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The J. Kyle Braid Foundation

The J. Kyle Braid Athletic Leadership Foundation is a one of a kind organization that can change the lives of young high school students from across the country, for the rest of their lives. Leadership is an important quality because, “Leaders make decisions that have significant effects on the lives of others. They have the ability to influence events and impact the evolutionary trajectories of societies.” (Vaughn et al, 3). The J. Kyle Braid Foundation, or JKB for short, uses very informal, and effective means of communication, including a monthly newsletter, texts, and the more modern use of Facebook. The foundation is dedicated to impacting the lives of students who are already role models so that they can be even more effective in their leadership skills and make a positive impact in their community and their schools. The J. Kyle Braid foundation began after Ken and Colleen Braid lost their 16-year-old son, Kyle, after he took his own life as an unfortunate result of using anabolic steroids. Kyle was an outstanding athlete and a leader on his high school football team. The Braids created this concept of a ranch in the small town of Villa Grove, Colorado, with a population of about 200 people. This setting is unique, because it is in a location with virtually no cell phone reception, and almost no communication to the outside world. The closest neighbor is literally miles away. This allows for the students at the ranch to stay focused, not only on what they are learning, but also on building relationships.

To attend the ranch, students are chosen at very few select high schools from around the nation that have had a direct relationship with the Braids. Peers, faculty, community leaders and advisors choose students during their sophomore year of high school. Two boys and two girls are chosen from each high school to visit the ranch for one week, all expenses paid, to learn how to become a more effective leader. This comes after a very intense and rigorous interview process by upperclassmen, to pick the best representative of their high school. The weeks alternate at the ranch with boys and girls, to keep them more focused, as well as to bond with others. Students spend about 24 hours of their week in a classroom learning how to become better leaders and better role models for their peers back home. The rest of the week is filled with other leadership training, in the forms of a ropes course, whitewater rafting, skeet shooting, paintball, and horseback riding to name a few. This is truly the opportunity of a lifetime for these students, most of which live in the suburbs of major cities and have never gotten the opportunity to experience the great outdoors like this.

To become a member of JKB, you must be selected by your peers, coaches, or advisors during your sophomore year of high school. Jo-Ann C. Brynne and Richard T. Rees write that, “The first important step in the design of a leadership development program is to focus on the key principles that will provide the structure for your program.” (Brynne et al, 14). The JKB Foundation is looking for students who are already leaders in their community, and students who already hold the key values and principles of the organization. Selecting students with these qualities is what keeps the ranch’s key principles in tact. They want students who have a positive reputation as well as a good relation with coaches and peers as well. To be in JKB you must also be an athlete. This is because the Braids wanted to help kids that were like their son. Kyle was an exceptional athlete and a leader on his football team. His decision to take anabolic steroids was only to better himself. As a sophomore, starting on the varsity football team, he was not fully aware of the side effects of taking these drugs. He wanted to become the best football player that he could be. Unfortunately, his desire also claimed his life.

This is one type of discourse community with great interest to me. I was selected to attend the ranch, in southern Colorado, my sophomore year of high school. I can speak from experience that it changed my life for good, and helped me become the person I am today. Leadership skills are something that will prove to be very important to everyone, particularly in the business model. Fulmer and Bleak write, “By the year 2020, an overwhelming majority of today’s senior leaders will have retired. At the same time, corporate growth plans suggest that firms will need to hire leaders into as many new positions as they currently have- while replacing the leaders who have retired or left the company”. (Fulmer et al, 85). Leaders will be in high demand in the very near future, and leadership skills are not a feature that everyone has. “One of the perennial complaints in the workplace is a lack of communication between individuals and another segment of the working community” (Palestini, 72). The students who attend the ranch, and are dedicated to becoming better leaders, will be very fortunate in have a ‘leg up’ in their business careers in the future.

I obviously am very biased towards JKB. It has changed my life in a very positive way and I am very thankful for everything the foundation has done for me. I was one of the few who was fortunate enough to attend the ranch after my sophomore year at Lakota West High School. I have seen the positive ways that JKB has changed me, as well as how it can create a better atmosphere for the community. JKB however, does have some negatives. One of the negatives I see is that it can bee very badgering at times. Occasionally it feels like this is an organization that only asks for money. It is true that JKB does a lot of fundraising throughout the community. There is an annual fundraiser in Butler County, which is the major source of income for the five high schools in the county affiliated with JKB. In addition at Lakota West, students raffle off an autographed football of the teams senior players, a few dodge ball tournaments, powder-puff football, and various other ways to raise money. Although it can be a nagging and a tedious process throughout the year, the reward is well worth the struggle. It helps pay for students to go to the ranch at no expense to them. Other than the constant attempt of trying to accumulate more money for a better cause, there are not too many regarding JKB.

