



BRIGHT SPOTS:

An Exemplar Study of SCA Leaders



STUDY GOAL: Inform professional development and support for SCA leaders

The following research questions guided this study:

- How do leaders achieve the balancing act of empowerment within boundaries?
- How do leaders create opportunities for collaborative learning among peers?
- How do leaders effectively build inclusive communities within the culture of their teams/workplaces?

STUDY DESIGN: Learning from exemplary leaders in seven SCA field sites & beyond

A team of researchers from Search Institute conducted seven two-day site visits with crews and corps across the United States which included observations, participant focus groups and leader interviews. Researchers also conducted an additional 12 phone interviews with corps leaders, community crew leaders and intern supervisors.

CORE FINDING: Relationships & emotional safety help SCA transform lives and conserve lands

When leaders get to know each crew member and consistently demonstrate genuine care for their physical and emotional safety and well-being, crew members come to trust them. When leaders build a positive relational culture among members, members come to trust each other. Together, these factors set the stage for leaders recognizing opportunities to promote growth for each member; and for leaders to provide the kind of support each member needs to make the most of those opportunities. It also sets the stage for members to learn from and support each other.

When all of the above is happening, members are continually growing, building their competence. The team works better as a unit. In turn, members gain new confidence in their abilities. Together competence, collaboration and confidence produce higher quality conservation work outputs while team members are growing as individuals.

GREAT LEADER PRACTICES FOR BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Search Institute has identified five elements that make relationships powerful in young people's lives. These five elements of developmental relationships emerged as central to the practices of SCA leaders in this study:

- Express Care
- Challenge Growth
- Provide Support
- Share Power
- Expand Possibilities

The real art came in knowing how to balance these elements, tailoring the mix to suit a particular participant or group, in a particular setting, at a particular point in their journey through the program.

GREAT LEADER PRACTICES FOR ENSURING EMOTIONAL SAFETY

"I used to put more of the focus on literally getting the work done, but it quickly became clear to me, if you're so far outside your comfort zone, you're considering leaving or barely getting through the day, you're not—no one's winning.... Years ago *I switched gears to emotional safety being my absolute priority.*"
— SCA LEADER

Getting to Know Participants Individually. Leaders who created a relational culture spent time listening to participants and getting to know them individually. Part of getting to know members included leaders structuring one-on-one spaces.

Dependable and Consistent. Participants appreciated leaders who were "always there for me" and "did what they said they would do."

Being Transparent and Proactively Addressing Conflict. Some leaders created structured space for the entire group to proactively deal with conflict, including community meetings where participants could solve problems and "discuss and evaluate how we're doing."

Showing passion for the work and the setting. Participants noted that their leaders' positive attitude and love for the work rubbed off on them. One said, "That passion she brings can spread into our day-to-day attitude when we come to work."

Self-reflection. Leaders who "walked the talk" reflected on their own attitudes and behaviors just as they asked crew members to do the same.

GREAT LEADER PRACTICES FOR SCAFFOLDING GROWTH

Clearly articulated high expectations. One crew leader said, "I just expect that they can." Participants appreciated crew leaders who "don't underestimate us."

Encouraged participants to stretch. Participants appreciated leaders who "know what we're capable of and push us to make sure we can reach that" and "pushed me to situations I wouldn't necessarily be in on my own."

Framed mistakes as a natural part of learning. This encouraged participants to reflect on what went wrong and what they could do differently in the future. A participant said s/he learned that "when you try something new, you're always going to make a mistake . . . but you've got to get over it. You will see it, acknowledge, find a solution and keep going." Leaders said this creates an environment where people want to try new things.

Encouraged people to share their ideas and act on them. Leaders commonly used a morning "circle up" as an opportunity for participants to raise questions and share their ideas for effectively accomplishing the day's work.

Stepped back and stepped in. While stepping back to let participants struggle and solve problems on their own, leaders in this study kept an eye on them, gauging when they might need help. A participant said leaders were "always willing to come over and help us, and . . . backed off if s/he thought we could make some progress on our own."

Sullivan, T., Sethi, J., Van Boekel, M., Gebru, E., & Allen, L., Chamberlain, R. (2018).
Bright Spots: An Exemplar Study of SCA Crew Leaders. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.



For more than 50 years, Search Institute®—a research to practice organization—has worked with partners in 60 countries, discovering what children and youth need to succeed. Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets are the most widely recognized and most frequently cited approach to positive youth development in North America and serve as the foundation of its work.



SCA unites young people with hands-on environmental challenges to create future stewards of our land, healthier environments and—ultimately—a better world. Since 1957, more than 70,000 young people have joined the ranks of SCA and have provided more than 28 million hours of hands-on service yielding immediate and lasting effects on our environment.