

## CASE STUDY 2.2

**LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE**

*In a large room with a bare floor, 65 African-American young people who are blindfolded are led in a guided visualization of voice, music, and other sounds.*

*They begin in Africa with peaceful music, a sense of connection to family, and a sense of freedom. The music changes, and they are pushed around, still blindfolded, the sound of chains rattling in the background. Then they are forced to the ground, body to body, accompanied by the sound of screaming and moaning. It is the Middle Passage, a time of slave ship holds packed with human beings living and dead, traveling to the auction block and on to plantations, with the sounds of whips and reminders of terrible loss and grief.*

*The visualization continues onward through time until today, into scenes of black-on-black crime, calls of “nigger” and “bitch” in the streets, gun shots, and music that degrades. Afterward, in a circle of 10 to 12 young people and two counselors, some young people cry quietly, some are silent as stone, and all recognize a pain as deep as time is long.*

— MIDDLE PASSAGE WORKSHOP

The scene described above is from Camp Akili, a summer program designed by Leadership Excellence to create opportunities for young African Americans to connect with what Executive Director Nedra Ginwright calls their “legacy of pain.” Before Camp Akili, “Crying was not in my vocabulary,” says Ronnell Clayton, a former camper and now a counselor. “People in my family had passed, my good friend had passed away at school. Still, I didn’t cry. After the Middle Passage workshop, I just cried and cried. I cried for three hours.” Leadership Excellence believes that when pain is acknowledged, healing can begin. And healing is at the foundation of its work.

Healing hasn’t always had such priority, though; it’s one of many lessons learned along the way by a small group of young people who wanted to make something happen. The lessons they learned are important enough to document in curricula and articles created through their involvement with YLDI.

In 1989, Shawn Ginwright and his friend Daniel Walker were students at San Diego State University. Both had participated in leadership camps designed to help young people achieve their potential. The information was good, but some things were missing. First, Shawn and Daniel were “just about the only black folks there.” Second, the emphasis was exclusively on skills like public speaking and group facilitation—skills that are, in Nedra’s words, “important, but insufficient.”

Shawn and Daniel envisioned a leadership training opportunity for young African Americans that would include culture and self-development. They gathered about 10 other San Diego State students, including Nedra, and created a summer program they called “In Search of Excellence.” That camp evolved into what is now Camp Akili; in Swahili, *Akili* means “excellent mind,” and excellent minds—free minds, strategic minds, determined and empowered minds—are exactly the point.

Shawn and Nedra continued their work after graduation from college while they worked full-time jobs. They counted on other community members to help with the work with young people. In addition to continuing the summer program, they began to address the academic failure of high schools serving low-income youth. They believed then that the problems facing young African Americans were rooted in a poor sense of self, including cultural self, and the low expectations of teachers and others who affected young peoples’ lives. Over the years, their analysis began to include a belief that many behaviors have their roots in pain. And if behaviors come out of pain, they reasoned, the answers lie, at least in part, in healing.

In those early years, Nedra says, they never intended to start a nonprofit, and they were novices at leading an organization. But, “We were young, and we had a passion,” she and Shawn say. They channeled that passion into weekly meetings with other young adults to plan Camp Akili, which Nedra had by then begun to coordinate. They also sought and received funding from donors like the Vanguard Foundation and organized events to encourage community change around African-American youth development.

Nedra remembers one event they planned, a lecture series to educate teachers about how to educate black youth. They invited Drs. Julia and Nathan Hare to speak in a hotel to a large group of educators from throughout Riverside County. They reserved the room, flew the speakers in, rented a van to truck in computers to facilitate registration, and waited happily for the 200 or so participants they expected would attend. But they didn’t understand publicity for big venues, and they hadn’t gotten fliers out until the week before. The night of the big event, their distinguished speakers addressed an audience of five: Nedra, Daniel, Shawn, and Shawn’s very proud mother and aunt. It was a great workshop, though; they paid the tab by selling Shawn’s new computer, noted the experience as a lesson learned, and moved on.

By 1994, young people who finished Camp Akili were ready for something that would last throughout the school year, so Leadership Excellence created Stand 4 Somethin’, a community service-learning program. As Stand 4 Somethin’ has evolved, Leadership Excellence has learned that for the program to be effective, it needs to be about more than community service. It needs to be about community activism. With support from youth activist organizations such as the Youth Force Coalition and C-Beyond, they realized that community service activities could be more effective and generate more sustainable results if they were linked to political analysis.

