

# Create an Organizational Culture for Y-AP/E to Flourish

it is important to remember that

the organizational culture will influence the quality of Y-AP/E and that, over time, Y-AP/E projects will influence the organizational culture. Effective managers, therefore, seek to create a “good fit” between the organization and the Y-AP/E project. When this fit exists, the organization benefits greatly.

As we reviewed the research literature, a fundamental finding of success emerged. Effective project managers were those who ensured that the Y-AP/E initiative was administered and implemented consistent with the highest organizational standards. Toward that end, project managers focused on three leverage points: they 1) paid close attention to logistics and group dynamics, 2) created ongoing opportunities for collective reflection, and 3) affirmatively addressed issues of power and role.

**LEVERAGE POINT #1:**  
**Pay attention  
to Logistics and  
Group Dynamics**

The process of evaluation requires ongoing attention, timely follow-up and coordination to ensure continuity of effort over time. Any organization that takes on Y-AP/E will need a coordinator, a dedicated individual, to handle logistical and administrative duties. We recommend that this role be held by a staff member or teacher. Why? Typically, adults go to the organization every day. Youth do not. This consistent availability ensures that issues are dealt with in a timely manner. Y-AP/E always requires the coordination of multiple people and groups. Having someone available to put out logistical fires, communicate with stakeholders, and perhaps most importantly, sustain project momentum is a role that is best suited to a staff member.

Case studies and practitioner experience indicate that this logistical role is important for all steps in the Y-AP/E process. For example, consider what it takes to collect data. First, it is often necessary to secure parental permission so that researchers can interview, photograph or record participants who are under age 18. This must occur before the data are collected. A coordinator needs to ensure that enough time is scheduled for the data collection, not an easy task given that adults and youth are often busy. On some occasions, providing meals to the researchers is a task that falls to the project coordinator. And, of course, arranging transportation to collect data is typically a task that the coordinator must handle.

Some studies indicate that the project coordinator spend a minimum of four hours a week conducting logistical and administrative duties, allowing for at least a 2:1 ratio of preparation time to contact time. The coordinator has to be prepared to do what is necessary and take on multiple roles – advisor, trouble shooter, research assistant, mediator, co-learner, and mentor – given the immediate priorities of the project. They need to pay attention to the dynamics of the group, being mindful of what transpires during the meetings as well as when the youth are out in the community. There will always be periods of time when youth and adults struggle, lack attention or appear not to be fully engaged. It is up to the project coordinator to determine whether this is a structural, group, or individual issue, and then facilitate processing through reflection and discussion.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Quality Y-AP/E demands “behind the scenes” logistic and administrative support. Ensuring that someone is ready to provide this ongoing support is critical to the success of the project.

## **LEVERAGE POINT #2:** **Create Ongoing Opportunities for Collective Reflection**

There is probably nothing more critical than providing youth and adults with ongoing opportunities to engage in collective deliberation and reflection. These opportunities can be formal (e.g., workshop) or informal (weekly check-ins). Research indicates that collective reflection is important because it provides:

■ Participants with time to bond and become cohesive in their mission.

■ A means to ensure that participants learn and discuss data collection and analysis strategies.

■ A forum for raising critical consciousness about organizational and community issues.

■ A forum for problem solving and keeping everyone “on the same page.” What are the criteria for collective reflection in workshops and check-ins? Available research indicates that it must be challenging to the participants, experiential in nature, and designed to promote evaluation and interpersonal skills among Y-AP/E team members.

■ Collective reflection prepares Y-AP/E participants to successfully perform basic research tasks (conducting interviews, administering surveys, analyzing data). Skill-oriented sessions rely on role play and practice to prepare the evaluators. For example, providing instruction on interviewing techniques and the use of voice recorders is necessary. But it is through role-playing, with collective reflection, that youth (and adults) will start to acquire the requisite skill and experience. Similarly, if photography is to be used as an evaluation tool, participants need to become familiar with the equipment. But it may be more important that the team members receive training on how to interpret the resulting images.

■ Interpersonal skills need to be taught in addition to technical skills. For example, as the youth and adult team members begin to collect data and then work to collectively analyze them, they will need to hone their communication skills. Learning to actively listen (e.g., to their fellow team members; to the individuals whom they interview), to appreciate others’ perspectives and ideas, and build consensus are not skills that come naturally to most people. The importance of these skills should be returned to frequently.

■ Most youth and adults engaged in Y-AP/E have not fully considered ethical issues associated with research. For this reason, training and reflection should emphasize confidentiality and the protection of human subjects. Given the nature of evaluation, it is likely that the Y-AP/E team will know some of the people they are interviewing or observing. Participants need to understand the rationale for human protections and learn that what they see, hear and learn in the research must remain confidential. This also holds true with photography. Y-AP/E team members must learn not only how to frame a photo, but also how to shoot images in an ethical manner.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** The use of ongoing collective reflection – formal and informal – may be the most significant factor in distinguishing successful and unsuccessful Y-AP/E initiatives.