A discourse is defined by James Paul Gee as, “[A] Way of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.” (Gee 526). This fundamentally includes any nature of communication or human interactions. Gail Fairhurst defines discourse as “[referring] to the study of talk and text in social practices.” (Fairhurst, 6). Every single person in the world has their own discourse, which is just as unique as their fingerprint. Even a brother and a sister who have grown up with the same lifestyle, same interests, and even the same clothes, they still will have their own personality, their own fingerprint, and their very own discourse.

The J. Kyle Braid Foundation is a very unique discourse. There are many foundations for athletes, and many foundations for leaders, but none that do what JKB does. The JKB Foundation takes kids in their early years of high school, picks out students who are good role models, and who will represent their respective schools well. JKB is also a unique discourse because they take a group of 20 kids almost every week of the summer and send them out to Colorado, with everything paid for, so they can teach them how to become better citizens.

One of the most important genres of communication would be through the newsletter via email. A large amount of communication is also done through group texts, although on a smaller scale. JKB communicates itself through educating underclassmen about JKB, as well as other leadership skills, and various fundraisers, which also spread the message of JKB.

When the ranch began nearly twenty years ago, communication was not always the easiest thing to do. The Internet was a fairly new technology, and communicating from the ranch, in rural Colorado, to nearly 35 schools across the country was a difficult task. The US Postal Service was the main form of communication when the ranch first started. Luckily, technology has changed over the past few years, and as the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research shows, “The last decade has seen a proliferation of new ideas about organizational structure. Many of these new ideas stem from and are made possible by the growing use of [Information Technology]” (Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 167). The JKB ranch has taken full advantage of these leaps in technology, to make communication easier, and consistent with the 21st century. “Communication is a complex process, made more difficult because people often make inaccurate assumptions about its complexity.” (Buerkel-Rothfuss, 3). Communication is a huge reason why things can be successful, especially with JKB. A strong leader has the ability to communicate with all types of people. Communication can be a huge barrier between classes of people, and can often cause a struggle, but a strong leader can overcome the barriers.

Fortunately, nowadays the ranch uses email as a primary form of communication to each of the schools. The monthly newsletter is sent out to all members of JKB, past and present. These newsletters are a great way of staying in touch with the ranch, especially for people who have graduated and moved on in their lives. The newsletters are very informal and include everything from upcoming fundraisers, to pictures of students at the ranch now, to alumni who travel the world, and all their experiences.

The J. Kyle Braid Foundation is a very close-knit community and everyone shares a very strong bond. JKB means something different to each person in this community, but it is something close to their hearts and plays a significant role in their lives.

One of the most important aspects included in the newsletter is the fundraiser. The JKB ranch is a non-profit and pays for hundreds of students to fly out to Colorado each summer. The ranch pays for the three-hour car ride down two lane roads with gorgeous mountains on either side from Denver to Villa Grove. All lodging, meals, white water rafting, horseback riding, paintball, and skeet shooting, is paid for. The entire experience of a lifetime is presented at no cost to the student, or their family. That being said, the students who do attend, and their families are asked to return from the ranch and do them a big favor. They are to spread what they have learned and become even more of a positive influence, peer leader, mentor, captain, friend, a leader in their community, on their team, and in their school then they were prior to experiencing the ranch. This being said, the ranch has a lot of bills to pay. This is mostly done by donations, and fundraisers, which people find out about, by way of the newsletters.

The newsletter is also a way to show results of fundraisers, and other student’s accomplishments. Occasionally, they will post what student’s plans are for after high school, what college they will be attending, if they will be playing a sport in college, or joining a military branch, etc.

The newsletter will also show pictures of events that local high schools have participated in or organized, to volunteer in their communities. Some schools choose to volunteer at a soup kitchen, or a homeless shelter, while others preform leadership workshops or camps. This is where younger students from around the community will come to learn some of the leadership skills from JKB ranch alumni. The newsletter is great so that people in Ohio can see what the people in Illinois are doing to make themselves better. This is nice because it can give other branches of the foundation ideas for how to get involved, or ways to better organize events.



Each newsletter incorporates the JKB logo and motto. This is something very important to the ranch. The logo is shown in the top right circle. It is a drawing of Ken Braid on the left and Kyle Braid on the right, with Kyle looking up to his father. This is significant because it shows a sense of family. Even though thousands of students have been to and through the ranch, it is still run and controlled by Ken and Colleen Braid. I think this says a lot, even after almost twenty years of doing this all summer, and putting an incredible amount of work into organizing it in the winter, they still take pride in it. They have managed to keep the integrity of the ranch and preserve the main goals and values of the ranch, which are to help young teens.