“It’s the difference,” says Nedra, “between ‘The park is dirty, let’s clean it up’ and ‘The park is dirty? Why is the park dirty only in the low-income community?’ And what are we gonna do about that ‘why?’” That kind of thinking results from an excellent mind, and that kind of thinking builds a genuine sense of liberation in young people.

The goal of Leadership Excellence programs is to positively affect black youth development and liberation, not to organize and win campaigns. The organization believes that although African-American social movements have focused—perhaps necessarily—on winning campaigns, those social movements ignored the issues caused by the basic pain of African Americans. When Shawn writes about the work of Leadership Excellence, he talks about the “major external things happening in young black lives that limit their access to [the things they need for the lives they want]; things like unemployment, pervasive violence, and the criminalization of youth.” Those are the macro issues, he says, but we’re also missing the point if youth work doesn’t attend to the micro issues that have been described by Alvin Poussaint in *Lay My Burdens Down* as “Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome”: hopelessness, despair, racial shame, and disconnection from humanity.

But it’s one thing to acknowledge these things, and another to do something about them. To effect real, lasting change in communities, those issues need to be addressed first—so that’s where Leadership Excellence begins.

Leadership Excellence doesn’t go out looking for young people interested in activism. Indeed, the group would be hard pressed to find them. Young people come to the organization on referral from probation officers, social workers, and schools, and through community outreach as well as voluntarily from the streets and schools. Some youth are drawn by an interest in hip-hop to Camp Akili, where, Nedra says, they recognize “they’re not operating out of the greatness they were created to be.”

Ronnell Clayton remembers a moment of such recognition during his second time as a camper: “I realized I was grateful. I had a lot of things going for me.” He and the others at camp discovered, “We are blessed to be able to go through every day full-fledged. I had to ask myself, what have I done with my life?” Through cutting-edge workshops that use hip-hop culture as a lens and a backdrop, campers explore issues such as cultural appreciation, a shared history of enslavement, spirituality, and sexism.

The 14- to 18-year-olds who come through Camp Akili want to act on what they’ve learned; Stand 4 Somethin’ gives them that opportunity. After that, they may apply for Camp Afrique, a Leadership Excellence trip to Ghana that is designed to increase cultural and global awareness.

Ronnell didn’t want to go to camp at first. His mother did the research, he says, and sent him off in the summer of 1995, between 9th and 10th grade. “It was awkward being one of the youngest people there,” he says, and the workshops didn’t “take.” Three years later, having graduated

from high school with what he calls “attitude problems,” Ronnell went back to Camp Akili, again at his mother’s insistence. “I did not want to go, but she said, ‘You’re going!’” By 1998, the workshops had a sharper focus on healing, and this time, he says, “They stuck. I got everything.”

For Ronnell, a big part of it was not only the power of the workshops but also the way adults treated him: “With the utmost respect. . . . I believe that’s what it was, they respected me right off. As youth, we don’t have a lot of say. And if you get say, then you have got to lead.” Once he saw the respect, “Then I’ve got to hold myself accountable”—not just for the big life choices but also the ones that seem small, like language. “I came back from camp that time and said to my friends, ‘Y’all can’t curse around me.’ They laughed.” But he was serious. “For two years I haven’t said ‘bitch, niggah, ho’. I found other ways to say things—‘dude,’ ‘cousin’—or I get quotes from songs and use them as sayings. When my friends do that stuff, I just say, all right, you’re gonna do that, but I’m gonna do this.” The Leadership Excellence experience changed his life so much, says Ronnell, that he “wants to give [his] community everything I have.” He’s starting by facilitating a youth program in his own neighborhood.

Even though Leadership Excellence can catalyze this kind of change for young people, there have been and are challenges; and when they come, Leadership Excellence learns how to move through them. When the Hare lecture in Riverside didn’t reach its audience, the group learned how to publicize events. When funding was hard to find, and when the funding they could get came with strings too tight to accept, leaders attended a fundraising school sponsored by the Bay Area Black Unity Fund to find other options.

