MENTORING
Tactics

Integrating a Youth-Centered Approach into Your Mentoring Program

MENTORING

changing a life forever

Youth are resources, with skills and talents to be explored and developed

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INTEGRATING A YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH INTO YOUR MENTORING PROGRAM

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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PURPOSE

*For those of us running mentoring programs, we are faced with many demands that require our time and attention. In the midst of all these demands, we can lose focus of our program's primary clients: youth. This tactic attempts to help re-center our program's efforts on youth, reminding us all that to build a youth-centered mentoring program requires that we make every aspect of our program centered **on youth**.*

> **"We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."**
> *Franklin D. Roosevelt*

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I: BACKGROUND ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In the early 1990's, a new approach to working with youth gained wide acceptance in the world of youth programming and policy. Rather than focus on youth as problems (as youth policy and programming had often done in previous decades), the youth development approach now focuses on building core strengths for youth. Youth are seen as resources, with skills and talents to be explored and developed. More specifically, a youth development approach recognizes "youth's need for positive, ongoing relationships with both adults and other youth; for active involvement in community life; and for a variety of positive choices in how they spend non-school time. It aims to build strengths as well as reduce weaknesses."[1]

Most (if not all) of us working in the mentoring field would agree with this approach, finding it a positive and effective way to work with youth. The challenge is to go beyond merely subscribing to this philosophy by ensuring that it is built into every aspect of our programs. In other words, we need to move from the idea of youth development to employing a youth development approach to, finally, applying youth development practices in our mentoring programs. A solid youth development philosophy informs a program's daily practices. Though your organization's values may be neatly framed on your wall or professed in your marketing brochures, these values are truly lived through your people and your program practices.

The Community Network for Youth Development defines key terminology, making an important distinction between the terms "youth development," "youth development approach," and "youth development practices."[2]

Youth Development: Youth development refers to the natural process through which all young people seek ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in adolescence and young adulthood.

Youth Development Approach: The youth development approach is a way of working with young people. In contrast to a deficit approach – one focused on reducing negative behaviors – this approach calls for providing young people with the developmental experiences shown to promote a healthy trajectory toward adulthood.

Youth Development Practices: These are the practices which youth-serving organizations can implement to ensure that the young people in their programs receive the support they need to learn and grow. These practices include providing physical and emotional safety, creating environments where young people build supportive relationships with adults and their peers, providing opportunities for meaningful youth participation, community engagement, and skill-building.

Based on this definition of youth development practices, mentoring programs should create environments that foster positive youth development. While it may not be aligned with your mission or feasible for your mentoring program to address each of these practice areas directly, think about how you currently address each area and perhaps how your program could incorporate other areas (without sacrificing the quality of your program).

As a youth development strategy, mentoring has been a key component of the youth development movement. We have learned a great deal about youth development by studying how mentoring works. Through rigorous studies of mentoring, specifically the frequently-cited 1995 Big Brothers/Big Sisters Impact study,[3] we have learned that youth who are matched with mentors are less likely to engage in harmful behavior. This study interviewed 1,000 youth ages ten to sixteen, half of whom were matched with a mentor. After eighteen months, compared with the non-mentored youth, the youth who were matched with a mentor

- Were 46% less likely to initiate drug use,
- Were 27% less likely to initiate alcohol use,
- Were 32% less likely to hit someone,
- Felt more competent about doing their schoolwork,
- Skipped 52% fewer days of school,
- Improved 3% in grade point averages, and
- Reported improved quality of relationships both with their parents and with peers.

Results from the 1995 Impact Study are not at all surprising, especially to those working in the mentoring field: they reaffirm what we know and witness every day in our work. Nonetheless, they are important results to cite to help build the case for investing in youth development.

