Skill Building – Overcoming Apathy

Introduction

It is common to hear students complain that their peers are "apathetic, uninvolved and disinterested" in self-governance and student club activities. While the types of clubs and reasons vary, the tools to overcome the problem of apathy follow the same principles.

Understanding one's own motivation helps a leader to understand other people. It does so not through "Doing unto others…" but by reducing blocks which prevent one from listening to, and thus, understanding the other person. Motivation, like growth, is inherent within people. Hence, the task of the leader is not so much that of "motivating others" as it is of unleashing and helping to harness the motivation, which is already there.

We all respond to a situation as we see it. Thus, one way to influence another person's behavior is to help them get a more accurate view of reality. The more we can help another person to feel comfortable in examining his own point of view and how he arrived at it, the more we can help him to behave rationally, flexibly, and creatively.

Unless they are blocked, people tend to change their point of view (and thus their behavior) in the light of the reactions of others to their behavior. We should be careful not to judge what a person can do simply on the basis of what he/she is doing. We need to recognize the effects of past learning and the potential of future learning.

When examining apathy among your peers, you need to ask, what is the student apathetic about? If students do not find the programs and projects of the group relevant and interesting, they will not be inclined to participate. This important fact must be addressed when projects and programs are being planned. The following steps can assist your org in increasing participation.

Assessment

Find out what the majority of your members (and non-members) are interested in. By involving people in the planning, they will feel a commitment to the success of the activity. Assessments can be written (in the form of a survey distributed at the end of the spring semester so that planning can take place during the summer for the following fall and spring semesters) or verbal (by placing "future planning" on the agenda of the April or May meeting and have an open discussion to determine activities of interest.

Planning

Students representing all classes must be given an opportunity to be involved in the planning of projects and programs. Timing is very important… if you have a wonderful program planned the day before midterm exams, you will not have a good turnout! Try to find out exam schedules, dates of competing activities (i.e., athletic games), and the best time of day to plan your activities.

Whenever possible, provide different levels of involvement. For example, many students may contribute to a food drive but not all students can help out with a dance party on a Saturday night. By planning a variety of activities that involve a broad spectrum of the student body, everyone will have an opportunity for participation.

Implementation

Good planning will lead to successful implementation. Be sure to communicate the date, time, and place of the event or activity. Make announcements in class, post flyers, stuff mailboxes with announcements, invite faculty and give students lots of time to plan to be there. Printing a calendar of events for each semester, and distributing to all your club members, will help everyone see the bigger picture.

Have all volunteers meet a day or two prior to the event to make certain everyone understands their rule. Use checklists and appoint partners or work groups to make sure everything gets done. Delegate and assign responsibilities as appropriate.

On the day of the event, make certain that all bases are covered. Be prepared for some volunteers not showing up due to illness or family emergencies. Have back-up volunteers available to help. Consult with your faculty advisor every step along the way.

Evaluation

Seek input after the event or activity has taken place. This can be a written evaluation or verbal critique. Get those involved together to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the activity so that it will be better the next time around. Nothing is perfect and we can learn from our successes and failures. Taking notes on this topic and referring to them before your next activity may also prove helpful.

Acknowledgment

Acknowledge those who contributed their time and energy to the project. Announce the Event Leaders. People like to be recognized for their contributions. An award ceremony at the end of the semester is a great way to end the year and have a meaningful gathering to celebrate success. Suggestions: Be creative; serve food/refreshments whenever possible; avoid cliques (people don't like to feel left out); involve first year students.

Always think about grooming new leaders. The key to a successful club is well-prepared leadership. If all the leaders are seniors, the chapter will fade when they all graduate!

Remember, not everyone will get involved… some people are just not joiners! However, you will find participation will generate more participation. When students hear from those who participated about what they missed, they will participate the next time around.