Why Cadets Struggle for a Sense of Ownership in Cadet Life

Introducing the Lead2Change model to help cadets win adult support for their big ideas

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Introduction – Wouldn't It Be Cool to Hold a Bivouac?

"Major Jones, can we schedule a bivouac?"

It's the sort of question cadets might ask their squadron-level leaders. In our strongest squadrons, the adult staff empower the cadets and guide them in fulfillment of their self-initiated goal. But in squadrons that are new or rebuilding or understaffed, some of the responses go like this:

"*Um, yeah, maybe someday,*" or
"*Sure, go for it, good luck,*" or
"*Nah. Wing doesn't like that.*"

But often the cadets are determined and sometimes power-through those vague, lukewarm responses or outright prohibitions. "But ma'am, here's our plan . . ." Nevertheless the seniors' responses might go like this:

"*Wrong format,*" or
"*Way too vague,*" or
"*Too much, too fast.*"

And if the cadets somehow cobble together enough support from adult staff to actually conduct that bivouac, that's no guarantee it will unfold as they hope:

"*Step aside, cadet, I've got this.*"

Finally, when the event is all done, so what? Do you just go home?

"*Hey cadet, did you learn anything from your bivouac experience?*"
Reply: "*Um, I don't know.*"

Do these scenes I've just describe sound plausible, something that might happen in some squadrons? In my thirty-five years' experience interacting with cadets they're all too common and they represent missed opportunities. But why do they arise?

"Is the Cadet Program cadet run?" In my research into the cadet leadership laboratory, that frequently asked question has revealed itself to be a false binary, not a helpful discussion starter. If "yes," there's no place for adult guidance. If "no," there's no hope of autonomy and growth. By phrasing the question differently, we can help cadets and their adult mentors alike provide high quality activities together.

How do we increase our capacity to empower cadets? That's the key question that has led me toward a new model on how cadets can lead change.

Figure 1 shows results from a small-scale survey of cadet officers (the top 15% of cadets, typically 10th – 12th grade students) and wing (state-level) adult leaders we conducted in 2020. The main question posed is "Do we 'empower' cadets?" I won't go into depth here but through numerous examples the survey explained what "empower" means in this context. Suffice it to say that an "empowered" cadet is one who is fully involved in planning and making decisions about cadet activities, a cadet who enjoys a sense of ownership while having caring adults nearby to assist in just the right way if adult help is needed.
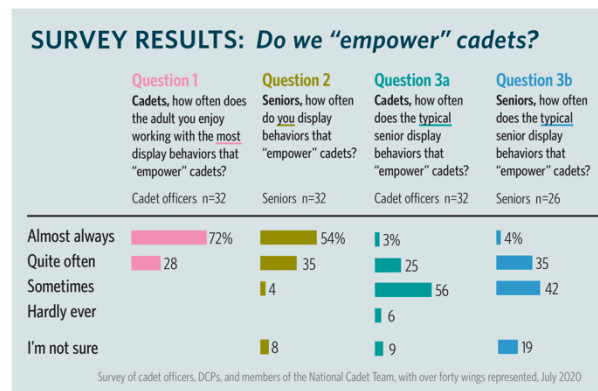

Figure 1

The survey responses indicated that some of the best, favorite adults (in the cadets' eyes) are people who regularly "empower" them. To a lesser extent, the state-level adult leaders saw themselves using those empowering behaviors. But when we consider the "typical" adult – someone who is perhaps new to CAP or perhaps is not an alum, or perhaps interacts with cadets only locally or on a sporadic basis, the frequency of "empowering" behaviors plummeted.

Part I – Toward More Empowered Cadets

As an exercise, the survey revealed that we did not have a common framework for discussing what "empowerment" and "cadet run" mean and do not mean. Indeed, it's difficult to discuss a topic and learn about it if we lack the words to do so. Acquire a technical vocabulary and suddenly complex ideas easily enter the conversation. Intractable problems become solvable because the right words are available for work. In short, it was time for a trip to the library. Our *Positive Youth Development Glossary* (CAPP 60-18, 2024) aims to equip the cadet community with common terminology for professional growth. Definitions for each term are drawn from today's scholarship and presented in both a general and CAP context.

Return to questions of what's "empower" really mean and is the cadet program cadet run. Scholarship has better, more precise expressions of those ideas. Four terms are vital to this paper's goal.

Youth Voice. The preferences, viewpoints, and voices of youth participants should guide extracurricular clubs like CAP. Youth should have a big say in what they learn, how they learn it, and why. Skimp on opportunity for youth voice and you'll find yourself at odds with teens' natural desire for autonomy, agency, and self-determination.

