

Five

MUST-HAVE QUALITIES OF A CLUB LEADER

TAILOR MADE : CRAFTING STUDENT LEADERS

Five Must-Have Qualities of a Club Leader

Over the last six months, we've highlighted various qualities of a great student group leader. We've decided to summarize some of our past entries and also add some new thoughts in our first edition of **Five Must-Have Qualities of a Club Leader**. These qualities will focus primarily on things you can work to improve with realistic expectations.

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Must-Have Qualities Overview

1. Communication Skills
2. Trust
3. Brand Obsession
4. Innovativeness
5. Tech-Savviness

1. Communication Skills

A club leader's ability to communicate is crucial to the organization, especially one in a campus setting. Since most student clubs meet no more than once or twice a week, it is up to the leader to keep the exchange of ideas and information constant and fresh. A moderate yet unceasing stream of emails, phone calls, and person-to-person talks throughout the week with board members, other student leaders, and any other resourceful people will yield big results.

Are you bombarded with emails each day? Be efficient and quick with responses while maintaining a firm yet warm tone. Don't hesitate to speak over the phone, especially when emails may not suffice in conveying the full intent of a message. And be sure to follow up on assigned tasks or plans - this will let board members know that their leader is responsible and cares about getting things done.

A leader must be in the know about all that's going on with club functions, so being CC'd on all club-related emails sent by board members should be a given. A leader should also be willing to speak in public, to rally the board, or to send messages of gratitude for a job well done. Communication is a nonstop task that must be accomplished over and over again if it is to have positive effects. Keep an open ear, a careful tongue, and an active mind to keep communication strong.

2. Trust

How many times have you come across a leader who tries to do too much? A leader who micro-manages everything? It is important that a leader cares about quality and wants what's best for the club. But in order to grow as an organization, the leader must place trust into the hands of other board members. Trust is not just about delegating responsibilities. It is an intimate understanding that you, as the leader, have confidence in someone else to carry out an important task.

Trust is something that develops over time - a leader must learn to have varying degrees of trust so that tasks and responsibilities are handed out appropriately. For example, you wouldn't want a freshman rep to be handling all the logistics of a large cultural event without any experience, so you might ask a sophomore with previous experience to handle the job. For the freshman, a less daunting task could be assigned or he/she could be asked to assist the sophomore in order to gain experience for next time.

Trust is a two-way street: placing greater trust in a person will make it easier for that person to trust you. It will also make that person own up to the trust, stirring a desire in him/her to do better and not disappoint. Placing greater trust in someone is akin to giving them greater ownership over whatever task is assigned. And if done right, this is one of the greatest assets a club can have: members who care deeply about doing a good job.

3. Brand Obsession

On this blog, we frequently talk about "the brand" and have entries on logos, websites, and flyers, which may lead you to think that all leaders should be graphic designers. While this is not such a terrible thought, our main point is not about Photoshop skills or color picking, but about the importance of a club's image. Another word we use for image, which we'll also do here, is "the brand."

A club's brand is the first thing that pops into people's minds when your club is mentioned. "Great parties!" or "Bunch of Koreans" or "Very interesting events" are some of the things that might signify your brand. Your job, as the leader, is to first figure out how you want people to perceive your club: an open-minded group of students passionate about Korean culture? a closely-knit network of students interested in raising cultural awareness? a group of energetic students looking to have some fun? Whatever it is, make sure you really believe in the brand. Then, using whatever means necessary, find ways to convince people that the club and its brand are one. Show that you're open-minded or closely-knit through well-designed flyers or throw an excellent party with fun games and post up a lot of photos on the club website. By paying attention to the details and tightly controlling the means through which others see your club, you'll begin to understand that a strong, positive brand will lead to stronger support from the public.

Brand obsession isn't just a PR or publicity thing. It is about being a leader who understands that a club's brand is as much an asset as the things it does. Just think about Apple and the way it manages its own brand. Their slogan of "Think Different" goes a long way. They've differentiated themselves with great design through simplicity, innovation, and lots of youth and energy. It's a message that's communicated in commercials, its website, and its products. People know, even without having tried everything in person, that an Apple product will be simple, easy-to-use, and elegant. Apple also boasts a legion of loyal users. You think this is an accident? Find something you'd like people to see in your club, and obsess over ways to make this wish a reality. You'll win a bunch of fans and supporters along the way.

