on leadership to see how it matched up with Senator Jackson.

I asked each youth to list out characteristics that every great leader should possess. Then, I told them about how others described Senator Jackson's leadership characteristics and had them compare his characteristics to what they listed. Did they list out the same characteristics? Would they consider Senator Jackson a great leader? And do you have to be an adult to be a great leader?

Each conversation was more than I hoped for but not unexpected given the power of our youth....

Leader = Inquisitive?

According to our youth, a great leader asks lots of questions. Senator Jackson respected history and valued expertise of others. He sought out information and others who knew more than he did. The youth thought that what separates a good leader from a great leader, knowing that you don't know everything.

Most of the youth expressed this characteristic as also being involved. It is important make a habit of always continuing to learn and constantly asking for feedback. Seek out as much information from as many different people to make an informed decision.

Leader = Visionary?

I have always been a big fan of starting at the end and working my way backwards. If you do not know where you are headed, then how will know what direction to go. Senator Jackson's ability to see the big picture made him a successful guide for others to follow.

All of the youth agreed that big picture thinking allows you to see the future you want to create and execute adaptable plans. Things can change so fast and it is important to have different versions of your plan to reach the same goals. Olivia, a high school senior serving in leadership positions at her school, put it best when she said, "Leaders need to have a mature mindset to think about the future".

Leader = Diligent?

Senator Jackson was persistent in executing what he believed was the best plan and by the best people. He did his homework and valued his team.

Several of the youth discussed the importance of working as a team to motivate each other to getting things done. Hinda, a high school senior who started her own non-profit organization said, "You can't wait for others to get things done". She said great leaders need to be motivated to get things done not for themselves but because they are getting it done for others. It is a selfless act and she felt Senator Jackson appreciating the work others did showed his diligence as a leader.

Leader = Pragmatic?

Diversity is such a hot word right now. Yes, you can create a diverse team, but can you put into action those diverse perspectives? Our youth tell us how much they appreciate not only having a seat at the table but also a space where they are encouraged to make action. Great leaders value others by including them into decision making.

Most of our youth indicated that leaders need to effectively solve problems by asking questions and getting feedback from others on the team, even from team members who necessary don't speak up all the time. Loyalty to your team shows who you really are to them. Davion, a recent high school graduate who served in leadership roles at tSB for the past 3 years said, "leaders have to be willing to meet with others," meaning they have to want to do it and not because it is their job. Senator Jackson motivated others by understanding what was important to them.

Leader = Open?

Senator Jackson respected others who did not necessarily agree with him. It reminds me of the saying, "Let's agree to disagree". If you can be open to understanding someone else, it will allow for inclusiveness. Our youth simply put it as, respect. Hinda said, "You have to earn others respect for them to trust you."

Everyone comes with their own set of experiences and information, so it is important to listen to what each person has to say with empathy and care.

Leader = Honest?

Senator Jackson believed in setting high standards for himself. To stick with your beliefs and honor the truth. Our youth connected honesty with courage because they believed that great leaders must be courageous to speak the truth knowing it might not be popular. Great leaders also must have courage to bring their true selves to every conversation and situation.

Leader = Determined?

According to all the youth interviewed, they all stated that great leaders must be responsible when making decisions because they affect many people around them. They have a responsibility to do what is best for others.

Senator Jackson set goals and created processes to achieve them. All of our youth agreed that having and setting goals are important in leadership. They should be realistic, organized, prioritized.

Leader = Inspiring?

Davion put it best when he said, "Leaders have to fully believe in what they are trying to achieve." If you do not believe in what you are doing, how will others believe in it.

Senator Jackson knew how to get the best people on his team and keep them. The youth pointed out that inspirational leaders know how to make connections and be community centered. The youth believe that in order to get people inspired, great leaders get to know their people.

Lessons Learned

The biggest takeaway from my conversations with our youth is that great leaders spend most of their time taking care of others that they do not spend enough time taking care of themselves. One important characteristic of great leadership according to all the youth interviewed that was not discussed in the Nature of Leadership, is the ability to take care of oneself. You have to make time to take care of yourself in order to bring your best self to others.

Another major takeaway is that there is no difference between youth and adult leaders. Meaning age does not make a difference in being a great leader. The youth said experiences make the difference. It is important for great leaders to pass on their leadership and provide opportunities to put others in leadership positions. Youth acknowledged how institutional racism and oppression cannot be ignored in leadership, and how even great leaders have implicit bias that hinder leadership. The youth indicated that racism is the biggest issue affecting leadership across all ages.

It was incredible to see how outspoken the youth were in their understanding of how systems of oppression (i.e. racism, ageism, sexism) affect their ability to lead and truly exhibit these characteristics that make great leaders. The youth expressed how they must navigate through these issues to show up fully in different spaces.

How will our youth use their experiences and power as leaders in their adult lives? I see many similarities between them and Senator Jackson, but will their differences be the deciding factor on where they will land as leaders? The bigger question is, who will decide?

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The 10 high school youth interviewed are alumni of Core Program. Some of these youth served in 2nd year Peer Leader roles, where they come back after their first year of programming to partner with tSB to build out curriculum and contribute to strategic planning. The others are youth who participated as Prophets (1st year youth) and did not to return in leadership roles at tSB. Please note that several youth interviewed remain anonymous.

Below are the youth who provided quotes:

Davion F. – past tSB Prophet 2017, Peer Leader 2017-18, Wintern (intern) 2019, summer intern 2020, strategic planning committee member (Board of Directors committee) 2020-21

Hinda I., – past tSB Prophet 2019, Peer Leader 2019-20

Olivia F. – past tSB Prophet 2018, Peer Leader 2018-19

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