



YOUTH AND ADULT LEADERS FOR PROGRAM EXCELLENCE

The Adoption of Innovation in Youth Organizations: Creating the Conditions for Youth-Adult Partnerships in Shared Decision-Making and Action

Community Youth Connection Issue Brief

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There is an emerging research base in support of practices that engage youth in shared decision-making and community action. Research indicates that youth involvement in decision-making and action with adults promotes both youth and organizational development. These practices have been labeled *youth-adult partnership* (Y-AP). Zeldin, Camino, & Mook (2005) studied the adoption of innovation, as applied to Y-AP. This issue brief provides a summary of that study as well as key additional references for those who want to learn more.

Creating Y-APs involves creating a full range of roles for youth, including those as planners and providers of service in partnership with adults (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, because such roles are new, there can be challenges. At the governance level, the challenge is to ensure that the voices of youth are represented at the tables where organizational decisions are made. At the program level, the challenge is to engage youth, in partnership with adults, in the design and delivery of programming and community outreach.

Reviews of literature concerning the adoption of innovation demonstrate that successful adoption requires the management of ideas, practices, behaviors, and structures, with the aim of bringing these different aspects of organizational and program structures into alignment (Rogers, 1995; Van de Ven, 1986). Adoption of innovation is also grounded in communication (Salem, Foster-Fishman, & Goodkind, 2002; Wolfe, 1994). Communication is not simply a way of passing on information about an innovation. It is also the process through which the idea comes to acquire consensual meaning among diverse stakeholders.

The analysis (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005) offers six guidelines for adoption of youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs), presented on the following pages.

Gain Clarity and Consensus on the Purpose of Youth-Adult Partnerships

- Working in Y-APs is relatively new. Not everyone agrees about the rationale and purpose. For some, the purpose is social justice, with the belief being that the first priority is to ensure that youth are represented “at the table.” For others, the fundamental purpose of Y-AP is to promote aspects of positive youth development, such as initiative, identity, or civic competence. Still others view the primary purpose of Y-AP as strengthening organizations, building civil society, and creating a sense of community.
- As a result, a critical first step is dialoging with diverse stakeholders about Y-APs to gain clarity and consensus about the purpose.

Mobilize and Coordinate a Group of Diverse Stakeholders

- Bring together youth and adults who represent various groups and spheres, and provide them with the opportunity to build relationships and find common ground.
- It is useful to bring on influential and committed adults who can serve as champions for Y-APs.

Create Favorable Organizational Stories About Youth-Adult Partnerships

- Favorable stories about Y-APs bring the practice and purpose alive. They create “real life” models that help people to gain mutual understanding.
- Stories are also important touchstones that help people remember and communicate the purposes and outcomes of Y-APs.

Construct Theories of Change or Logic Models about Youth-Adult Partnerships

- Theories of change or logic models are “roadmaps,” or flowcharts that show the connections between program assumptions, strategies, activities, and expected outcomes. Applied to Y-APs, theories of change are useful in gaining agreement among diverse stakeholders about what should be done, and why it is being done.
- While organizational and program stories emphasize the origin and purpose, theories of change concerning Y-APs center on the means and strategies for implementing them.

Affirmatively Address Issues of Roles and Power

- There will always be power differences between youth and adults to some degree in organizations and programs because, bottom line, adults tend to have fiduciary and fiscal responsibility.
- Organizations and programs do well to address these differences directly through open dialogue. Successful organizations and programs identify power differences, and seek to accommodate them. Organizations and programs that do not address power issues are those most at risk for failing to institutionalize the innovation of Y-AP.

Institutionalize New Roles for Youth

- Success hinges on creating and institutionalizing roles for many, not just a few, youth throughout the organization.
- This diversity of roles allows the organization to scaffold youth through progressively more challenging roles, and helps to ensure that there are always “qualified” youth for all roles.

Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence: A Practical Guide for Program Assessment and Action Planning is based on, and promotes, these guidelines for adoption of Y-APs in youth organizations. Items in the four assessment instruments appraise aspects of Y-APs, and the assessment processes - data collection, analysis, presentation, and action planning - are designed to promote ongoing dialogue and implementation of Y-APs.

More information about the resource kit, including information about how you can purchase one to use in your organization, is available from <http://www.actforyouth.net/>.

References

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