> **"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, we can work together."**
> *Lilla Watson*

II: MOVING BEYOND UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION

How do we transform a dedication to a youth development approach into building a mentoring program that employs youth development practices? In a business, if the customers you are serving are not at the center of everything you do and if their needs are not directing your services, then how can you expect to have a successful venture? Likewise, an organization that does not build its services around its clients' needs is limited in the results it can deliver. Building a successful youth-centered mentoring program is essentially about building a customer-focused business, where youth are your primary customers. While your mentoring program has several customer groups (e.g., mentors, donors), viewing youth as your primary customer is key.

So, what can you do to make your mentoring organization more youth-centered? The first step is to assess how youth-centered your program currently is by looking at the role youth play in your mentoring program. The Community Network for Youth Development has developed a "Practitioner Assessment of Youth Participation and Leadership Development:"[4]

1. How do you motivate youth to join? To take responsibility?

2. Do you get youth input into activity planning?

3. Do you get youth input into program design?

4. Do you get youth feedback after they have participated in activities?

5. Do you ensure that youth input impacts the program? How?

6. Do you identify potential leaders?

7. What training/assistance/support might youth need to take leadership roles in your program? Is this support provided?

8. Do youth get involved in assessment and evaluation development?

9. What leadership roles do youth take in your agency?

Whatever your responses, you can use this series of questions as a tool to help further develop the level of youth participation and youth "voice" in your program. To delve deeper, we will focus on the various organizational pieces that make up a mentoring program, looking at how each component can include youth development practices. After all, your mentoring program is only as youth-centered as its program practices.

Viewing youth as your primary customer is key

MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES

Your mission, vision, and values provide the foundation for your organization and should direct every aspect of your program. Review your mentoring program's mission, examining how it models (or does not model) positive youth development. A mission statement should accurately convey the purpose and guiding values of an organization and be both succinct and inspiring. Use words that are proactive, and avoid jargon. Language should reflect the philosophy of your program.

SAMPLE MISSION STATEMENTS

Youth Mentoring Connection *is dedicated to improving the lives of "at-risk" youth through mentoring relationships with caring adults, supported by life skills and empowerment programs. We accomplish this by creating, operating, and supporting mentoring programs in partnership with other community organizations and the private sector in Los Angeles and surrounding communities.*

Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Inc.: *To make a positive difference in the lives of children through professionally supported, one-to-one mentoring relationships with caring adults. We are committed to assisting children to achieve their highest potential by becoming confident, competent, and caring individuals.*

For your own mission statement, ask the following questions:

- What does your mission statement say about your program's perspective on youth? On youth development?

- What does your mission statement's language say about youth?

- How do you feel about your mission statement? Are you excited and inspired by it? Does it feel representative of the work and the program to you?

TRY THIS

In a staff meeting, give a pop quiz to see how many staffers can recite your organization's mission (and if you have adopted vision and values, include those on the quiz, too). If not many staffers pass the quiz, it may be time to discuss the foundations of your organization (mission, vision, values, goals). If you do not currently have a mission statement in place, you can use this exercise to begin the process of crafting one.

MENTOR RECRUITMENT, SELECTION, AND MATCHING

A volunteer recruitment process should involve articulating your "ideal" mentor. Whatever your criteria are for these mentors, they should include core qualities that would make them effective role models for youth. Core mentor qualities include the following:

- Are caring

- Have youth's best interests at heart and are advocates for youth

- Have clear judgment

- Are consistent

- Are responsible

- Are open to new ideas and learning new things

Beyond these qualities, factors such as interests, personality, background, and life experiences should be carefully considered. The more you invest in recruiting, selecting, and matching your mentors with youth, the more likely your mentors and mentees are to become invested in the relationship. Mentor recruitment, screening, and matching are all complex topics that require significant time and energy to effectively build into your program. For more on these topics, see the **Resources** section of this tactic.

MENTOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Your recruitment and selection processes ensure that you have an excellent group of mentors, but it is your mentor training and support that is critical to preparing your mentors for this experience and ensuring the overall success of their relationships. In addition to the core components, your mentor trainings should introduce the youth development approach and provide information on child development. Equip mentors with tangible skills (such as communication skills) that they can use in their mentoring relationships. Mentor training is "professional development" for your mentors and should be viewed not as a single occurrence but as an ongoing process. Schedule regular "reviews" several times a year for mentors and mentees to talk one-on-one with staff about their relationships.