**LEVERAGE POINT #3:**  
**Affirmatively**  
**Address Issues of**  
**Role and Power**

Almost every article and report that we reviewed spoke to the importance of role and power in Y-AP/E initiatives. Whenever adults and youth work together as partners, issues of power and role will emerge. The research literature is clear that being aware of role/power dynamics is essential; addressing them in a proactive manner will greatly contribute to a successful Y-AP/E project. Those Y-AP/E initiatives that avoid confronting the issues of role and power, and make believe they don't exist, are at the greatest risk for failure.

Y-AP/E, by its nature, makes explicit, issues that are not often discussed in organizations. There will always be asymmetrical power between youth and adults in part because adults have fiduciary and fiscal responsibility for the group. At the same time, Y-AP/E, by definition, is implemented to challenge prevailing notions of youth and adult roles. Consequently adult staff must find the proper balance between treating youth as full partners, while also being guides and mentors.

The literature includes many strategies which have been effective in addressing issues of power. Most often, these occur during formal trainings with ongoing "check ins" throughout the project. Many Y-AP/E initiatives bring in outside facilitators to explore issues. Quite often, these "talk" strategies are complemented by site visits in the community and interactions with community leaders and residents. Ultimately, most Y-AP/E initiatives seek to emphasize that youth and adult staff, as separate classes of people, typically come to a project with differing obligations, interests, and skill sets. These differences can be viewed as strengths, not liabilities. Successful Y-AP/E projects build from the differences, allowing all participants to engage in the work consistent with their own interests and skill sets.

Most youth come to Y-AP/E wanting "equal power" and "equal rights." Collective discussion about power and the assignment of responsibilities typically alleviates these concerns. This is because youth are rarely asked to discuss these issues in settings of partnership with adults. They almost always respond well. As youth begin to perceive that their voice and competency are respected by adults, and as they gain a feeling of community and importance within the organization, their commitment to the project is enhanced. Concerns about power receive toward the background.

**Responding to Power outside the Y-AP/E Group**

Affirmatively responding to power and role imbalances within the Y-AP/E group is a priority. At the same time, issues of power within the sponsoring organization cannot be ignored. It is often the case, for example, that the youth workers initially supporting the Y-AP/E may not have significant institutional power within their own organizations. Similarly, in a school environment, constraints placed upon teachers must be acknowledged.

Too often, adults with institutional power are able to consume the project, shut it down, or frame it as an adorable performance of "student voice." The lesson is clear the Y-AP/E team first needs to identify who has institutional and other types of influential power in the larger organization, and then, get them on board with the project. Creating new project "champions" grants legitimacy to Y-AP/E and offers an institutional buffer when conflicts arise. Gaining this support often simply requires persistence. Having youth speak to "adults with power" early in the process helps the adults see that the research effort is one of serious purpose and method. Ongoing communication with the power brokers is an effective strategy for strengthening their commitment.

Some projects have addressed issues of power by using organizational self assessments to create an awareness and favorable context for Y-AP/E. That is, before initiating a Y-AP/E project, the youth/adult teams work with organizational staff to conduct a self-assessment to explore how “ready” the organization is for seriously taking on this effort. Making the link between organizational assessment and Y-AP/E can create a solid foundation for the subsequent work. It also serves to inform organizational leaders about Y-AP/E. As these stakeholders discuss Y-AP/E, perhaps in a focus group or brainstorming session, they start to learn more and gain enthusiasm for these efforts.

It is also important for youth to understand that evaluation can be a powerful tool, and evaluators can have influential roles within the community. Therefore, we suggest that Y-AP/E participants spend time examining existing power structures and the cycle of social and community change. As the Y-AP/E team begins to understand the “stakes of change,” realizing that change often comes at a high price, the consciousness of members is raised. They begin to understand that their work might jeopardize funding for some programs or projects while promoting funding for others. They begin to understand that evaluation can bring people together or isolate them. Research further indicates that such consciousness raising can strengthen the Y-AP/E team. It helps them collect their data with sensitivity, interpret their data, and equally important, provides necessary context and insight for their conclusions and recommendations.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** It is necessary to unpack the role of power and privilege within the Y-AP/E group, the sponsoring organization, and the larger community. Taking the time to address issues of power and role will strengthen the entire Y-AP/E process: from collecting the data and analyzing the results, to ultimately using the findings to make recommendations.

#### KEY LITERATURE FOR TIP SHEET 4:

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