



Leadership Academy? Bah humbug!

This past summer I was teaching at an NALC training event and noticed a participant whom I'd seen at a different training a year or so earlier. I recalled from the earlier session that this person seemed bright, enthusiastic about learning, and to have a heart for the NALC. Always being on the lookout for potential NALC activists and leaders, I sought this person out during one of the breaks. I mentioned the earlier training, spoke to him for a few minutes about what he'd been doing since and eventually got around to asking if he had ever thought of applying for the Leadership Academy.

Perhaps I'm a bit naïve, but his reply threw me for a loop. He said, "I really would like to go, but when I approached my branch leadership to see if someone would be my sponsor [mentor], I was told my branch doesn't believe in the Leadership Academy." Seeing the puzzled look on my face, he added, "They said that they prefer training their leaders locally." None of his leaders would agree to sponsor him. So we discussed that perhaps he could get a mentor from another nearby branch or from the NBA's office, but then we both came to the conclusion that if he did that, he might be viewed as going behind his local leaders' backs or maybe even seen as disloyal to his branch leadership and risk being excluded from branch activities. He was in a difficult situation, no doubt. So we just kind of left it there with me lamely suggesting he try talking to them again.

When I got back to my office later that week, I checked into it and, sure enough, even though it's one of the larger branches in the country, none of its members had ever attended the Leadership Academy.

This caused me to wonder if this was an anomaly or if there are leaders in other branches who feel the same way. I certainly hope that the latter isn't the case. It doesn't make sense to me why a branch leader would deny any members this opportunity. After all, it costs the branch absolutely nothing—the member's lost time and expenses are entirely paid for by NALC Headquarters. Members are exposed to a wide variety of training and skill-building designed to make them more valuable to their branches. From learning about labor history and ethical decision-making, to practicing teaching, public speaking and writing skills, the students come out better

equipped to help their branches than when they went in. They also are exposed to a much wider view of the NALC, living, learning, studying and working alongside carriers from every part of the country. They also get to meet, learn from, and talk one-on-one with their national officers and headquarters staff.

When first designing the curriculum for the Leadership Academy in 2005, then-President Bill Young tasked Executive Vice President Jim Williams and a committee of union leaders from across the country to put together the kind of program they wish they had had when they were first getting involved in the NALC. It was not intended to be a shortcut or an easier road to leadership positions, nor was it meant to be a training ground for future regional or national officers. And it still isn't. It is meant to provide a few individuals some tools and information and return them to their branches better equipped to assist the local leadership in accomplishing the goals of the branch. In short, the goal is for graduates of the Leadership Academy to enhance and strengthen a branch, not weaken it. Even if a branch has its own internal leadership development process, I can see no downside to supporting a member who is interested in attending the Academy.

We have heard of a few students who, after graduating from the Leadership Academy, have returned to their branches mistakenly expecting to be greeted as conquering heroes awarded with appointments from on high. Perhaps this accounts for some of the feelings of those who don't support the Academy. I would like to make it clear that the instructors at the Academy make no such promises or claims and, in fact, go to great lengths to disabuse the students of such a notion. Graduating from the Academy, they are told, gives them no special standing, just a few tools, some information, and a pat on the back. What they make of it will be up to them; they will have to earn anything and everything they get.

I would hope that any branch leaders who have been reluctant to support the Leadership Academy would reconsider their position. As John Quincy Adams said: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." ☒