

Promoting Youth-Adult Partnerships in Coalition Decisionmaking

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Youth involvement is a vital element of community planning and organizing around the prevention of youth substance abuse. As such, community anti-drug coalitions are finding new ways to engage youth in a variety of coalition activities. While some coalitions have successfully built youth involvement into the structure of the coalition itself; creating components such as a Youth Action Board, where youth actively participate in all coalition decisions, many coalitions have yet to build such infrastructure around youth involvement. This is not surprising since doing so may present numerous challenges, particularly for those coalitions that have been in existence for many years.

A recent article in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* discusses how one public system, 4-H Youth Development (4-HYD), sought to incorporate a Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) model in their existing infrastructure. The model institutes a practice of bringing young people and adults together to make important organizational and community decisions that historically were made by adult stakeholders. Through interviews and focus groups with staff, youth and other key stakeholders, researchers identified and discussed challenges involved in modifying traditions and creating community buy-in around the effort. The findings may be helpful not only for coalitions promoting Youth-Adult Partnerships in coalition decision making, but also can apply to groups aiming to make other kinds of innovative structural modifications to the coalition.

While tradition within an organization often appears as a strong point, it also can serve as a barrier to change. Traditions are accompanied by a set of shared values and a culture that requires significant buy-in to alter. Revising a mission statement on paper may be easy, but does not guarantee changes to traditions and structure. Some staff also expressed concern that supporting the new Y-AP model might cause volunteers, service providers and legislators who supported traditional programming to have negative perceptions of them. These and other issues such as high turnover and scarce resources to implement new programming were cited as challenges that needed to be addressed.

Despite the challenges, the findings show positive results. The 4-HYD successfully integrated a Y-AP into their existing public system. While the researchers assert that example may not translate to other public systems such as coalitions, the implementation of management goals played a key role in the success of the integration of Y-AP into decision making processes. They describe these management goals as follows:

- 1) Gain stakeholder attention and understanding of the purposed and proposed outcomes of Y-AP (“Planting Seeds”),
- 2) Educate stakeholders helping them to put the Y-AP into practice (“Walking the Talk”), and
- 3) Develop a feeling of ownership of Y-AP among stakeholders (“How We Do Business”).

These goals may be key steps in creating organizational change.

Source: Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., MacNeil, C. (2008). *Youth-adult partnerships in decision making: Disseminating and implementing an innovative idea into established organizations and communities.* *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 41, 262-277.

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- **Show respect for tradition** Whenever you are attempting to get support from volunteers and other members to change the system, it is important to demonstrate your respect for the current system. Many of those you will come into contact with have vested a great deal of time and interest in it and are very passionate about their work. Make sure to approach them in a way that explains how the new practice (ex: Youth-Adult Partnerships) could enhance the current system.
- **Create opportunity for “small wins.”** In the case of advocating for Youth-Adult Partnerships, while many stakeholders believe in the importance of a youth voice, many lack the experience of working one-on-one with youth as partners. Give stakeholders a chance to gain confidence in their ability to implement the changes (ex: Working collaboratively with young people). Create opportunities for stakeholders to see the plan in action. This will help develop stakeholders’ positive personal experiences with the proposed changes.
- **Develop a “pitch” and tailor it to different audiences.** Staff members working with 4-HYD found that when they connected the priorities of the Youth-Adult Partnership initiative with the interests of their current and potential stakeholders, they were much more effective at creating buy-in. Know your stakeholders and their interest in the current traditional system. Find out what about the system works for them and what they would change. Listen carefully to their needs and synthesize this information into your “pitch” to help explain how your proposed changes may interest them and how and why adopting these changes will benefit the entire organization.
- **Empower stakeholders and create ownership.** The researchers noted that the 4-HYD staff members did not simply state opinions and ideas to their stakeholders. They strategically created an environment where stakeholders could learn about Youth-Adult partnerships and decide whether they wanted to be involved. Your belief in and advocacy for the initiative can motivate others to make their own decision to support and get involved in the partnership.

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