

The Eight Habits of Highly Effective Activity Advisers

1. Early to Bed, Early to Rise....

Benjamin Franklin wasn't kidding when he discovered this little recipe for success. All of the advisers I talked with make it a habit to be at school ready to work at the crack of dawn. The average time was around 6:30 a.m., with some arriving as early as 5:45 a.m., and others as "late" as 7:30 a.m.

Successful advisers also put in long days. Despite many of the advisers being some of the first to arrive at school, many are also some of the last to leave. Most advisers say they leave school around 4:30 p.m. or 5:00 p.m., and that is on days that they don't have a school-related evening event to attend. "I put in long hours in order to provide quality experiences for the students, but the end result makes the long hours worthwhile," says William Knight, student council adviser at Hermosa MS in Farmington, NM, who was the Region VI NASC Adviser of the Year.

2. Manage Your Time Well

It probably goes without saying, but advisers have a lot to do. So, with more demands on your time and energy than hours in the day, how do you get it all done?

"You have to be able to prioritize," says Deanne Clifford, student council adviser at Lake City HS in Coeur d'Alene, ID, who was Region VII NASC Adviser of the Year. "As simple as it sounds, you just do what needs to be done first, and keep sane by delegating duties effectively."

Other advisers recommend keeping it "real" when prioritizing tasks, and suggest being honest about how much time things will take. Budget what it will really take to accomplish something, not what you wish it would take. Over scheduling your time will do nothing but add stress to your life.

Advisers also recommend making time for yourself and loved ones. "A very important thing is to make time for yourself so you can get recharged and reenergized," says Marquita Thomas, student council adviser at Goodpasture HS in Madison, TN, who was Region III and national NASC Adviser of the Year. "And always make sure to devote time to your family and the people in your life who matter most to you."

3. Get Organized!

An important part of time management is the ability to keep things organized. Nearly all the advisers I spoke with said staying organized is paramount in their success. They recommend finding some type of organization system that works for you, whether it be a Blackberry or 50 Post-It notes, to help you stay on track.

"There is a running joke at my school that you will always see me with a stenographers pad when I walk the halls," says Terry D'Imperio, student council adviser at Livonia (NY) HS, who was Region II NASC Adviser of the Year. "I divide up one page into four quadrants: To Do, Calls and E-mails, Student Council Items, and To Buy—it's the only way for me to stay organized!"

Other organizational tips include:

- Getting e-mails and other paperwork done first thing in the morning to allow more flexibility later in the day.
- Planning each step of a project or process—however small—so that there will be no surprises when trying to get things done.
- Taking time at the end of each day to review upcoming activities and then doing any task that can be done immediately to lighten the load down the road.

4. Be Flexible

OK, it sounds somewhat oxymoronic to say you must be a “super-organized-I-dotter-and-T-crosser,” yet be willing to go in a completely different direction, if that’s where your day takes you. But, from all the advisers I spoke with, this seems like a very helpful skill to have, especially if you want to stay sane!

“That’s what I like about my work day,” says Dan Jung, student council adviser at Pulaski (WI) HS, who was Region IV NASC Adviser of the Year. “There is always something unexpected that happens. An issue will develop or a crisis will occur. It’s never boring.”

While D’Imperio adds, “I organize the things I have control over, but there comes a point where you just have to take a deep breath and see where the day takes you.

“You have to finish each day’s work,” says Marie Abele, NHS adviser at Richfield (MN) HS, and recipient of the National Honor Society’s Rynearson Adviser of the Year Award, “but your day will be less stressful if you can plan in some flexibility with your activities.”

5. Follow Through

It sounds like a no-brainer, but it seems to work. If you commit to something, do it. If someone else says they are going to do something for you—hold them accountable for it.

“I tend to be a perfectionist,” says Jung. “But I believe if I’m going to do something, I might as well try to do it to the best of my ability. Most people view me as someone who will get the job done correctly.”

Many of these advisers believe that people support what they help create. They say the best way to ensure that your student leaders will follow through on something is to allow them to develop activities from the ground up. A sense of ownership does wonders to motivate you, and your students, to follow through.

6. Delegate

“I empower my students to make decisions, and when all is said and done, those decisions are what guide us through the school year,” says Clifford. Many of the advisers I interviewed sang praises about the power of delegation.

“I often have to remind myself that my title is ADVISER not member,” says D’Imperio. “It can be really easy to jump in too quickly to bail a student out or pick up the slack. The beauty of delegation,” D’Imperio continues, “is that it helps team members feel part of the group and makes for less stress for everyone involved.”

Sometimes, however, delegation is easier said than done, especially when lack of experience, or a different perspective, may cause student leaders to handle something differently than you

would.

"Students learn by sometimes making mistakes," says Clifford. "I do not step in and interfere unless I think that something is dangerous or unethical. The bottom line is, given the appropriate leadership training and advice, students will act on their conscience, learn from mistakes, and do the right thing."

But, for those times when something needs to get done right and right now, Knight recommends knowing all your leaders' work habits. "That way, if you are in a bind, or time is running out, you know who to call to get the job done."

7. Communication Is Key

As with many things in life, communication is key to being a successful adviser.

Communicating well makes the practical part of the job much easier. For example, one of the four quadrants in D'Imperio's spiral bound daily organizer notebook was "Calls and E-mails." Keeping simple notes on who you have talked to and what decisions have been made makes long-term communication easier, and can help down the road if any "he said, she said" situations arise.

"This section is exceptionally helpful to keep for several weeks in case I have to get back to someone," says D'Imperio. "I have a running list of phone calls that I have made and who I've left messages with."

Good communication also helps with the morale of a group and its ability to work well together and respect one another. "As with many leadership skills, communication isn't just a skill that will benefit us now," says Abele. "If we can practice listening with patience and an open mind, and learn to welcome input from others, we will all have skills that benefit us for the rest of our lives."

8. Love Your Job

When asked about a mission statement for his career, Dan Jung said it has always been to make a difference. "I knew from the beginning that I wouldn't make a lot of money by going into education. Instead, I hope that I can make a difference in at least a few people's lives."

Out of all the advisers I spoke with, making a million dollars was never once mentioned as the motivation for pouring their heart and soul into their job. It's a labor of love.

"My goal," says Clifford, "is to make sure I have a positive effect on every student I meet. Then in turn, maybe I will have a positive effect on some kids I might never meet."

Fortunately, the effort and energy expended by these advisers is often returned to them, at least to some degree.

"A pivotal moment for me was when one of my leadership students, who suffered from cerebral palsy, planted a Bradford pear tree in the front of the school in my honor," says D'Imperio. "He had a picture taken of him with the tree next to him and he wrote me a note that said: 'You help us grow.' I think about him, and the effect we can have on others, every time I pass it."

Helpful Hints from Highly Effective Advisers

While speaking with these advisers I heard many tips or helpful hints that weren't necessarily a

common habit among all that I spoke with, but still seemed like useful information. So, to add to what you already have to think about, here are some top tips from top advisers.

- Get involved with your state and national organizations; network with other advisers; go to as many conferences as possible; develop friendships with other successful advisers.
- Start a leadership class at your school.
- Persevere even if a situation seems impossible.
- Praise in public, criticize in private.
- Get a co-adviser or an assistant adviser.
- Choose your battles carefully—there is a lot to battle through as an adviser so make sure you spend your energy where it is most needed and most effective.
- Make it about kids. Your students learn by doing the work, not watching you do the work.
- Give of yourself without expecting anything in return. Know that you won't always get a thank you, but the positive difference that you make in the lives of young people will matter for generations to come.