

**Kari Robideau:**

Hello. This is Kari Robideau and this is the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development Podcast Series. Today's topic is, is there a leadership gap? The leadership gap that we're referring to is young people involved in our communities in leadership roles. Joining me to talk about that today is Brian McNeill, who's an Extension Educator. Thank you for joining me, Brian.

**Brian McNeill:**

You're welcome, Kari. Great to be here.

**Kari Robideau:**

And we also are trying something a little bit different. I have a special guest here, Kia Harries, who's a Regional Director, who also has experience in working with youth and in communities and in our 4-H program, so thanks for joining us as well, Kia.

**Kia Harries:**

You're welcome, Kari.

**Kari Robideau:**

Brian, I'm going to start with you. Give us an idea of who you are and take a moment to share with us your passions around this leadership gap that you've seen in communities.

**Brian McNeill:**

Thanks again, Kari. And thanks for this opportunity to share on this topic, one that I do have a lot of passion with as I think of my years in extension and my work with the 4-H program. Wanting young people to get up to explore their leadership and to challenge themselves and be leaders in the community. So I think back to some my early work with Youth on Boards, getting young people the experience to try what that's like to be a president or to see a school board in action and to kind of get that feel. So when they leave the community they know that when they, as an adult they can return back and give back to the community.

**Brian McNeill:**

So my passion goes kind of early back to this and as I've thought about this topic, I've also been engaging with community members. One recent experience has been with the Lake Association. We did a program in an area and talking to a member of the Lake Association, he was probably 59, 60 years old. And he said, "I'm probably the youngest person on this committee. And we as a group, we want young people to be involved with us. But we don't know how to get them involved." So even hearing from our community members and thinking about young people started really thinking about there is a gap of involvement and of leadership.

**Brian McNeill:**

And so there's research that I looked at the 4-H, our national 4-H did some surveys with young people to really assess where they are thinking about leadership opportunities. And some of the research was stating that young people were seeing that adults are doing work but doesn't necessarily affect them. Or some of the other results is there a 96% of youth think that leadership is important, but they don't know if they have the skills to do it. So I think as young people, they're even questioning if they're able to do

that when they become adults. So that really started me. That's what got me going on this blog to share this concept and to see what others are thinking out there.

**Kari Robideau:**

And you mentioned the blog. That's something that we're basing this topic off today. And I wanted to talk to you more about this because if you look at the Youth Development Insight blog and what you wrote there, the comments and the response to it was pretty incredible. I think this is something a lot of us are thinking about. A lot of us are wondering how do we close in this leadership gap? You mentioned what that report says about young people and their thoughts on coming out as leaders, but it sounds like this is a young adult gap.

**Brian McNeill:**

Yes, you're right. And if you do get a chance to take a look at the blog, you'll see that there was a variety of people that commented on it. Anywhere from people delivering local programs, there's a 4-H program coordinators to other areas in extension. Toby Spanler, who does another one that from the Community Vitality program area, gave some insight on some of his work, so it was good to see that other people are seeing that and were responding to the blog as well.

**Kari Robideau:**

One of the resources that you look at in that blog is from Karen Pittman and Shanetta Martin that discusses a perceived lack of leadership skills in young people. Can you share more about that report and the concepts around youth engagement as a strategy really for community change that stood out for you from that article and that resource?

**Brian McNeill:**

Yeah, I think it's that youth engagement or even youth exposure and as I read that article really made me think, getting youth to see what happens at those committees, those gatherings of people who are making decisions, it's so important. I think that, and that's what Karen Pittman is talking about, is really exposing them to that, young people to that opportunity. So I think it's important that youth see school boards, church boards, whatever it is in action. Even a town board where their parents or grandparents might be members of and leading those meetings and really seeing those processes and being mentored. I think is another key aspect we need to think about is how has that mentorship, what does that look like in teaching young people those opportunities and skills so when they do get to that age, they're ready to take over.

**Kari Robideau:**

And Kia, I'll bring you into the conversation at this point because I know that is one point that really resonated with you in Brian's blog post is that importance of adult mentorship, excuse me, and adults showing young people what it means to be a part of the community. What have your experiences about that been?

