

Youth-Adult Partnerships

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Several authors have indicated that youth-adult partnerships are indeed highly potential strategies for building youth-adult relationships to strengthen community development initiatives (Camino, 2000; Matters, 1990; Wunrow & Einspruch, 2001; Zeldin & Olson, 2000). One conclusion drawn from our review of the literature is that more empirical research is needed to better understand the role and effectiveness of youth-adult partnerships in communities. Based upon the empirical research, albeit limited, we have developed an operational definition of youth-adult partnerships. The term is defined as follows:

***Youth-Adult Partnerships:** A fostered relationship between youth and adults where both parties have equal potential in making decisions, utilizing skills, learning from one another and promoting change through civic engagement, program planning and/or community development initiatives.*

We have developed a continuum (see Figure 1) that includes five key points that identify groups consisting of varied levels of youth and/or adult involvement. It should be noted that organizations might fall along any point of the continuum. The first step in evaluating a successful outcome is to determine where you currently are as an organization and where you desire to be in the future. The following concepts are used to further describe the points on the YAP continuum: Adult-Centered Leadership, Adult-Led Collaboration, YAP Equilibrium, Youth-Led Collaboration, and Youth-Centered Leadership.

Adult-Centered Leadership

Leadership has been defined as a social and cultural term, consisting of a process that results from the interaction among a leader, followers, and the situation (Nahavandi, 2000). Adult-centered leadership is best explained using this definition. This point along the continuum consists of programs that are conceived and driven completely by adults. Activities within this category include school or other types of formal education where youth are instructed by adults. Included in this definition are community programs where adults plan and implement, while the youth's role is as a participant only with no voice in implementation or evaluation at this point along the continuum. One example would include youth being invited to participate in a church youth camp, but were not

previously asked what they would like to do at the camp and have no role in the implementation.

Adult-Led Collaboration

An adult-led collaboration includes programs or situations where adults provide some guidance for youth, but there is more camaraderie among youth and adults as opposed to adult-centered leadership. Mentoring would most likely fall into this category, due to such programs allowing adults and youth to bond in hopes of developing and sharing commonalities. However, adults remain in power and are the driving force in making the relationship a meaningful success. For example, adults may provide youth with several options to decide on a community service project. However, before presenting these options, the adults review the possibilities and determine the best potential projects.

Youth-Adult Partnership

The youth-adult partnership (YAP) equilibrium is located centrally on the continuum. It is the point of stasis where a partnership is achieved between youth and adults. Youth and adult participants have equal chances in utilizing skills, decision-making and independently carrying out tasks to reach common goals. Both also acknowledge learning from one another through participation. Ideally, there is a balance between youth interaction among other youth, adult interaction among other adults, and most important, youth and adults working together effectively to reach desired goals.

Due to the fact that one party (whether adults or youth) must initiate a desire to form a partnership, most YAPs may begin as a collaborative effort. Adults may want to organize a summer program at a local community center by gathering input on what the neighborhood youth want. For instance, youth being invited to the table to express their opinions and to help implement their ideas serves as an effective YAP. Another example would be youth going to the local health department for assistance on how to address obesity among teens. The youth could organize a health and wellness fair focused on weight loss/control at the health department or their school. Health professionals could assist by serving as guest speakers while the youth (the key organizers of the event) serve as workshop facilitators.

Youth-Led Collaborations

Youth-led collaborations are programs or situations where youth primarily develop the ideas and make decisions with limited support from adults. For example, young people may determine a particular need for their community. They then design and incorporate a program and/or project to address the issue. Depending on the experience of the young people, they may even evaluate the program or project. Adults typically provide assistance with this process, as well as some preliminary procedures, such as securing funding and addressing personnel concerns. One example would be youth identifying and initiating a fund-raiser for a teen center. Another example is youth

engaging in school reform for educational change. In any situation, young people take the lead in seeing that the project is carried out from inception to completion.

Youth-Centered Leadership

Youth-centered leadership is at the far right end of the continuum and includes programs or activities led exclusively by youth, with little or no adult involvement (although the assistance of adults may be solicited at later time periods; in this case, there is a shift to a youth-led collaboration). Very few activities, if any, occur in structured environments, which would often necessitate adult support (through managing the facilities, providing supplies, etc.). For example, young people have been known to channel their energies through this form of leadership, from rallying for more youth-related activities to simply meeting after school to play a sport or game of their choice. However, youth that are involved in totally youth-centered leadership may also organize engagement in negative behaviors. Gang affiliation is another example of an entirely youth-centered leadership that often leads to mischief and violence instead of productive community activities.

References

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Figure 1: Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships

