

Who tells you
what to do?

- foster parents
- caseworker/social worker
- foster care system
- teachers
- ministers
- government
- employers
- other adults in charge
- peers

So listen up.

It's time to make some of your own decisions about your life. We may not be experts, but most of us are in foster care or are former youth in care and we've learned how you can navigate the system to take charge of your own life. This Toolkit will show you ways to get your ideas and actions organized and get some things changed for the better.

A Leader

Who will take care of your future? If you don't get involved, someone else will be glad to take over for you. Trust yourself. You can lead the way. You'll need confidence and courage to get involved. You probably already have a lot of the qualities that leadership requires.

words of wisdom

"I was always looking outside myself for strength and confidence, but it comes from within. It is there all the time."

Anna Freud (1895-1982)
Founder, child psychoanalysis

Simply stated, if you are a leader, you are someone who influences others to follow your direction. As a leader, you possess the ability to guide and assist others in their efforts to achieve a specific vision or purpose.

"A good leader understands and appreciates the meaning of leadership. Leadership is being involved, being open-minded to ideas, possessing self-confidence, and being willing to put in the extra effort to get a job done. Leadership is the ability to guide and be guided, while making a difference in the lives of others by helping them realize their maximum potential and achieve a greater goal and vision."

(Definition of Leadership from the 1999-2000 Inductees
<http://oregonstate.edu/groups/nrhh/old/leaders.htm>)

you don't have to look it up yourself... here is a definition of leadership

Qualities you'll find in a leader

Once you know the special characteristics of a good leader, you can recognize them in yourself and others.

In general, you can spot leaders by their ability to charge people up and motivate and inspire them to act. You can see that the more effective they are, the more respect and support they have from others.

You can also identify leaders because they have a vision of what needs to happen, then they come up with a plan of how to accomplish their ideas. You'll find that effective leaders lead by example.

"A good leader is able to involve all those in a group, treat everyone the same, take into account all opinions. They are open, caring individuals, who care about what they are working for."



Angel French, Former Foster Youth

Here are some other leadership qualities you might find in yourself and others:

- ✓ Vision
- ✓ Honesty and integrity
- ✓ Good communication skills
- ✓ Conflict resolution skills
- ✓ Problem solving skills
- ✓ Respect for knowledge and skill-building
- ✓ Empathy and respect for group process
- ✗ Acknowledgment of leadership potential in others
- ✗ Ability to follow as well as lead
- * Positive self-esteem and self-confidence
- ✗ Courage to take risks
- oh yeah baby! Willingness to go the extra mile



Darrell Locke, Former Foster Youth

“A youth is a good leader if they possess the greatest quality of following as well as leading, but also recognize a failure is just a chance to do something better.”

You can tell you have leadership skills when:

- * You value empowerment of all participants. That means not hogging all the power for yourself, but instead, allowing everyone in the group to influence the outcome.
- * You understand the importance of working on public speaking skills, facilitating skills, and mentoring skills.
- * You participate in collaboration (working with others) efforts, matters of shared decisionmaking, conflict resolution, the feedback loop, and development of goals.
- * You like to get involved and stay committed.

Some tips on how you can become a leader

As a leader, you can start remarkable things and create meaningful experiences. Make the courageous choice to lead and you'll be amazed at what you can bring about. Remember, leaders can be self-made.

she's the bomb!

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962; Former First Lady, Activist, and former foster child)

Everyone -
regardless of age or circumstance
possesses innate leadership skills
and abilities
evolved from their life experiences
both good and bad.

You can take classes and workshops, but the big ingredients in leadership development are courage and practice.

Here are 11 skills to practice so you can sharpen your leadership abilities. Let's talk about them one by one.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Decide | 7. Facilitate |
| 2. Get Involved | 8. Give/get feedback |
| 3. Collaborate | 9. Share decisionmaking |
| 4. Be a Mentor | 10. Resolve conflict |
| 5. Listen | 11. Create S.M.A.R.T. Goals |
| 6. Speak | |

1. Decide

Step one can be as simple as deciding you want to make a difference by inspiring and involving others, and by being willing to make the required commitment.