4. Innovativeness

Big new ideas are always exciting and fun. A leader who is bold enough to pursue a new event and see it through will reap many rewards. But innovation isn't always about doing something that's never been done before. It is often about doing the same things but doing them better, by introducing small new ideas. Most clubs will have the same events year after year, not because they have nothing better to do, but because these events have been proven to do well and are integral to the club's brand. An innovative leader will take these circumstances not as deterrents to innovation but as opportunities.

Example

Each year at Columbia, our KSA held a Korean BBQ event in late September. This event always attracted many people and was one of key events in the Fall. When I became KSA president, I noticed that the Korean BBQ event usually fell around the same time as Chuseok, the Korean Autumn Festival. We decided to keep the event in similar format - serve good Korean food and let people mingle - but added Chuseok elements such as song-pyun and flyers that described this traditional holiday. The end result was a great social event that also facilitated a cultural awareness campaign. People of both Korean and non-Korean backgrounds came to the event and left having learned something new.

The key to innovation is the belief that even small new ideas can make a difference. You can have a "cafe" event where you serve food and drinks while student musicians perform, or you can go one step further and have a "traditional Korean tea tasting" while food is served and students perform. It's all about how far you'd like to take your innovation. I'm not saying that quality should be sacrificed for novelty, but every event presents various opportunities to meet your club's mission while also providing people with a good time.

5. Tech-Saviness

It's easy to say something like "I'm not a computer person" or "I don't know anything about programming" and throw up a white flag. Technology can indeed be intimidating, especially if you're looking at it from the angle of "needing to be good at it before I can use it." But technology is something that's made its way to almost every facet of college students' lives. Students use email, browse websites, download music, and procrastinate on Facebook on a daily basis. There is a built-in understanding that technology is something that improves lives and makes things easier. So why not go one step further?

A leader must always be looking for ways to incorporate technology to make the operations of a club easier. We mentioned BillMonk several months ago as a great way to track reimbursements. There are other tools such as Backpackit and Basecamp for managing projects or Ning for creating an internal social network for your members. You don't have to be a programmer or a computer whiz to set these up and get things rolling. And if you have someone on the board with a vast knowledge of technology, pick his/her brain and find more ways to make the club run efficiently.

Example

One thing I noticed before becoming KSA president was the annoying process through which people signed up for shift duty. Shift duty would normally be something like manning the ticket booth for an event or sitting at a table and answering questions during a club fair. To sign up, people would send emails back and forth using Reply All so that everyone could see who was signing up for which time slot. This would always lead to confusion, especially when two people would sign up for the same spot at the same time, creating two different versions. Additional email would then be sent out to clarify, and before long, there were so many one-line emails that nothing made any sense. One of our board members, Jason, was a computer science major. I asked Jason if he could help develop a web-based program where people could simply log on and sign up for their desired slot. After a few weeks of figuring out the details and development, we launched our KSA Event Manager, which worked like a charm and got rid of unnecessary emails.

The lesson here is that technology is not a mountain you need to climb over but a goldmine from which you can continually dig. And a leader who understands this will not be afraid to look and see what other options are out there, how hard or easy they may be to implement, and if the club can develop its own tools from the resources it has. Being tech-savvy isn't about knowing jargons or code, it's about knowing whether or not something can make life easier and actually putting it to use.

Conclusion

Being a leader of a club is an experiment. Barring any reckless or law-breaking behavior, the stakes of being a club leader are hardly as great as having a paid job or running your own business. If you do a terrible job, the worst that can happen is that some peers will lose a bit of respect for you and the club may not perform as expected. This is why there is so much room for exploration and growth as a club leader. You can compress years of communications training through all lessons learned from emails and phone conversations. You can experiment with all sorts of brand tweaks without worrying about investors or the bottom line. You can learn the intricacies of working relationships without the stress of salary demands or turnover. If you have an idea, you can see it come to fruition without legal hassles or bureaucratic red tape. All you need is the resolve, the patience, and a willingness to improve. Be prepared to communicate better, to trust more, to obsess, to innovate, and to embrace the unfamiliar - be ready to dive into a truly engaging experiment.