

Middle School Students Forge Partnerships with Corporate America

BY SCOTT BEALL

When I first began teaching middle school my friends thought I was crazy. Everyone knows middle school students are driven more by hormones than intellect. They're wild, rebellious, and working in a low accountability environment, waiting to "get serious" in high school--right? All arguably true, however over the years I have found gold in that roughness. In many areas the wild turbulence of nature can yield riches if creative thinking is applied. (Generating electrical energy from the ocean waves and tides comes to mind...).

Indeed, we are products of our habits of thinking. And of course, the longer one remains addicted to a habit, the more difficult it is to break. While this applies to many people's thinking regarding middle school students, it has even greater implications for our efforts to move society toward sustainable behaviors and actions.

I pursued the notion of tapping the creativity, energy and rebelliousness of middle school youth with the creation of DoRight Enterprises, a sustainability curriculum that empowers students as "expert sustainability consultants" to audit local businesses, schools, homes and faith based institutions. After successful audits of over 35 local businesses in Brewster, New York by 14-year-old students, I was convinced. However, a larger question loomed. Why stop at local mom and pop shops? Why not larger corporations?

In September 2007, I took this idea to Joe Laur, steward of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) Sustainability Consortium, (www.solsustainability.org). In short order, Madeline Skaller, 14, a ninth grader at Brewster High School, and I found ourselves delivering a plenary address to 50 corporate members at the SoL Sustainability Consortium members meeting at the 7th Generation headquarters in Burlington Vermont. Companies represented included Ford, Nissan, Coca Cola, Nike, Harley Davidson, and many more.

Initially, these adult corporate leaders may have thought that 14-year olds adding value to "serious" matters was "cute." Throughout our presentation and subsequent hour-long discussion, the cute factor evaporated and the room began to resonate with inspiration, curiosity, possibility, and ultimately, amazement. Peter Senge, MIT pioneer in systems thinking and founder of SoL, pushed the discussion further with pointed questions, and all left with new perspectives and a shift in their thinking. On reflection of the event, it was reported with excitement that the companies "really get it now--that the voice of youth is vital to their sustainability discussions." Corporate America has often sought out connections with young people to establish early brand loyalty and to further their understanding of youth markets. If this event is any indicator, the role for youth may be on the verge of expanding substantially.

To pursue this idea, I forged the concept of DoRight Corporate Advisory Teams (CATs), talented youth composed of groups of students who have completed the DoRight Enterprises curricular program. CATs focus on a creative, systems-based orientation that uniquely reflects their generation's sensibilities toward positive social and environmental change. This orientation makes them attractive resources for businesses and corporations. CATs seek to provide fresh energy and new perspectives to catalyze innovation and maximize creativity within R&D and management teams. Certainly, as critics may argue, 14-year olds do not have the knowledge depth and experience to compete with adult staffers, but their presence could change the chemistry of a working group. They offer something that adult staffers may lack, something that the great Zen master Suzuki Roshi refers to as "beginner's mind." Roshi said, "In the mind of the beginner there are many possibilities,

while in the mind of the expert there are few." After all, who is better positioned to break our addictions to old paradigms of thinking and the unsustainable behaviors they bring, than those who are less addicted to them?

The first pilot DoRight CAT is emerging with a group of 9th graders in Brewster, New York who have completed the DoRight Enterprises curriculum. To learn more about this program and DoRight Enterprises, please see Scott Beall's article online at www.celfoundation.org or visit www.dorightenterprises.org.

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