The other decision you will have is finding a cause or

“While there's no magic involved, guiding others takes hard work and some sacrifice. It involves being committed and acting responsibly. It reflects an awareness of the needs of others, awareness of the challenges and an enthusiasm for creating positive change through enhancement and innovation. Making the decision to become a leader is making a pledge to give back to and make a difference in the lives of others.”

(adapted from University of Buffalo State New York Leadership Development Center Resources Tips and Tricks, www.leadership.buffalo.edu/tips1/html)

problem that motivates and inspires you. As a youth in the foster care system, there are many ways you can make a difference and show leadership, so be sure you care about the cause you choose.

2. Get Involved

To practice skill two, you'll have to leave the comfort of your own little routine.

“Listen very well to what people say, understand a group's direction. Try to get a read on the group's pulse.”

David Ambroz, Former Foster Youth

Here are some more opportunities to practice your leadership skills by getting involved:

- Volunteering at home, in your group home, at school, or at church.
- Attending community hearings and speaking out.
- Joining local organizations that support youth issues.
- Developing a youth organization or group.
- Attending and participating in a legislative session.
- Lobbying local, state, and national governmental bodies.
- Voting.
- Seeking elective offices and/or appointments.
- Writing letters, making calls, sending e-mail to newspapers, and local and state legislators as well as television stations.

(reference/source: National Council on Disability 2001.
Applied Leadership for Effective Coalitions
www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/applied-leadership.html)

We suggest you start practicing your involvement skills on a “local” level such as your group home, IL group, classroom, church, or associations or clubs where you are a member. When you are confident that your leadership skills are serving you well, then you can progress on to involvement at the state level, then the national level.

Have fun and stay motivated. If you get discouraged or overwhelmed, try to remember why you got involved in the first place. Your goal is to make a difference and to help others do the same.

3. Collaborate

An unmistakable sign of a good leader is the ability to collaborate or effectively work with others to achieve a common goal or vision. If you want to develop this skill, you will need to work on building healthy relationships where everyone feels valued, involved, and empowered. Your goal in a project will be to form a partnership for joint action. You will want to empower, build trust, and strengthen the group for maximum effectiveness. The idea is that the more support or collaborators you have on your side, the better your chances of succeeding.

Collaborations can bring you big challenges. Let's face it: the larger the group, the more personalities and work styles you have to deal with. While you will find this to be true as your coalition begins to grow, as a leader, you must learn to always look for positive ways to keep the group on task by ensuring that everyone feels valued and by reminding them of the greater purpose.

Look at collaboration as an environment of opportunity with a pool of resources, skills, and talents. Keep in mind that collaboration should strengthen your cause and promote individual and group capabilities. Collaborate with similar-minded individuals with a common purpose that reinforces both your and their purpose and commitment. Trust, power-sharing, collective decisionmaking, and compromise are all essential to effective collaboration.

(reference/source: National Council on Disability 2001.
Applied Leadership for Effective Coalitions
www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/applied-leadership.html)

4. Mentor

The fourth step to practice in your journey to leadership is developing your skills as mentor. Acting as a mentor or “modeling” can help you sharpen your leadership skills through observing and guiding others. Every day we demonstrate modeling by conducting ourselves as we have seen our role models conduct themselves.

Mentoring is “a deliberate, conscious, voluntary relationship.” Mentoring can occur between any two or more people or groups who are willing to offer and/or accept the experience and guidance of another. Both parties involved in the relationship benefit.

Mentoring can offer interpersonal support and guidance and a mutual exchange of wisdom, coaching, and role modeling. Some mentors in your life may be your caseworker or foster parent, a teacher or coach, a youth leader or boss, or your court-appointed attorney.

We suggest you practice being a mentor to your peers who may need your guidance or to younger children you know. Your leadership skills will continue to improve and evolve.

If you have a mentor, do what you can to maintain your relationship. The benefits of long term mentor-mentee relationships can be immense, especially as you approach life outside of the foster care system.

(reference/sources: Mentors Peer Resources 2002. www.mentors.ca/mentor_programs.html)



Don't let little problems get you down. Keep your eyes on the big picture.

5. Listen

As a leader, you need to be a good listener. Here are some ways to practice your listening skills.

First, being a good listener requires that you act like a good listener. It's important that you communicate that you're hearing the person through your facial expressions. Tilting your head toward the person with whom you are speaking is also a good idea to show that you're paying attention.

