

## **“Guide”... the new “Leader”**

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We often use the term “leader” to capture our aspirations and calling as youth workers in our ministries. Increasingly however, those we’re expected to “lead” see “leader” suspiciously. Many have witnessed, even suffered, the “dark side” of leaders through their distant, controlling, corrupt, self-serving, or immoral behaviors. Being a leader isn’t intrinsically bad, but we think the word has been tainted enough that we need to give the term a rest, either by making the effort to redefine the term or by using a different term all together.

Let’s try the latter.

Let’s be guides... not leaders.

Why?

Because that’s what teenagers and families need.

There’s been a lot of good dialogue in youth ministry circles over the last few months about where youth ministry must go. Essential to the conversation is reframing the way we see ourselves and shifting our identities from “youth leaders” to “youth and family guides”.

“Leader” is not synonymous with “pastor”. In fact, anything we can do to get away from the idea of being the cheerleader “up front” is a good thing. Maybe a title like “guide” launches us in a good direction. Guides are on a journey participating with less experienced sojourners. Guides usually navigate territory that’s away from their home base (e.g. the church building). Guides are more interested in spurring on transformation than indoctrination. And guides enter into the messiness of the journey rather than living off in the distant land of theoretical vision statements.

There’s a grittiness to guides that we want to recapture in our pastoral calling as shepherds, so here are a few ideas for what being a youth and family guide might look like...

**Guides need to interpret for those they’re guiding.** Youth don’t need us to dump a bunch of content into their heads. Cognition does not equal formation. They need help in interpreting what they’re discovering.

- Guides interpret culture, they don’t simply copy it or reject it.
- Guides speak the gospel using a language their sojourners understand- through image, language, parable, technology, and most of all as living examples.
- Guides help youth, their families, and the church to see “adolescence” as broader than “the teenage years.”

**Guides need to be missiologists.** We see adolescents, embedded in their unique and beautiful culture, who first need to be understood before being boxed into a one-dimensional “educational stage” that is “targeted.” In the spirit of missiologists...

- Guides listen for the message in music.
- Guides consider the meaning behind adolescent art forms.
- Guides seek to understand adolescent relationships
- Guides eat adolescent foods, enter their worlds where invited, and use caution about rushing to judgment.
- Guides seek to understand the many layers of culture within the subculture of adolescence (e.g. skaters, film-makers, football players, ethnic groups, family dynamics, etc.)

**Guides need to be healers and spiritual directors.** Our primary role is not as informers, teachers, coaches, activity specialists or rock stars. Rather...

- Guides become experts in spiritual, emotional, physical and psychological triage.
- Guides are holistic in their approach to spiritual transformation.
- Guides are healthy themselves (self-aware, egoless, stable psychologically, relationally, etc.)
- Guides embrace signs and wonders, convinced of the supernatural and overcoming the impossible.

**Guides are theologians, philosophers, artists, and monks.** True change happens through good thinking, writing, and art. Our thinking will inform our own growth and it will inspire those teenagers, parents, siblings and volunteers who journey with us. Guides embrace the real in the midst of the virtual.

- Guides might teach and interact through blogs with rich content.
- Guides will crave a few fellow sojourners rather than networking.
- Guides seek to accurately portray God, His attributes and His will.
- Guides keep journaling their own journey with pen and paper.
- Guides add beauty to their worlds through creative innovation rather than through cultural copying.

We've seen the benefits of youth workers stepping up to be leaders. Maybe lately, we've overdone it. Our teenagers and families needs guides more than leaders. And let's face it, so do we. Maybe "Guides" are the new "Leaders." We think so...

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