

Transcript: Organizational Support for PYD

Applying Positive Youth Development to Youth Service Organizations

Why is organizational support for positive youth development important?

In this brief presentation we will outline the reasons organizational support is needed in youth-serving organizations. We will look back at positive youth development training in New York State and the lessons we have learned. And we will take a look at implementation science and its insights and findings about promoting innovations.

This will lead us to the role supervisors can play in developing the organizational support needed to establish and sustain a positive youth development approach.

Introduction

Welcome, my name is Jutta Dotterweich. I am currently the director of training for the ACT for Youth Center for Community Action at Cornell University.

Over the past 20 years I have been advocating for positive youth development in various capacities. As director of the Advancing Youth Development partnership, we have provided training and technical assistance on PYD to counties all across New York State for many years.

With ACT for Youth, we have promoted positive youth development as a public health strategy working with community coalitions across the state.

In more recent years, we initiated the PYD Network and developed an updated PYD 101 curriculum, online PYD courses, and a curriculum to create inclusive program environments for young people with different abilities.

Objectives

The objectives for this presentation are threefold:

- One, drawing from past positive youth development efforts in New York State, briefly summarize the lessons learned as it pertains to establishing PYD as an approach to youth work.
- Two, review key findings from implementation science to illuminate the challenges of and best practices for adopting innovative approaches.
- Three, identify ways supervisors can provide organizational support for PYD – all with resources gathered in the Supervisor’s PYD Toolkit.

“How can I empower youth when I don't feel empowered?” - Youth Worker/Youth Program Staff

Looking back at the early years of ACT for Youth and The Advancing Youth Development Partnership, this question comes to mind:

“How can I empower youth, when I don’t feel empowered?”

We heard this many times from program staff when we promoted the concept of youth engagement, a key principle of positive youth development. Through youth engagement, we give young people opportunities to matter, to have a voice, and to influence decisions that affect them and others.

Staff often did not feel that they had a voice, so how could they empower youth?

Key Takeaways

After years of providing professional development, here are my key takeaways related to this question.

Training and educating frontline staff is important. It provides them with an orientation and the language and basic skills of a positive youth development approach. However, it is not sufficient to establish that approach in an organization. Often staff would say that they were excited to apply PYD strategies in their programs, but their ideas were not well received back in their home agencies.

Secondly, training may not be sufficient to sustain a positive youth development approach. For one, it is very difficult to attract supervisors, program directors, or administrators to trainings, especially longer trainings. Mostly, we have learned that supportive practices and policies are required to sustain a positive youth development approach. This, in turn, may require allocating funding and resources differently.

Finally, as we mentioned earlier, the concept of youth engagement and empowerment has been very challenging, especially when staff do not feel they have a voice themselves.

Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein’s concept of organizational culture helps us understand the challenge of youth engagement and voice. Provided by organizational consultant Robert Rich, this graphic illustrates how embedded certain assumptions are.

Edgar Schein is one of the leading thinkers on organizational culture.

He identifies four layers that are valuable in assessing organizational culture

[Image of iceberg: Artifacts and Espoused Values are above the surface, Values in Use and Basic Assumptions are below the surface]

- **Artifacts** – these are attributes of culture we can see walking around such as where people park, who gets a certain office, dress code, etc.
- **Espoused values** – this is how the organization portrays itself to the world – written material and other communications that describe the values the organization aspires to; for example, “We put people first.”
- **Values-in-use** – this represents the values that influence how the organization makes decisions, distributes power, etc., in real time. The degree of disconnect between espoused values and values-in-use determines level of trust and the perception of fairness and integrity.
- **Basic assumptions** – this is the organizational unconscious, accumulated over time, embedded in thinking and operations. Basic assumptions form the basis for judging and discarding new

ideas. “Unwritten rules” are most likely the biggest challenges to any attempt to introduce new concepts and strategies in an organization.