**Kia Harries:**

I firmly believe that young people need that opportunity to see leadership in action. Whether that's like Brian referred to, being at the table for a city council meeting or a church council meeting and watching how leadership happens, how people engage with one another. And I believe that having a role model, so a parent or someone they, an adult they spend time with that actually does attend meetings or give

service to another group so that they see that that's important. When they see it modeled, they tend to follow that. And I believe that young people who get that experience are much more prepared to be leaders, to attend, lead, guide, run for city council or office or be a part of those hospital boards, wherever it might be, but they tend to be much more willing to be engaged when they know what happens, when they see how it works, when they know what people contribute as leaders on those groups.

**Kari Robideau:**

So I'm hearing from both of you that that modeling aspect of adults for young people when they're on boards is so important. How do you make sure it's not the token young person that we often talk about on that board? Obviously they're able to see how that board is run, but what are the critical components? What is the mentoring that happens beyond just seeing what those adults do? What else needs to happen so that it's not token?

**Brian McNeill:**

Well, I think if a group is concerned or wants youths to be involved, there has to be some training. And so there has to be some understanding of youth development and how do we work with young people so they can experience and fail but fail in a way that they can learn from? And we also need the adults on the other hand to understand youths, their schedules, what topics pertain to them and what really doesn't pertain to them. So that training I feel is really important that both adults and youth go through so they understand both sides so when they come together the process is more successful. Otherwise, there's assumptions being made about kids or maybe the kids are coming in and unfortunately sometimes adults want to do Youth on Boards and they'll select one young person.

**Brian McNeill:**

Well that's pretty intimidated for one person to come to a table of a group of people that have been together for years and feel comfortable. So there has to be two or three young people so they can feel safe and secure and part of the process. But that goes into some training that needs to happen again for both sides.

**Kia Harries:**

I also believe it's important to engage those young people asking their opinions, asking for their viewpoint on the issue or the question of the discussion. But having young people be able to give a perspective and know that it's a safe environment to know that that input is valued, that that's also very important for having young people. You can't just have them at the table. They have to be an active part or engaged in what the topic is.

**Kari Robideau:**

And that even though there's training, there needs to be that engagement and modeling of this is when we want your input. This is when we want you to be a part of this.

**Brian McNeill:**

Yep, that's exactly right. Otherwise, then if the young people aren't engaged, the process won't be successful. So having that input and say, this is what's important to us and let's talk about this. That'll help towards the positive effect of that process.

**Kari Robideau:**

So give me an example. Where has this happened and it's been successful and you have seen a young person go on as a young adult, a part of a leadership role on a community committee?

**Brian McNeill:**

I think I've got a few of that. Well, in our 4-H programs, give young people an opportunity to be officers in that process. But again, it's different when you are working with people that have been on a board for a long time. So we've had some examples of young people who have gone through a program, got their education and then are joining boards bringing a fresh perspective to the boards. Some county fair boards I've heard recently that have brought younger people to get new ideas because they felt in a rut and after they brought those new ideas, the fair become successful because they brought in some fresh ideas, fresh ways to look at things. So they're out there and it's always fun to hear that successful when it happens.

**Kari Robideau:**

I thank you for that example, Brian, and what I'm hearing through this conversation that we're having today is the importance of those intentional opportunities for young people to be involved in leadership roles so that as they become our young adults, we stop hearing in our communities where's the leadership gap in this? We have no one younger to take over our roles anymore and what will happen to our committees if that happens. So thank you, Kia, for adding your insights to this as well. If you would like more information and conversation on youth leadership, you can find us on the web at [www.extension.umn.edu/youth](http://www.extension.umn.edu/youth), where you'll also discover other research, training and events, and you can even check out our Minnesota 4-H program.

**Kari Robideau:**

Keep this conversation going by checking out our Youth Development Insight blog that we have mentioned numerous times throughout this podcast. You will find Brian's post from August 2016 and those conversations never expire, so please go on there and add your thoughts to this conversation. That will wrap up this podcast. This is Kari Robideau with Kia Harries, Brian McNeill from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please, tune in again.