Free Choice Learning. A close cousin to youth voice, free choice learning is self-directed, voluntary, and guided by individual needs and individual interests. It's learning we do when we want to. Youth programs like CAP are ripe for free choice learning because unlike compulsory schooling, youth program participants can "vote with their feet," leaving the program if it's not fun, interesting, or challenging.

Authentic Decision-Making. Youth should be empowered to set the direction and make operational choices for their club. Youth participants earn increasing privileges of authentic decision-making as they grow in maturity, experience, and willingness to accept responsibility for their choices as leaders. True, under *in loco parentis*, the adult's duty as a chaperone, some decisions are never to be delegated to youth (e.g., signing contracts, ensuring safety, providing adult supervision, etc.).

Youth-Adult Partnership. The club community – multiple adults and multiple youth – should work together in a democratic and collective spirit. Youth and adults alike need to feel they're valued members of a team who share the same goals. If one believes the Cadet Program should be "cadet run," then the adults will abandon cadets to their own adolescent wisdom. In a good youth-adult partnership, youth voice and authentic decision making overcome the tendency of adults to dominate the relationship, to push aside the cadets and take control of the activity.

Now, armed with a basic vocabulary that describes our ideal cadet leadership laboratory's look and feel, we can climb to 20,000 feet altitude, as it were, and try to see the whole system, the whole space framing cadet life.

The causal or fishbone diagram in Figure 2 attempts to identify several of the main factors affecting cadet life, several truisms that impede effective youth leader development. This diagram is built from
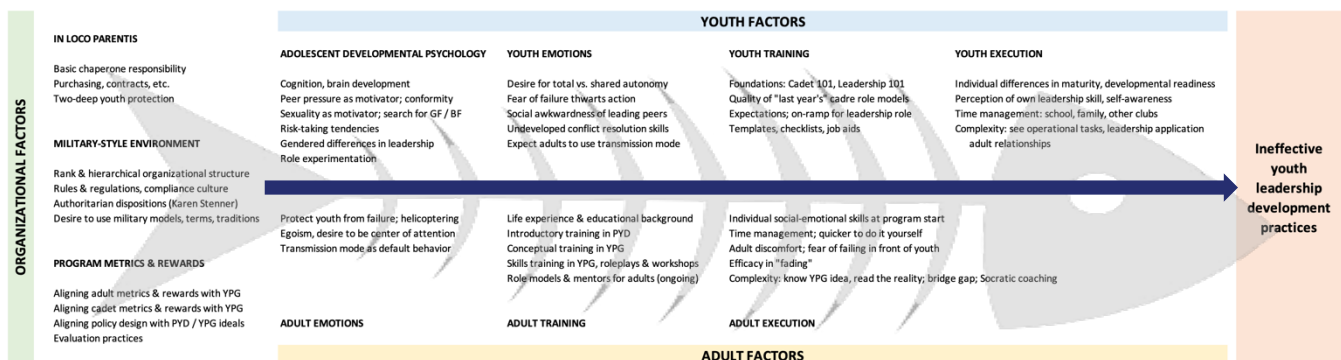

Figure 2. *A causal or fishbone diagram depicting prominent elements of the system affecting youth leadership development practices*

interviews with cadets, adult leaders, Air Force partners who see our program in action, and my own 35 plus years' experience which includes time as a cadet in the preceding century. Of course this diagram cannot hope to capture every conceivable feature, but it probably identifies enough to help us appreciate the multi-faceted system that sometimes produces "empowered" cadets and sometimes produces disempowered cadets. In other words, if we want this system to produce empowered cadets more reliably than it is doing today, we need to identify some key nodes in that system, some centers of gravity ripe for intervention. No single element of this system is likely our silver bullet; we probably need to contend with the weakest handful of elements. In Part II below, the elements of Lead2Change that can be traced back to the causal or fishbone diagram are *presented in blue italics.*

Part II – Designing an Intervention to Increase our Capacity to Empower Cadets

CAP operates in a volunteer environment. At best, cadets enjoy about 16 contact hours per month (2 hours per week plus one "Saturday" event). Therefore, any intervention, any proposed solution needs to be simple enough for *busy "part-time" participants* to understand and use. The intervention needs to focus on the fundamentals, offering cadets and adults a *simple path* to cadet empowerment.