And this is where youth engagement and youth empowerment may be stuck. Given young people’s lack of life experience, education, and training, there most likely will be the basic assumption that they are not qualified to have a voice; they are not old or experienced enough to make contributions.

Adopting Innovative Approaches

In the past 10 years or so, implementation science has evolved as an interdisciplinary field that looks at how evidence-based strategies and innovative approaches can be adopted and scaled up in agencies. The insights of implementation science can help us address the challenges of introducing a positive youth development approach, including authentic youth engagement, within an organization.

As we all know, change is difficult on a personal as well as an organizational level. A new approach requires changing current practice. And this involves loss, giving up something we know well and do well and replacing it with something we may be unsure about and less comfortable with. Providing supportive conditions such as training, coaching, resources, extra time, staff, and space are needed to make the transition successful.

Implementation science identifies three drivers of successful implementation of innovation: competencies, leadership, and organizational infrastructure.

Let’s look briefly at each driver, highlighting resources you can use in adopting a positive youth development approach in your organization.

Implementation Driver: Competencies

Competencies is the implementation driver we may be most familiar with. When implementing a new approach, we usually focus on building skills and knowledge through training and coaching.

ACT for Youth offers many resources to support the development of competencies among all stakeholders involved in implementing the PYD approach. As mentioned earlier, we have developed PYD training curricula and online courses with new youth work professionals in mind. Many of these resources are also appropriate for volunteers and upper-level staff who are new to PYD. These resources are freely available on the ACT for Youth website.

Implementation Driver: Leadership

Leadership is the second driver of successful implementation. New approaches may require not just technical leadership based on expertise and know-how, but also adaptive leadership that engages members of the organizations to collaboratively identify challenges and possible solutions. This is largely because with innovations we don’t yet know all the challenges and we still have to build the expertise.

Ronald Heifetz and colleagues at Harvard University have focused on leadership, especially adaptive leadership, for years. This chart illustrates the differences between technical and adaptive leadership.

Most youth service organizations have clearly identified the programs they offer, how the programs are being administered, which youth population they offer the programs to, and so forth. They most likely have done programs in a very similar way for quite some time. If a challenge or a difficult situation arises, it is usually easy to identify the problem and the solution. Given the know-how and authority, the problem can be solved by changing resources, staffing, timetables, etc.

On the other hand, if a youth service organization is starting an innovative program they have not done before and maybe staff has barely been trained, challenges may arise, and it may be difficult to identify the underlying problem and the possible solutions. The current expertise may not be sufficient to understand and resolve the issue. Consequently, adaptive challenges require learning, trial and error, and collaboration.

Resource: Adaptive Leadership

Let's apply this framework to PYD. Integrating key principles such as youth engagement in organizations goes beyond doing business as usual. It requires an adaptive leadership approach that engages all stakeholders at the agency, staff and youth, in collaborative troubleshooting and solution seeking.

Adaptive leadership may require a shift in the way you do things that is beyond the scope of this presentation. Ron Heifetz is a well-known expert on adaptive leadership.

Watch this introductory video to learn more.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ioocNc-HvTs>

Implementation Driver: Organizational Infrastructure

Finally, let's turn to the third implementation driver: organizational infrastructure—the practices, resources, and systems that keep organizations running and make innovation possible in a very practical sense. Supervisors and program coordinators can play a major role in advocating for organizational support and creating an organizational infrastructure for positive youth development.

The Supervisor's PYD Toolkit, of which this presentation is part, exists to support your efforts to build the organizational support needed for a positive youth development approach. For the Toolkit, we gathered and developed strategies, resources, and tools to help supervisors work towards the following goals:

- Establish youth development practices and policies
- Hire and develop competent and engaged staff
- Sustain new practices and policies by allocating fiscal and other resources
- Advocate for aligning agency mission with PYD goals

I invite you to explore the Toolkit, including additional presentations, on the ACT for Youth website.

http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/professionals/supervisors