TIPS ON TRAINING AND SUPPORTING YOUTH-CENTERED MENTORS

- **Respect your mentor's time.** Many of your "ideal" mentors are most likely busy individuals, involved in various work, community, and family activities. Program processes must be organized and executed to maximize a mentor's time.

- **Be a role model.** You are essentially role modeling behavior and communication for your mentoring relationships. This includes being consistent, timely, and pro active in your communication with mentors.

- **Provide recognition.** Recognizing mentors formally (such as through events, awards, or gifts) and informally (through your conversations) are both important pieces of mentor recognition.

MENTEE TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Mentoring programs are often so focused on preparing and training mentors that they neglect to prepare mentees for the relationship. While the level of training need not be as in-depth, it is still important to introduce mentees to the concept of mentoring, address any questions and concerns, and help send them into the relationship with appropriate expectations. The mentee training also establishes rapport between the mentee and the program case manager, an important part of supporting the mentee and keeping lines of communication open. Just as you are formally "checking in" with mentors, make sure this happens with mentees as well. Not only does this help you understand the mentoring relationship more clearly (since you are gaining access to both perspectives), but it sends a strong message to all parties that the youth is an active, respected party in the mentoring relationship. Organize scheduled meetings with mentees to find out the status of the mentoring relationship from their perspective.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Evaluation is a very necessary part of your program, both to help articulate the impact of your program on youth (usually referred to as "outcome evaluation"), as well as to inform you on how to improve your program (often referred to as "process evaluation"). Program evaluation is a complex topic that demands its own focus, but as it relates to building a youth-centered mentoring program, your evaluation should also be youth-centered. Exactly what does this mean? If you already have an evaluation system in place, what does your evaluation measure? Like your mission statement, does your evaluation reflect your organization's youth development approach? For instance, does your evaluation measure only to what degree youth "stay out of trouble," or does it also measure youth success and achievement? The way you collect information should also reflect your organizational philosophy on youth. Seek formal feedback from both mentees and mentors. Consider other ways that youth in your program might be able to be involved with your evaluation. Use tools like surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather information on mentee and mentor perspectives on your mentoring program and its impact. Make sure that your evaluation tools (such as surveys and interview questions) use language that is clear, tailored for its audience, and in line with a youth development approach. Finally, once you collect evaluation data, what do you do with this information? It is important to use your evaluation findings not only to report the impact of your program but also to improve how your mentoring program operates.

TAKING IT A STEP FURTHER

There are several organizations that focus exclusively on involving youth in research and evaluation. While most mentoring programs are not equipped to mobilize a group of youth researchers at their own organization, we can all use some of the findings and lessons to inform our own programs. Here are two excellent examples:

Youth in Focus
www.youthinfocus.net
*Youth in Focus provides training, coaching, and consulting to help underrepresented youth and adult allies engage in **youth**-led action **r**esearch, **e**valuation, and **p**lanning (Youth REP) to create the conditions for social justice. The Website contains a publication section with helpful tools on youth research and evaluation.*

The YELL Program at the John W. Gardener Center for Youth and Their Communities
http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/support_community/yell/html
*The YELL (**Y**outh **E**ngaged in **L**eadership and **L**earning) project guides youth through a process that helps them learn how to think critically about their environment, access the tools and resources to become knowledgeable people, and draw upon their experiences and skills to be active decision-makers in their schools and communities.*

FUNDRAISING

We all need money and resources to allow our mentoring programs to operate, but how often do we think deeply about how our fundraising strategy reflects our philosophy on youth? Here are a few questions to consider when delving into this topic:

- Do your grants all accurately convey your mission and work? Are you changing your mission and/or services to fit the guidelines of a grant?