The first trip to Ghana was also the program’s first experience running a program with a major funder along for the ride. On that trip, one of the youth leaders was caught with marijuana. What to do with the young person? What about the perceptions of the funder? The answer was to look to African culture. So the leaders called a family meeting of all trip participants, including one funder, and asked the family to hold the young person accountable. The family asked him to account for his behavior, spoke about how his actions affected them and the group, and talked about how his behavior could affect the organization. That experience, plus a meeting with his mother when he got home, was consequence enough. Each challenge, small and large, results in learning.

Documenting what is learned is the YLDI part of the work of Leadership Excellence. The group now has written curricula for both Camp Akili and Stand 4 Somethin’, and in his writing, Shawn has begun to articulate the foundations of their work. Leadership Excellence has pushed the concepts of youth development beyond “Band-Aiding” problems and “asset building” to incorporating social identity and social context.

Through social and cultural awareness, self-development, and healing, Leadership Excellence seeks to “create youth who are personally and socially aware and conscious and who want to make change in themselves and the community.” Success may be measured by a young woman’s decision to wear her hair naturally, a young man’s rejection of sexist terminology, or young people choosing to make change in their community. One young woman advocated that her school create a child care program so that young mothers like herself could learn. Success occurs when young people change the kind of music they listen to or become more critical of mainstream culture. “Our movement,” says Nedra, “creates healthy, socially conscious young people who have the tools and commitment to create social change.” When those young people talk about organizing, they talk about raising consciousness: It has become their passion.

### Leadership Excellence Lessons Learned

- ★ Many behaviors come out of pain. If behaviors stem from pain, changing them lies, at least in part, in healing.
- ★ For a program to be effective, it needs to be about more than community service. It needs to be about community activism.
- ★ Skills like public speaking and group facilitation are important but insufficient. Effective youth and leadership development strategies also need to incorporate culture and self-development.

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2 This workshop was created and piloted by Leadership Excellence, a YLDI partner. For more information, contact Leadership Excellence.

## Personal Leadership Workshop

### WHO ARE YOU?<sup>2</sup>

**Overview**

This is a self-reflective workshop that asks youth to work in groups of 2 or 3 as they respond to questions with words, pictures, or both. The workshop provides a safe medium in which participants can address questions about their sense of self.

**Purpose**

To stimulate critical, self-reflective thought about the ideas and images that young people have of themselves and to foster healthier, more productive ideas of self

**Time Required**

1.5 hours

**Materials**

CD covers or construction paper, markers, pens, and crayons for each young person

<sup>2</sup> This workshop was created and piloted by Leadership Excellence, a YLDI partner organization (See Appendix 3, Contact Information).

### Preparation

You can prepare CD covers ahead of time by using the template provided (see handout). To make a CD cover, simply copy the shape from the handout on a piece of paper, cut along the dotted lines, and then fold it in half along the solid line. There should be one CD cover for each participant. If you prefer, you can have participants draw on blank pieces of construction paper.

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
<b>Step 1:</b> Setup & Individual Artwork	30 min	Ask participants to respond to questions using written words, pictures, or both. Use a nonthreatening format, such as “Design your own CD cover,” to give participants a safe medium to answer questions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Who are you?</li> <li>★ Who do you pretend to be?</li> <li>★ How do others perceive you to be?</li> </ul>	Blank CD covers OR construction paper  Markers, pens, and crayons
<b>Step 2:</b> Small-Group Discussion	30 min	Once participants have responded to the questions, divide them into groups of 2 or 3. Ask them to meet in their small groups and explain what their creations represent.	
<b>Step 3:</b> Group Reflection	30 min	Ask the small groups to wrap up their discussions and reconvene as a large group. Use the following questions to guide participants in reflecting on the experience and bring closure to the activity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ How did you feel participating in the exercise?</li> <li>★ Were you able to be honest?</li> <li>★ Did any of the questions make you uncomfortable?</li> <li>★ What questions were easy to answer?</li> <li>★ What questions were difficult?</li> <li>★ What did you learn about yourself by doing this exercise?</li> <li>★ What did you learn about others?</li> </ul>	

# “WHO ARE YOU?” HANDOUT

## CD COVER TEMPLATE

FRONT COVER  
Front page

FRONT COVER  
Back page