The motto of the ranch, included in each newsletter, is “Teens taking the Lead.” This is what the whole week at the ranch is geared towards. Everything the ranch does, the advisors do, and the ranch alumni do, is geared towards this statement. While at the ranch, students are under the supervision of the Braids, and other advisors. However, once they ‘graduate’ from the ranch, they are expected to be leaders themselves. The advisory role of a JKB sponsor is to make sure they stay on track and to inform the students when they need to begin interviews, and to make sure they maintain a good relationship with other faculty and advisors within the school. The sponsor does not run the group though. This is what makes JKB a unique discourse. Students are the ones who run JKB. The main goal is for the students to learn how to be leaders, and having a sponsor present telling them how to do things is not always effective. Therefore, the advisor has a pretty laid back role, making sure the students use their skills learned from their week at the ranch to lead.

Once everything is flowing, and the students feel comfortable with each other, it is a pretty self-sustaining group. It truly is teens taking the lead. This is also how one of the workshops got its name. The five schools that are involved with JKB in Butler County, Ohio put on a workshop called “Teens Leading Teens.” This is where all the juniors and seniors in JKB invite freshman from all Butler county high schools to attend a day of leadership. This is where the upperclassmen teach the freshmen how to become better leaders. This is done through various activities in the gym, in classrooms, and out on a football field. This is a very important form of communication from JKB to the rest of the community. There are also many ways that each individual high school communicates with its own members.

Lakota West High School is one of the five Butler county schools involved with JKB. At Lakota West, communication is done a much smaller scale. Unlike the ranch, which needs to communicate with dozens of schools across the country, Lakota West JKB communicates with its members, who are simply within the school district. This immediate group would consist of any members who attended the ranch, the alternates and other students who were invited to interview to go to the ranch, but were not chosen, as well as any advisors. This is usually a group of no more than 10-15 students.

One of the most common ways that this group communicates is through texts. Being in high school, almost everyone has cell phones and text messaging is usually the preferred way of communication between high school students. Mass texts, or group texts are often used to communicate meeting times, or locations, or reminders to bring something last minute. This is nice because texts are instant, and are usually read fairly immediately. Occasionally, there will be one or two students who will not have texting capabilities on their cell phone. This can usually cause a lot of issues. The initial though is for them to just be left out. However, since this is a leadership organization, a solution must be found. Luckily, this can be a good problem to have. Not being able to communicate with a student at the last minute means that you will actually have to plan things out ahead of time. From first hand experience, this turned out to be a good thing, and we learned how to plan ahead, including specific details.

Communication between the classes is also very important. For the most part, JKB consists of juniors and seniors in high school. And for most of the year, these two classes communicate as one, and there is no distinguishing between the two. However, in the spring, when the time for interviewing sophomores comes around, communication becomes a lot more important. The upper classmen must communicate with the potential sophomore candidates effectively. For the most part, this is the sophomore’s first interaction with JKB and the first impression is crucial.

It is also important that communication within the upperclassmen throughout the interview process is effective as well. All dialogs between members must be kept confidential from candidates, and peers, and even family of members. The members take this very seriously, so that there are no leaks, and no candidates find out who will have the privilege of attending the ranch before any others.

When the candidates are finding out who will be attending the ranch and who will not, it is a very serious time. It is very serious in the room, because there will be about 16 students who will not be as fortunate as the only four who will be attending. It is important not to show biases towards any students and have respect for all candidates.

Another way that communication was done within this community was by creating a Facebook group. This was a private group that only members could see, but where information about meetings and events was posted. Anyone could post in the group and it was a great way to inform each other. One of the drawbacks of this method was that it was not instantaneous. Not everyone checked the group on a regular basis and it was difficult to get everyone in the group to get to get in the rhythm of checking the page regularly.

One way that JKB communicated with the community was by creating events pages on Facebook that were public for everyone to see. One example is for the dodge ball tournaments that were hosted each year. Members would post information about when the tournament would be held, as well as costs, team sizes, and deadlines for signup. It was a very good method to communicate with the student population, because everyone was on Facebook. As long as the information was posted in a timely manner, so word would travel quicker and more people would be aware.

JKB also did a lot of communicating with the student population through posters, hung all through out the school. A lot of times we would spend the end of our weekly meetings making posters advertising for the events. This was a good way to get creative and post them in the hallways of the school, where everyone would see them.

Communicating with the community is a big portion of what JKB does, and being able to communicate effectively dictates weather JKB is successful, and how it is perceived in the community. The link between communication and leadership is ultimately what JKB is all about. “…Understanding leadership demands more than understanding leadership traits or behavior; it also requires an understanding of how followers perceive those behaviors; how these perceptions make followers feel and think about themselves; and, ultimately, what these thoughts and feelings make followers want to do.” (Lord et al, 187). This is what defines a successful leader, and a leadership community, such as the J. Kyle Braid Foundation.

Communication within JKB is very effective. It is not very high tech, nor extremely organized, but everyone knows what is going on, and what is happening when. It has worked for the last twenty years, and we can only hope that it lasts twenty more!

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