Second, be aware of the way you communicate non-verbally with others. Making eye contact is a good strategy for showing that you're engaged in the conversation. Think about the other ways in which you can show that you're listening – good posture, nodding your head, and leaning towards the person are some examples.

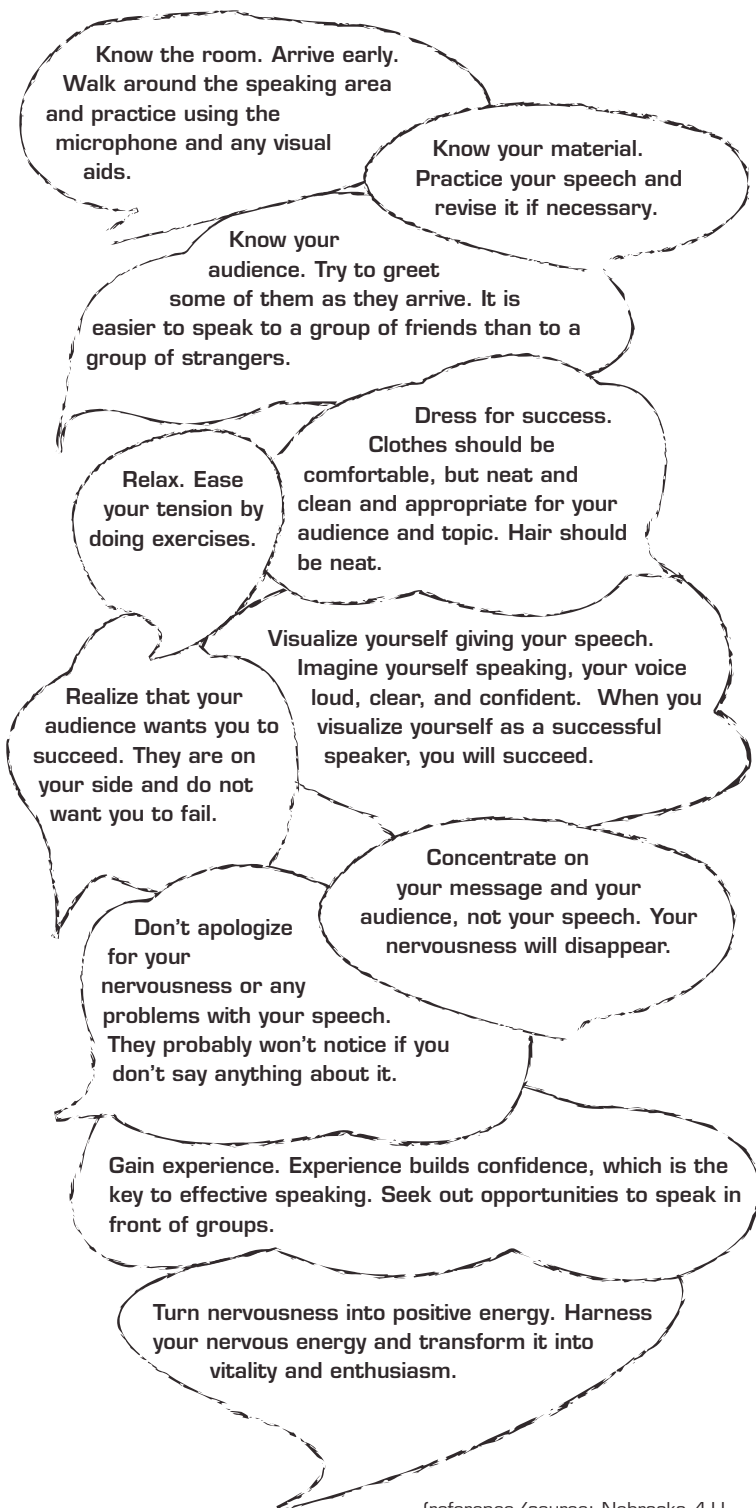
Third, as you send non-verbal cues to show that you're listening, it can also be helpful to use words that show the person that you're listening to what they have to say. For example, you may say “uh huh... oh really” to support the speaker as he/she shares with you. Asking questions is another way to demonstrate that you're listening to what someone has to say.

Finally, concentrate on what the other person is saying. If you're planning your response or disagreeing with them in your mind, it will be hard for you to truly hear what they have to say. Having an open mind is key to being a good listener.

