

Youth-Adult Partnerships: A Key to Healthier Communities

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Since the early '90s, the role of young people in community life has become a focal point of those working to develop healthier communities. Today, most communities have youth leadership programs whose missions are to have a positive impact on their peers and, sometimes, their community. In fact, in many communities, teens have taken over roles that historically have been the domain of adult leaders. It has often been assumed that "empowering" young people to take on leadership roles will, in and of itself, deter them from using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; engaging in sexual activity; becoming involved in criminal activity; and leaving school before graduation. In the 1990s teens went from being treated as objects to being treated as resources. "Youth empowerment" became a common phrase in community health conversations. But, did the pendulum swing too far? Did adults go from treating youth as objects to giving them sole responsibility of correcting "teen problems?"

In the middle of the pendulum swing is youth-adult partnerships. When young people and adults work together as partners the experiences, perspectives, passion and talents of all involved are the keys to success. Each person--the 42 year-old mother, 16 year-old peer leader, 32 year-old youth program director, 67 year-old volunteer, and 12 year old student--is essential to achieving the group's mission. The adults are not advisors. The youth are not token participants. ALL are contributors.

With his 1983 break-through publication, Discovering the Meaning of Prevention, Bill Lofquist first challenged adults to rethink how they view and work with young people. Years later, his Technology of Prevention Workbook and workshops that accompanied it presented both a model and self-inventory which adults in youth-serving organizations could use to reflect on whether they were treating young people as objects, recipients or resources. In a 1997 interview for "Doing Democracy" newsletter (Center for Living Democracy) I asked Bill how his "Spectrum of Adult Attitudes Toward Young People" and its accompanying inventory had come into being. Bill told me, "One basic issue has to do with the nature and quality of relationships between and among people. It was important to address this with a clear and provocative mental model. The basic notion is that, as a generalization, there are three ways people treat other people, and those are as objects, as recipients or as resources. There are qualitative differences between the three."

When asked about these differences Bill told me, "We are really talking about control. When adults view young people as objects, the adult is in control with no intention of youth involvement in decision-making, planning and evaluating in organizations that make up the youth opportunity system (CommuniTeam's note: schools, youth agencies, recreation programs, etc.). When young people are viewed as recipients, the adult is in control but allows for some youth involvement. But, when young people are viewed as resources, there is a youth-adult partnership and a genuine sharing of control."

In his Spectrum of Adult Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Young People, Bill suggests that working from the Youth as Resources paradigm requires us to shift our objective from "personal growth and development of young people" to "increased organizational effectiveness." When we view young people as resources we invite and engage them as partners because it will make our organization and its efforts more effective. The personal growth and development of the young people involved is a by-product of this approach. It is not the main objective. We don't just do things for kids we do things with them.

Can adults engage young people as resources but not work with them as partners? My experience is a big "Yes." This is where I have found a difference between theory and practice. In all the years that I have been working with communities to develop youth-adult partnerships, I have seen that in many cases young people are engaged as resources but are given far too much responsibility and accountability for addressing their community's "teen problems"--alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; juvenile crime; school failure; and youth violence. (I have also seen even more cases where young people are treated as objects or recipients, but that is not the subject of this article). Often, teens are brought together to strategize how to make change and adults are there for support and encouragement, but not guidance or leadership.

So I asked Bill how adults can engage young people as resources through the creation of true youth-adult partnerships. His response was clear. "It's important for adults to know that when they enter into a partnership with young people, the adult doesn't become any less responsible. The initial response of many adults is to abdicate personal responsibility in their relationship with young people. It really only becomes a true partnership when both young people and adults are taking responsibility for themselves in the relationship. They need each other's perspective. It is a shared responsibility to participate fully."

A key difference between "youth empowerment" and "youth-adult partnerships", then, is the role of adults. As is true with any high-performing team, when young people and adults come together to improve the health of their community, the skills, experiences, perspectives and commitment of every member are critical factors for success. Even if a group or community coalition is focused on the healthy development of young people, and not the community at large, adult contributions are still essential. In our work helping communities identify the factors contributing to the youth issues that most concern them, we find over and over again that many underlying conditions require adult behavior change before youth changes can take place (for example, common factors are poor adult role modeling; lack of opportunities for authentic youth-adult interaction; and young people viewed as problems rather than resources). The Developmental Assets research and model further clarifies the role of adults in healthy youth development. Most of the external assets and even many of the internal assets young people need to thrive are within the control of adults... not youth.

Leaving the main responsibility of change to teens and other youth is both ineffective and unfair. It sets them up for failure. While it may improve the self-esteem of those involved in the short-term, it most often will not produce the kind of results that our communities need in order to be as healthy as possible. To be most effective we need to develop youth-adult partnerships where a diverse set of representatives from both age groups come together to form one team with a shared mission and common set of objectives. Once this is done, the group has the ability to identify the best people to accomplish each of the various tasks in front of them. At times it may be just young people. Other times it might be just adults. But, for most tasks, the contributions of both teens and adults will be essential.

It is CommuniTeam's belief that youth-adult partnerships are the most important factor influencing the success of community health initiatives. At CommuniTeam, we assume that success is mainly measured in terms of changes in behaviors and norms. Attendance at events, numbers of peer leaders attending meetings, grant money raised, may have an influence on success (or they may not) but they are not measures of success when an initiative's aim is to improve youth and/or community health. Reductions in behaviors that inhibit healthy development and increases in behaviors proven to promote the well-being of people is all that matters. From our founder Steve Fortier's direct experience creating The Leadership Project and his subsequent work with hundreds of other communities, we firmly believe that the creation of a team of community change agents from both the youth and adult populations is the key to creating a healthier community.

To see how CommuniTeam helps communities develop the skills necessary for effective youth-adult

partnerships and community change, go [here](#).

About the author:

Steve Fortier not only believes in youth-adult partnerships, he is committed to living them... as a parent, community member, YMCA director, program developer, and author. In the late 1980s Steve was one of the developers of The Leadership Project which pioneered the creation of community teams of teens and adults as an approach to community health promotion. During the creation of The Leadership Project, Steve and his colleagues developed Teen-Adult Dialogue Nights and other teen led processes that are now being used to build youth-adult partnerships in thousands of communities worldwide. The Leadership Project went on to be recognized as one of ten Exemplary Prevention Programs in the US in 1990.

Steve pioneered the use of youth leaders to facilitate "adventure-based" teambuilding and leadership development activities. In 1992 he gathered eight youth from two different leadership teams he was working with (four from an elementary school and four from a high school) and set about writing a how-to manual for other youth leaders to do the same. In 1995, Youth Leadership in Action was published. It is now being used by thousands of organizations around the world to provide young people with the training and skills to work with adults to build healthier communities. It remains as one of a few books for youth leaders that was written BY youth leaders.