

Introduction



GETTING READY:
Purpose and Structure
of Manual



Defining Y-AP

Y-AP is not simply youth and adults being in the same room. They are working together as colleagues, struggling together, and celebrating their successes. Our definition is this:

Youth-adult partnership is involving youth and adults in responsible, challenging, and collective action that seeks to benefit an organization or larger community. All individuals in the partnership have the opportunity to engage in planning, decision-making, and action consistent with their own interests and skill.

It is not expected that all youth and all adults will be involved in all decision-making. Some members do not have sufficient time to always participate; other members may not always be adequately prepared to participate.

Y-AP can be a powerful tool for organizational improvement. Organizational improvement is not about youth leading the charge and having the right type of energy. Nor is it about adults having the proper wisdom and years of experience. Rather organizational improvement is about all staff and participants - regardless of age – having the legitimate opportunity to work collectively, bringing their unique talents and perspectives to the table. *The term “partnership” reminds us that the engagement and voice of both youth and adults are critical.*

A Note on Terminology

There are many terms used to describe the inclusion of youth in collective decision making. These terms include: youth participation, youth voice, youth in governance, youth organizing, youth civic engagement, and the like.

This manual uses the term “youth engagement” as an umbrella term to describe the various ways that youth participate in organizational decisions and action. Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) is considered to be the most central aspect of authentic youth engagement.

Who is this Manual for?

This manual is not written for “novices” or for “experts.”

This manual is for all persons who wish to enhance their learning about Y-AP, those who wish to share their experience and skill with others, and most importantly, those who want to learn collectively with others.

This manual works best with groups of two or more persons who are willing and able to devote some focused attention over a sustained period of time to improving their practice and that of their organization.

This manual is appropriate for youth, volunteers, front line staff, community residents, organizational partners, managers, administrators, and board members. You don't need to include everybody at all times in the learning process. Whatever mix of people works for you and your organization is perfect in order to get started.

The most important thing is to start.

Purpose of Manual

What are the “leverage points” that facilitate positive change? There are many, of course. This manual is designed to help strengthen three key leverage points that are fundamental to quality Y-AP within organizations and communities. Specifically, the purpose of this manual is to help stakeholders:

- Acquire core knowledge about Y-AP
- Establish one's own point of view about Y-AP, and the ability to communicate it to others
- Build consensus on key issues regarding Y-AP

Knowledge

Knowledge is power. Change depends on people having a diverse range of knowledge gleaned from research, experience, observation, and tradition. This manual presents short summaries of current research and current thinking about Y-AP. We also provide links to additional research and practical theory.

The research summaries may sound “academic” on first reading. This is the nature of research. But, remember, research is just a tool and does not, in and of itself, bring about change. *Change is facilitated when stakeholders actively discuss how research and theory relate (or do not relate) to their own experience, to their own practice.* Change is facilitated when people try to interpret and make sense of research findings. This manual is designed to provide ample opportunities and guidance in applying research to practice.

Power and Planning

Establishing One's Point of View

It is easy to get overwhelmed from too much information. Positive change can occur when each person establishes his or her own point of view on critical issues. For this reason, the manual includes a variety of “tools” – key questions, practical activities, assessments – to guide individuals in the process of establishing their own point of view. *An informed point of view demands personal reflection and critical thinking over time. Moreover, an informed point of view has to be communicated well in order to influence change.* The tools in this manual are designed to promote such reflection and critical thinking. The tools are designed to help people clearly state their ideas and positions.

The tools are written to be quite “basic.” But don’t be fooled. While the questions are simple, you will find it challenging and satisfying to arrive at practical answers.

Discussion and Consensus Building

Organizational change is a collective endeavor. *Organizational change ultimately arises from discussion about things that matter. It comes from people willing to come together to build consensus and take collective action.* Knowledge, points of view, tools, and data are simply the means to an end. For this reason, the manual is designed to guide groups in building organizational consensus about the practice of Y-AP.

The important thing is this: Ask questions and listen to how people respond, make declarative statements that tell people what you really are thinking, and finally, work to find consensus.

Organizational improvement requires a group of individuals who are committed to enhancing their own collective learning, and who are committed to using this knowledge to identify and adopt “best” practices. This manual, therefore, is geared toward organizational change through small group learning and action.

Different persons/groups have different institutional power to make organizational decisions. Organizational change ultimately requires the “buy in” of these persons/groups. It may be useful to involve some key persons with institutional power (e.g., program directors, executive directors, board members, community leaders) from the very beginning. Alternatively, you might wait to involve them directly until your group has engaged in shared learning and has roughed out recommendations for improvement. At that point, you could have a formal organizational-wide meeting to present your insights and ideas for organizational improvement through Y-AP.

The most important thing is that you have a clear rationale and a plan for who you are involving, and when, and how you expect to gain the active endorsement of those people/groups with institutional power. This manual will help you work through these issues