Through empathy interviews, structured talks I used to understand the perspective of 21st century cadets and their adult leaders, I discovered that the military-style, *"sole leader in command" model* is often unsuited when teenaged cadets want to try to lead change. Cadets desire peer support. Many *teens hesitate to stand out front on their own* because so much of adolescent development is the struggle to fit-in and win peer acceptance. Further, because leadership is a new experience for teens, they're apt to stumble at times. Adults could find it useful to work with cadets in pairs, *hoping that if one cadet struggles to comprehend a problem their co-leading peer might pick-up that challenge* more quickly, thereby keeping the project on-track without the adult either permitting the struggling cadet to fail or the adult resulting to a more directive leadership style or instructional *"transmission mode."* Accordingly, cadet projects should usually be led by a duo working as co-leads. To respect traditional military nomenclature, we might have a Lead Project Officer and a Deputy Project Officer working side-by-side under adult mentorship.

At this writing, in January 2024, CAP is still seeing the effects of COVID. Some cadet officers were waived from the formative experience of a week-long summer encampment. My causal or fishbone diagram points to the power of *"last year's cadre"* to set the example for this year's mix of top-ranking cadets. Through no fault of their own, the current generation of cadet officers / older teens mostly lacked the benefit of seeing older sisters and brothers in action a couple years ago. Therefore, some kind of step-by-step process might be necessary to guide today's top cadets through a process of leading change.

Effective youth-adult partnerships are two-dimensional, not one-sided experiences where the cadet is *starved for guidance* or where the adult shoves the *cadet off-stage and steals the spotlight*. Our sample recipe for leading change needs to have *scaffolding* and *fading* embedded. By scaffolding, I mean the cadets require help eating their elephant one bite at a time, a progression to guide young people toward attainment of their goal. By fading, I mean the adults need help finding that deft touch where they

intentionally reduce their use of direct instruction and control over the cadets as those cadets proceed through their project and gain confidence and skill. (For more on scaffolds and fading, see CAPP 60-18, *Positive Youth Development Glossary*.)

All the while, our intervention needs to say the same thing to both audiences, the cadets and adults alike. "Look, I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing right now," the cadet might say to the adults, in an effort to allow them to exercise youth voice and authentic decision-making. The adults echo to the cadets "Look, *I'm* doing what I'm supposed to be doing right now," as they take a moment to provide constructive feedback and ask probing questions to strengthen the cadets' plan, facilitate learning, and deliver a great experience for all participants.

Part III – The Lead2Change Intervention for Empowering Cadets

In Figure 3, I present this multifaceted intervention in a simple 4-phase process: (1) Propose, (2) Plan, (3) Do, and (4) Reflect. Appendix 1 displays the full Lead2Change infographic.
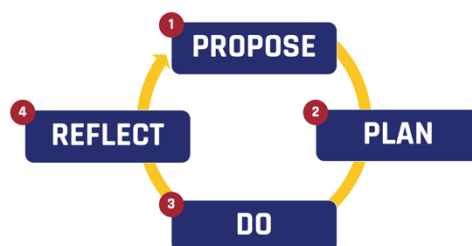

Figure 3. *The simple model for cadet change initiatives underlying the Lead2Change tool*

Phase I – Propose. First the cadet taps their imagination for a cool new idea. "Major Jones, can we host a bivouac?" Second, the cadet invites a fellow cadet to assist with the project, perhaps with the title of Deputy Project Officer. Together the duo drafts a 1-page summary of their idea. This is not a massive, comprehensive proposal, just an outline of the idea, how they envision their project unfolding and achieving something meaningful. The cadets send that 1-pager to adult staff as an email and ask for 15-minutes sometime soon to present the idea, using their document as a jumping-off point for an oral briefing. The briefing is an opportunity for adult staff to engage in back-and-forth dialogue, perhaps filling-in some of the blanks for cadets or identifying hurdles the cadets will need to find their way around. First-timer cadets might be sent back to revise their proposal a bit and represent their idea when their ready, but overall, the adult staff's posture must be one of "Let's try to find a way to say yes to the cadets' request." You want them to have that bivouac. At the end of this first phase, the cadets receive a thumbs-up from their adult staff, support for their idea *in concept*, permission to get to work on the nitty-gritty details, perhaps with help identifying what those nitty-gritty topics are.

Phase II – Plan. The cadets' proposal sketched their idea at a high level. Now it's time to develop a detailed plan for their change idea. A sample operations plan is available to guide them. In the op-plan, they divide the labor as to lanes of responsibility – which challenges belong to the cadets, which challenges belong to the adults, and which challenges are shared. They provide just enough detail to the various standards and tasks to get the job done. An op-plan of about 2 pages should suffice, and an exemplar is available.

