

Benefits of Skill-Building for Youth Development Practitioners

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Our field requires well-qualified youth workers to assume leadership roles of youth-serving organizations around the country. The benefit of training and support that targets skills in the areas of management, organization, youth development and evaluation has the potential to unleash energy and creativity of directors who will, in future, possess a positive, resourceful approach to young people. The benefit of training can also provide some assurance there will be adults in the future who, beyond liking youth, are also knowledgeable and possess the skills needed to serve them effectively.

In addition to direct benefits of training, participants of such programs benefit from opportunities that bring them together as a network to share and promote effective practice and to broaden relationships with others in communities to influence youth policies and resource allocation.

In recent years, several models have developed that support youth-serving professionals. The New Leaders Academy of the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), established in 1998, is one such program as is the U.S. Department of Labor's Youth Practitioner Apprenticeship program. Both seek to identify promising youth employment/youth development professional staff from throughout the country, and provide them with information, education, support and training to become the next generation of leaders. NYEC's model includes training modules and curriculum to address necessary skills and competencies within youth-serving organizations, development and use of an Individual Development Plan and year-long support of a Career Advisor who helps to advance that individual's goals.

Models like the New Leaders Academy and the Youth Practitioner Apprenticeship program have the potential to impact the field in a variety of ways: 1) the individual, 2) his/her organization and 3) the field of youth employment.

At the individual level, training programs can expose individuals to the current range of knowledge and expertise in research, policy, and practice regarding youth employment/youth development. They can expose individuals to the range of career opportunities within the field and enhance their management and organizational development skills. Training programs can also enable individuals to establish or broaden relationships with national, state, and local youth employment/development policymakers and practitioners, program operators, and research and policy analysis organizations. At the organizational level, participants in such programs may have the opportunity to research and document best practices and, when feasible, implement these at their organization. At the organizational level, participants can have an impact through sharing of new information with their colleagues.

At the level of the youth development field, greater knowledge and self-awareness can have tremendous impacts on public policy, as leaders of this country's youth-serving organizations have demonstrated. An essential characteristic of the work to build the skills of youth-serving professionals is the creation of a cadre of people connected as a network and committed to improving practice in the field of youth employment/youth development. While no single act or program achieves the result of connecting people, a staff training and development program can contribute to youth workers' realization that there are others like them committed to youth work and improving outcomes for young people and their families. The shared commitment of knowledgeable professionals can have profound impacts for youth at the national, state and local levels.

In 1999, the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C. conducted a series of evaluations of the New Leaders Academy of NYEC. The evaluation included participants' self-reports of growth as well as reports from their supervisors. Overall, AED's survey of supervisors indicated the benefit of their employees' participation in the training program to be professional growth, networking with other organizations and the sharing of knowledge with others in the organization. Supervisors often substantiated their employees' self-reports, noting improved communication and interpersonal skills.

One supervisor noted, "We hope to benefit by having the New Leader bring back to our organization the latest information from the youth field." Another supervisor talked of the expectation of developing stronger connections to other national youth-serving organizations.

AED's findings demonstrated growth occurred at the individual (personal) level, organizational level and at the broader level of the field, according to participants' self-reports and supervisors' reports. Supervisors cited personal growth among their employees, including better managerial skills (cited most frequently), a greater sense of confidence, a heightened sense of having a "national outlook," expanded content knowledge and a greater sense of professionalism. Managerial skills supervisors cited most often included: demonstrating improvements in leadership; decision-making; delegating responsibility; political sensitivity; resourcefulness; long-range planning; people skills; and follow-through. Participants of the Class of 1999 reported that personal growth occurred as a result of training. Nearly all participants that year cited personal growth in the areas of:

- increase in confidence - trust instincts more
- better informed - more assertive
- feel valued by peers - more competent and committed
- sense of accomplishment - more vocal
- better understanding of self - more focused

As for changes at the organizational level, supervisors stated specific positive changes occurred as a result of their employees' participation in the Academy. One supervisor stated, "We all got promoted through New Leaders Academy. She shared info with other

staff and brought her peers along with her.” In this case, the result of individual training was not just for the benefit of a single person but it benefited co-workers as well. Supervisors also stated their employees gained an understanding of the need for professional development and growth; a better understanding of youth development principles; and a better understanding of their own organization’s mission and purpose--all demonstrating potential impacts on the field of youth development.

Because training for youth-serving professionals is a recent development, the full and long-term impacts of programs like New Leaders Academy and the Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship program have yet to be determined. It is expected, however, that stronger networks and sharing of effective strategies to improve the lives of young people will result in further contributions to the field. We know that work and education programs often serve as ideal developmental opportunities for young people. These can and should be among those that offer the greatest value to adults who work with youth.

Adrienne R. Smith presented these remarks at the U.S. Department of Labor Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship meeting. Ms. Smith is a Consultant who currently serves as Workforce Investment Act Administrator for Workforce Connection of Central New Mexico. She was Founding Director of the New Leaders Academy of the National Youth Employment Coalition in Washington, D.C.

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