- Do the corporations or corporate foundations from which you receive support understand and support a youth development approach? Are there any major conflicts with any of your corporate funding sources?

- Are you investing in cultivating relationships with your donors? Just as you invest in developing a relationship with your mentors and mentees, your donors are another key constituent group that requires regular communication for keeping them informed and tied to your program.

- How are your mentees and your mission represented at your fundraising events? If you have youth at special events, does your organization have clear policies on issues like the availability of alcohol? Do you provide event attendees with opportunities to learn more about your mentoring program and to connect to your mission?

BOARDS

Are your Board members advocates of youth? Are they familiar with the backgrounds and needs of the youth your organization is serving? Since your Board of Directors typically has very limited interaction with your mentees, it is important to keep Board members informed about the youth in your program. Moreover, having a mentee speak at a Board meeting or a special event is more memorable and moving than any amount of information or statistics you can supply about youth in your program.

WHAT ABOUT HAVING YOUTH ON YOUR BOARD?

Including youth on your Board of Directors seems like a natural and easy way to incorporate youth voices into your program. But before you make this major decision, it is important to understand what this undertaking entails. Here are a few things to consider:

- It is advisable to have a group of youth rather than just one youth on your Board. A single youth may feel extremely intimidated or even tokenized in this position. Having a group of youth sends the message that an organization is serious about listening to youth and putting them in the role of decision-makers.

- Youth as Board members means that Board meetings must be scheduled around school hours and that youth must be provided with transportation to attend meetings.

- When seriously considering the option of including youth as Board members, be sure to explore other options such as creating a youth advisory board or a youth leadership group that provides organizational feedback.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MESSAGING

Do your brochures, printed materials, and Website reflect the essence of your organization, your mission, and your values? What emotions do these pieces convey? What do they communicate about youth? Consider the language and the "look and feel" of your materials. While the language you use needs to reflect your philosophy about working with youth, it also needs to be clear and memorable. If you do not effectively convey information to potential constituents (mentors, mentees, donors), your message is not successful, no matter what it says.

MESSAGING EXERCISE

Write down the language your organization uses externally to describe your mentoring program.

- What is your tagline? Is it accurate and unique?

- What does your language say about how your mentoring program views youth?

- How does this language make you feel?

- Do you have an "elevator pitch" that succinctly describes your mentoring program's mission, services, and goals? If so, have you trained staff and Board members on this to ensure consistency?

MEDIA

Building relationships with local media is a key part of spreading the word about your mentoring program, as well as advocating for youth. By working with the media to help portray positive stories of youth, you are furthering your own mission by practicing a youth development approach.

- Identify key media people (editors and writers for local papers, television news anchors, radio personalities) who can advocate for youth and for your mentoring program.

- Use your existing relationships. Do your Board members, mentors, or parents of mentees have connections to media?

- Consider writing opinion/editorial pieces for your local newspaper. Encourage Board members and interested mentors to do the same.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Staff are the engine of your mentoring program: having talented, committed staff members who subscribe to your program's youth development approach is crucial. Just as you have a recruitment, screening, support, and retention process for your mentors, it is important to have a similar system in place for staff in order to attract and retain the best team for your mentoring program and for the youth you serve.

- The language you use in your marketing pieces should be reflected in job descriptions. Any job description you release should emphasize that a youth development approach is essential for this position.

- Focus on professional development. A solid mentoring program does not focus only on mentor and youth development: it is also necessary to build staff development into your program. Rather than dictate professional development for your staff, frame it as a staff benefit. Provide staff with an annual professional development budget and let them create a plan with their managers for how best to use it.

- Include a process for meeting quarterly with staff about performance and goals.

- Develop a staff recognition plan.

- Use staff meetings as an opportunity to share stories about mentors and mentees to keep all staff informed and connected to the youth in your program.