As was the case with the proposal phase, the plan phase concludes with the cadets using their written plan as the starting point for an oral presentation to the adult staff. The adults provide constructive feedback, identify any major gaps in the plan – "So, what's the plan for inclement weather? What if half

or double the expected number of cadets attend the activity?" If necessary, adults may send the first draft back to the cadets for some revisions, but again, the adults' posture should be, "Let's try to find a way to say yes to the cadets' general plan."

The adult staff should focus on content, not the plan's format. Adult staff should accept a plan that addresses the fundamental factors of the planned activity, service project, or change idea. The goal here is to get the cadets to begin thinking of how their idea will unfold. A basic schedule, a simple budget, a checklist of safety issues, names and contact info of vendors and key staff, and an outline of individual activities and classes are some of the features of an adequate op-plan.

Phase III – Execution. It's D-Day, time for the cadets to implement their plan. A solid plan is great preparation for a successful project, but as events unfold, leaders need to be flexible. Cadets might need some help generating options if their plan goes sideways.

As the activity or project proceeds, adults keep alert for any major flaws that are occurring or are about to occur that will *ruin* the experience for cadets. It's *okay* for the project to have bumps, but if a major failure is on the horizon then adults should take a hands-on posture, intervening to keep the project worthwhile for the participating students / cadet corps. Three examples of "major failure" might include: (1) Massive stage fright paralyzes a cadet instructor, (2) Snafus have cadet students / cadet corps sitting idle too long, or (3) Cadet cadre lose focus, resorting to in-jokes, favoritism, or crazy antics. Major setbacks ought to be rare, thanks to the youth – adult partnership developed during the proposal and planning phases.

To guard against the adults inadvertently robbing the cadets of their opportunity to lead and make decisions, adult staff should frequently ask themselves, "Who is in the spotlight 80% of the time, cadets or adults?" Quick coaching and questioning made from the sidelines ought to be how adults spend the majority of their time, apart from the obvious duty of ensuring youth safety and adequate supervision.

Phase IV – Reflect. "Know thyself." "The unconsidered life is not worth living." These two truisms from the ancient Greeks command aspiring leaders to set aside time for reflection. Under the "Lead2Change" model, reflection happens in two settings: privately between the two lead cadets, via a written after action review, and through an oral presentation to the adult staff, which generates some back-and-forth dialogue in a collegial atmosphere.

First, the cadet project lead and deputy project lead get together and support one another in examining what happened. How did we think the project would proceed? How did it go in actuality? Why? What "problem" or "worry" were you fearing that did not appear? What was the biggest surprise? What was the toughest part of the job? The most fun? If you had a free "do-over," how would you spend it?

Reflection is an exercise in teaching oneself to think critically about one's own performance. Through reflection, leaders become open to feedback from peers and adults; indeed, you "fight for feedback" because it's the "breakfast of champions." In other words, reflection is where the real learning takes place, so adult staff should help the cadets ask, "Okay, so what?" and to harvest meaningful answers.

The cadets capture some of their reflections on a 1-page after action review or AAR. (An exemplar is available.) The AAR's audience is the cadets themselves, plus whomever is leading a similar project "next time." When this document is ready, it becomes the starting point for an oral presentation and dialogue with the adult staff. The adult staff's insights are vital because mature perspectives can fuel the cadets' growth. Still, nobody can truly profit from more than 2 or 3 coaching points, so the adults need to prioritize the insights they wish to share and not inadvertently overwhelm the cadets with feedback.

Finally, the Lead2Change model recommends that the cadets thank everyone who helped them (which could go beyond their immediate adult staff to include guest instructors, vendors, parents, etc.). It's the right thing to do. It's also beneficial to the cadets because it creates opportunities to deepen those relationships and social networks.

Part IV – Roads Not Yet Taken

Currently, the Lead2Change tool represents a minimum viable product (MVP). It provides the cadet community with a workable framework that can deliver decent outcomes right now. Under the "agile" development model, secondary features can be added later; it might be the case that as we use the MVP we'll discover that secondary features we're envisioning now aren't truly needed, or something else is needed entirely.

Later, perhaps online threaded discussion forums might be useful for peer-to-peer dialogue and sharing of challenges and solutions. We could attach a few trained adults to the forums as moderators / coaches to serve as sounding boards, independent of the cadets' local adults. Imagine the potential to form an online community of practice marked by youth voice, free choice learning, and authentic decision making. Also, if cadets and adults use this tool, they'll generate exemplars for the proposals, operating plans, after action reviews, etc., that we could post to a community website.