(above steps adapted from the Canadian Association of Student Activity Advisers Face It Solution for Effective Listening. www.casaa-resources.net/resources/sourcebook/acquiring-leadership-skills/listening-skills.html)

5. Speak

Public speaking is one of the most exciting ways to practice leadership skills. You may feel nervous or even afraid to speak in front of a group. What you may not realize is how much easier it is when you take the time to prepare and practice. Here are some tips:



(reference/source: Nebraska 4-H
2000. A toolkit for Volunteer Leaders:
Public Speaking C-3)

6. Facilitate

To *facilitate* means to make easier. As a leader, you may be called on to facilitate a meeting or workshop and it will be your job to be sure that everyone feels relaxed and welcome and has a chance to be heard. Be sure you have goals and a timeline for each meeting and stick to them. Ask yourself, "Why are we having this meeting and what do we want to accomplish?"

Here are pointers to consider if you want to become "A World-Class Facilitator":

- ✓ Ensure objectivity and introduce processes to your team to help surface and address issues.
- ✗ Introduce relevant expertise and knowledge, relying on your extensive track record and exposure to similar situations.
- ✓ Act as a catalyst. Use your skills to initiate change and development.
- ✓ Overcome the inertia (sluggishness or passiveness) often found in structured organizations.
- Communicate with people at all levels in your group.
- ✗ Help your group to learn.
- ☐ Clarify goals.
- ✓ Break through barriers to effectiveness.
- ✓ Question assumptions.
- ✗ Encourage consideration of alternative methods.
- Generate creative solutions.
- Plan changes.
- ✓ Increase commitment. *and interest!*
- ✓ Encourage open communication.
- Raise the level of trust.
- Be sure you value everyone's input. Encourage questions and discussion and participation.
- ✗ Delegate power and responsibilities.
- Ask members to set an agenda, or outline issues to be discussed and decided on at the next meeting.
- Try to stay on topic and focused.
- Start and finish on time.
- * Thank everyone for attending.

7. Give / Get Feedback

As a leader you will want to reinforce behavior that you consider positive, as well as provide opportunities for change and growth for other behavior. Giving feedback is an essential skill for you in your role as leader. It is important to regularly ask, accept, and offer input and feedback to and from members of your group as a method of including and empowering everyone.

Although feedback can vary, all feedback should be structured and viewed in a positive way. Some feedback expressed may be offered solely as advice; for example, advising someone on how to handle a situation. Other feedback may be meant to acknowledge a good job or effort. This is called positive feedback

positive vs. constructive feedback

Sometimes it is necessary to give or get negative feedback, which we prefer to call constructive feedback. This type of feedback usually points out some mistakes that have been made or flaws that exist. The goal is not to criticize or make fun, but rather to learn and provide a solution for the problem.

Your leadership skills are important when offering effective feedback. Try these suggestions:

- Always deliver feedback in a respectful and constructive manner. This will help the listener to hear and hopefully accept the feedback in a positive way.
- If there is a problem, identify it clearly and specifically, and organize the issues that need to be addressed.
- Select an appropriate time and place where you will not be interrupted. Sometimes feedback is better received in a group setting, sometimes it is better received in a private setting. To decide, follow your instincts. It gets easier.
- Set the stage. Acknowledge that it is difficult to hear feedback. Explain the purpose of feedback.

- Strengthen the chances of getting your message across by stating the positive outcomes that could result from accepting feedback.
- Make your case. Be specific and stick to the facts. Detail how this issue affects others, oneself, or the success of your group or organization.
- Make sure that your feedback is clear and understood.
- After making your point, stop and listen for new information that may reinforce or change the feedback you are providing.
- If you are the one hearing the feedback, remember that the most common error that people make is to take it personally. Don't be defensive. Listen with an open mind. You don't have to accept all feedback, but it should all be considered and discussed, if possible.
- Plan for change. The cycle of feedback provides opportunities and commitments to continual learning, change and growth.

(some of the preceding feedback information was adapted from reference/source: Crawford, D & Bodine, R. (1996).