III: SUMMARY

This tactic offers a starting point for developing a youth-centered mentoring program. This must be approached holistically, and no aspect of your program should remain untouched. There is never a point when any of us are "finished" or reach the ultimate level of youth-centeredness; we are all constantly trying to serve youth better through our programs. When in doubt, always return to youth. The more you anchor your mentoring program on youth by listening to their perspectives and attempting to understand their needs, the better your program is able to serve youth, ultimately helping them reach their full potential.

FINAL EXERCISES

- Write a pie-in-the-sky vision for your mentoring program that describes how youth are involved in your organization (e.g., what roles they play, how they influence decision-making). Write another vision for how youth are involved in your community.

- Based on these visions, what are things you can do today, in the short term (next three months), and in the long term (next one to two years) to improve upon the youth development approach of your program?

IV: RESOURCES

PUBLICATIONS

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Webster, B.E. (2000). Going to Market: Marketing Concepts for Mentoring Programs. Folsom, CA: The EMT Group, Inc.

Webster, B.E. (2001). SHOW US THE MONEY! Fundraising for Mentoring Professionals. Folsom, CA: The EMT Group, Inc.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS) Mentoring Technical Assistance Project
www.carsmentoring.org

Provides free technical assistance and training on mentoring program development to new and existing community and school-based programs. Includes publications section.

Community Network for Youth Development
www.cnyd.org

Offers support, training, and capacity-building resources to youth-serving organizations and programs.

Forum for Youth Investment
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support, and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.

John Gardener Center for Youth and Their Communities
http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/

Housed at Stanford University, the Gardener Center runs various youth development projects that bridge research and practice, such as the YELL project.

Kids Count Database
www.aecf.org/kidscount/

A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States.

MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership
www.mentoring.org

Advocates for mentoring by working with network of state and local mentoring partnerships across the country and develops research-based mentoring products. Provides resources for programs, including information on Gauging the Effectiveness of Youth Mentoring

National Mentoring Center (NWREL)
http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/

Provides training and technical assistance for mentoring programs, such as Marketing for the Recruitment of Mentors: A Guide to Finding and Attracting Volunteers. Includes a publications section, lending library, and training opportunities.

National Youth Development Information Center
www.nydic.org/nydic/

Clearinghouse for youth workers. Includes resources on funding, research, programming, policy, job, and training opportunities.

Public/Private Ventures
www.ppv.org

Conducts and publishes research on mentoring.

The Grantsmanship Center
http://www.tgci.com/magazine/98fall/mission.asp

Offers grantsmanship trainings and publications, including resources for mission creating statements.

Youth in Focus
www.youthinfocus.net

Provides training, coaching and consulting to help underrepresented youth and adult allied to engage in youth-led action research, evaluation and planning.

Youth Leadership Institute
www.yli.org

Designs and implements community-based programs that provide youth with leadership skills in the areas of prevention, philanthropy, and policy and civic engagement. Publishes a number of resources on youth/adult partnerships, including Young Active Citizens Curriculum: Youth and Adults at the Decision-Making Table.

Youth on Board
www.youthonboard.org

Prepares youth to be leaders and decision-makers in their communities and strengthens relationships between youth and adults through publications, customized workshops, and technical assistance.

V: SOURCES

[1] Public/Private Ventures. (2000). *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures. P. 9.

[2] Community Network for Youth Development. *Definitions.* Retrieved March 4, 2006, from http://www.cnyd.org/definitions/.

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CARS

CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

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MENTORING
Tactics

Mentoring is an effective and increasingly popular approach for creating positive change in young people's lives. Early results from mentoring programs are promising, suggesting that positive, consistent attention from an adult, even a non-relative, can create change.

The Mentoring Technical Assistance Project provides free technical assistance and training to new and existing community and school-based programs that work with youth. The project also provides free Mentoring Plus workshops and regional trainings. Please contact CARS for more information.

To receive free mentoring consultation services please complete the online application at:
http://www.carsmentoring.org/
TA/TA_application.php
Contact Erika Urbani, eurbani@cars-rp.org
for further details at 916.983.9506.

LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!

We welcome readers' comments on topics presented.

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