Further, there's a real potential to use Lead2Change as a tool for empathy building. For any project or change idea there are stakeholders, people who don't yet value that idea and need to be persuaded to support it. An intentional empathy exercise can help. What will a given stakeholder want to know about the idea, what will worry them about the idea, what aspirations does that stakeholder have and how might the change idea mesh or conflict with them? I'd like to see cadets identify a couple "potential points of potential interest" and a couple "potential points of concern" for two or three stakeholders. Such an exercise could help a new generation of leaders learn how to bring others along with them instead of their trying to win change through brute force.

What's next? We need to test Lead2Change as an intervention. We have a small but usable baseline in the empowerment survey results in Figure 1. Give Lead2Change to some squadrons, have them use it, and then run the participants through that same survey. If the respondents report a greater degree of empowerment, we've got the beginnings of a win. Further, we could design Kirkpatrick-style evaluations. Is the tool understandable to cadets and adults? Is it simple enough to be usable, repeatable such that it becomes standard process in the squadron, or is Lead2Change just a momentarily interesting tool that won't stick? Finally, Kirkpatrick would have us examine if the tool actually produces real outcomes in the

real world, which in the cadet space means that Lead2Change develops leadership skills that work in a diverse, democratic society.

Part IV – Conclusion

America's most successful youth-serving professionals will find nothing especially new in this Lead2Change intervention. In the best cadet squadrons or local club chapters for 4-H or Scouting or other extracurriculars, something like its Propose – Plan – Do – Reflect process is likely underway already. Lead2Change's value lies in its potential to provide some of the new or rebuilding organizations with a recipe for positive youth development. I'm hoping that the model is, in the words of poet Alexander Pope, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed," and in turn, creates an a-ha! moment for adults who want to support youth voice and authentic decision making but have not found that recipe on their own.

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Appendix 1. Lead2Change infographic. *This document on the next two pages is available in portrait and landscape formats at GoCivilAirPatrol.com/Lead2Change.*

LEAD2CHANGE

How cadets can win adult support for their big ideas

CIVIL AIR PATROL

Adult Staff: As you receive the cadets' idea, say to yourself, *"Let's try to find a way to say yes."*

1. PROPOSE

1. Imagine

Put your thinking cap on. What could we add as a cadet activity or what could we change about cadet life to make CAP better for cadets?

2. Invite

Invite a fellow cadet to help you as the project's co-lead. Teams tend to out-perform individuals.

3. Draft a Proposal

Draft a 1-page summary of your idea. Describe what benefits your idea could produce. Outline how things would work. List some of the challenges you need help with.

SAMPLE AVAILABLE

15 MINUTES

4. Present

Show and tell your idea with two or more adult leaders. Use your 1-page proposal as a starting point for a verbal briefing. Allow time for questions and discussion.

ADULT GUIDE AVAILABLE

5. Success!

Congratulations! Adult staff now support your idea *in concept*. Still, there's a lot more to do before you gain approval to actually run your activity or implement your proposed change.

Sometimes you might be asked to revise your thoughts and re-present the idea.

2. PLAN

1. Build an Operating Plan

Build your 1- or 2-page operating plan. It's time to get specific about who will do what, by when, how, and why. If you and your co-lead "got hit by a bus," your operating plan should be all that a colleague needs to carry-on in your absence.

SAMPLE AVAILABLE

15 MINUTES

2. Present

Show and tell your idea with two or more adult leaders, like you did before. Use the 2-page operating plan as the basis for your presen-tation. Allow time for questions and discussion. This is where you seek formal approval to launch your activity or change initiative.

ADULT GUIDE AVAILABLE

Sometimes you might be asked to revise and re-present your operating plan

1. Execute!

Congratulations! You've persuaded adults to support your idea. With their help, you've built a plan with enough detail to make your idea successful. Now comes the fun part: execution.

2. Observe & Stay Flexible

Watch closely and listen to people as your activity or change initiative starts. No matter how great your plan is, you might need to make changes on the fly. Take notes so you can learn how to get better.

1. Reflect

Get with your co-lead to reflect on the whole experience. Review the notes you made during the execution phase. Ask yourselves, What did you expect to happen? What actually happened? Why? What did you learn? Draft a 1-page after action review to capture those lessons.

SAMPLE AVAILABLE

2. Share Your AAR

15 MINUTES

Show and tell your after action review with your adult staff. By telling others what you've learned, you're apt to help make that learning stick. Be open to their feedback — that's how you'll grow. Your AAR can help the next cadet build on your success.

ADULT GUIDE AVAILABLE

3. Thank

Thank the people who helped you with the project. Briefly tell them what change your project created and what you learned along the way. It's the right thing to do, plus you might strengthen your relationship with that person for "next time."

SAMPLE AVAILABLE

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CADET PROGRAMS

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