<http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/160935.txt>. A guide to Implementing Programs in Schools, Youth-Serving Organizations, and Community and Juvenile Justice Settings)

8. Share Decisionmaking

As a leader, you will need to make a lot of decisions. Probably one of your best decisions will be to include other group members in decisionmaking whenever possible. Sharing this responsibility will offer all members the opportunity to share their unique perspectives and expertise.

Through your well-defined decisionmaking model and the group's clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, shared decisionmaking will foster a collaborative spirit. Members will feel a sense of ownership of, commitment to, and accountability for the group's purpose and goals.

(adapted from Vision for Shared Decision Making:

<http://www.cksd.wednet.edu/5year/shared.htm>)

9. Conflict Resolution

As a leader, you can expect to deal often with conflict. It is a natural, important part of life. Conflict provides an opportunity to learn, create, grow, and change.

Essentially, conflict arises from a difference of needs, drives, wishes, and/or demands. Conflict is not necessarily positive or negative; it is the response to conflict that determines whether it is positive or negative. Since conflict is an inevitable part of life, learning how to respond to it in a positive way is especially important for a leader.

Conflict resolution begins with developing an understanding of the conflict and the principles of conflict resolution. You will want to be familiar with the three major effective problem-solving methods:

negotiation

Negotiation is a problem-solving process in which either of the parties in the dispute or their representatives meet face-to-face to work together to resolve the issue of conflict.

mediation

Mediation is the problem-solving process in which the two parties in the dispute or their representatives meet face-to-face to work together to settle the dispute with the help of a neutral third party called the "mediator" to resolve the dispute.

consensus

Consensus decisionmaking is a group problem-solving process in which all of the parties in the dispute work together to settle the dispute by crafting a plan of action that all parties can and will support. This process may or may not involve a mediator.

In conflict management and problem-solving, it is beneficial to discuss the issues openly. Focus on the issues, and not the individuals. Focus on what the desired positive outcome is and what can be learned from the conflict.

[reference/source: Crawford, D & Bodine, R. (1996).

<http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/160935.txt>. A Guide to Implementing Programs in Schools, Youth-Serving Organizations, and Community and Juvenile Justice Settings]

10. Create S.M.A.R.T. Goals

As a leader, you will want to establish goals so you and your team will be clear about what you want to achieve. Working toward these goals will help you stay focused and help you measure your success.

Because setting good goals is so important to your success as a leader, here is a good way to think about the goals you are setting:



Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Realistic
Tangible

Specific goals are clearly defined as opposed to broad. When you develop a goal that is specific, it increases the likelihood that it will be accomplished.

It may be helpful to answer the following questions to determine whether or not your goal is specific::

- ☆ Who: Identify the persons involved.
- ☆ What: Identify what you want to accomplish.
- ☆ Where: Determine a location.
- ☆ When: Establish a time frame.
- ☆ Which: Be clear about requirements and constraints.
- ☆ Why: Articulate specific rationale and benefits for accomplishing the goal.

Measurable goals help you with staying on track and meeting deadlines. To make your goals measurable, identify criteria for measuring your progress toward your goals. Ask yourself the following questions:

*how much? how many?
how will I know when it is accomplished?*

Attainable goals are those that you can realistically achieve. As you figure out ways to accomplish your goals, you'll develop lots of different strategies for making them happen. You can attain almost any goal if you plan your steps wisely and create a time frame that allows you to carry out those steps.

Realistic goals create a framework that guides the work of you and your team. If you truly believe that your goal can be accomplished, then it probably is realistic. Additional ways to tell if your goal is realistic involve thinking about what you've accomplished in the past. What conditions would have to exist for you to achieve this goal?

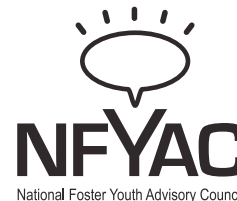
Tangible goals are those that can be experienced with one of the senses, that is: taste, touch, smell, sight, or hearing. When a goal is tangible, you have a better chance of making it a reality. Many valid goals are intangible, so it's important to give careful consideration to ensuring that your goal is tangible.

[Adapted from Top Achievement
<http://www.topachievement.com/smart.html>]



"I participated in student government at school and on teen panels while I was in foster care. My confidence grew because I realized I was a good example for foster parents and workers about what foster youth are like. I have helped change the negative stereotypes."

Tameka Jefferson, Former Foster Youth



The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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