Youth Challenged to Find Their Strengths | CPD

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Motivational speaker and leadership trainer Todd Christensen speaks to the participant of the first-ever leadership conference for youth with disabilities.

Motivational speaker and leadership trainer Todd Christensen challenged the participants of a new leadership conference for youth with disabilities to “Look at your strengths … remember who you are. Be true to yourself. If you find something you are passionate about, you will make a difference.”

Christensen spoke to the youth and their group leaders earlier this week at a conference coordinated in part by Jeff Sheen of Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities. Sheen is a training and development specialist and program coordinator at the CPD.

Christensen asked the 10 young men and women, who were participants in youth groups sponsored by Centers for Independent Living around the state of Utah, to define what makes a leader. Their responses included: “Always directing a cause,” “showing you can be a leader and not a follower,” “a person who’s not afraid to be themselves,” “a person who stands up for themselves or someone else,” “someone who doesn’t care what people think—they know what’s right,” “someone who is willing to learn or always learning,” “humble,” and “someone who is willing to listen and understand people.”

During the two-hour session, Christensen led the students through several exercises meant to help them define the concept of leadership, how the principles of leadership could be applied to their own lives, and the importance of moving outside of one’s comfort zone.

“What kind of life do you live if you’re not willing to step up and take risks and stand up for something?” he asked. “You’re a zombie … Great leaders crash and burn, but they live life and they make others’ lives better.”

Christensen said that the only thing necessary to be a leader is to have a follower, but a leader has to be someone that people want to follow. Leadership is not intimidation, he said, but about building relationships and visualizing the future.

“A lot of people will talk leadership,” he said. “But you have to decide: who is the kind of leader you’d like to follow? Who is the kind of leader you’d like to be?”

He quoted a survey in which 88 percent of the respondents said honesty was the most important attribute in a leader, followed by forward-looking at 71 percent, competent at 66 percent and inspiring at 65 percent.

“If you’re not honest, how can you inspire people to follow you?” he asked.

Christensen said the seven keys to success as a leader are passion for your cause, belief in yourself and your product or service, energy, strategy, the ability to build rapport, communication, and 100 percent commitment.

“A leader needs to be passionate,” he said. “Managers are appointed, but leaders are chosen by their constituents … The followers, the constituents, make the leader want to be a better leader. You are leaders, you just don’t know it yet.”