

# HONORING THE EXPERIENCE:

Towards a Youth Staff Model for Youth Programs

By Phil Rooney

For the past seven years I have worked with and supervised a staff of passionate and engaged young people who are taking control of their lives, actively engaging participants in their program, and contributing to the wellbeing of their community. While I have seen the potential and impact of working with a staff of young people, there have been many practical and philosophical challenges. I wondered by what authority I should be telling these young people what this program should look like, when they have been participants for the past five or even 10 years. However, I often saw that though these young people had a vision for their program, they didn't necessarily have the skills to implement it. My most challenging moments as a youth worker and as a supervisor have been when their vision of the program and their expectations of their position were different from mine. The specifics would change, but I kept confronting these two questions: How can I, as a youth worker, better support young people to effectively run their own program? How can I use the authority of my position to support the development of their autonomy as effective youth workers? This past year I have had the opportunity through the NorthStar Fellowship to engage more deeply with these questions of authority and autonomy and to draw from the experience and knowledge of our field.

My primary frame for youth work and the NorthStar Fellowship has been my experience with Youth Farm. Youth Farm is where I began as a youth worker, and the relationships I have developed there impact me every day. It is where I continue to pour my passion for democratic and experiential education. Youth Farm is a youth development non-profit that engages young people ages nine to 24 in five neighborhoods of Minneapolis and St. Paul to grow food, grow community, and grow leaders. Our participants develop skill mastery as cooks and farmers, learn how to cooperate to accomplish shared goals, build relationships with peers and adults, and contribute to their community by growing, distributing, and cooking food. As participants become more experienced and capable they take on greater leadership roles within the program and community. Once participants are of legally employable age they can apply for a youth staff position, referred to as Project LEAD, where they co-facilitate programs. These youth staff members also partner with adults to make decisions for how Youth Farm should engage our community. In addition to supervising Project LEAD, I've managed a programmatic expansion to include former Project LEAD participants who are now between the ages of 18 and 24. These young adults work part time throughout the year as program facilitators, farm managers, and organizational leaders.

I also worked with the St. Paul Youth Commission in the City's Department of Parks and Recreation to establish The Canvas, an arts center run for and by teens. Establishing the Canvas gave me a lens to understand how larger institutions can partner with young people. There were challenges along the way, including convincing recreation staff that young people were capable of running their own space without destroying it. I knew from my work at Youth Farm that engaging young people as partners was possible. I knew that youth staff members were capable of much more than they were given credit for. I didn't know why more programs did not employ youth staff.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

Employing young people as program staff can have strong benefits to program participants, youth serving organizations, and the youth work field. Yet it is a model that is not widely documented, and youth staff

programs struggle to find adequate funding. Youth staff programs can be implemented poorly, and supervisors often lack sufficient support. I had very little training outside of my own experience when I became a Program Director at Youth Farm with the responsibility to supervise a youth staff cohort. I had a vision for the work based on a few summers spent in a different neighborhood, but this vision didn't always match that of my new youth staff. I struggled to hold newly appointed youth staff accountable to basic employment expectations, like staying on the job site. The experienced youth staff struggled to adapt to different ideas coming from a boss whom they didn't know well. We weren't working in partnership, and I didn't know where to turn for help.

Thankfully we all loved the space at Youth Farm so much that we stuck with each other. Even when we struggled with each other we still saw the benefits of our work together, especially in comparison to programs that had no youth staff. Over time we grew to support each other through our strengths and challenges. I began to understand my work with youth staff in a new light. My role wasn't to oversee young people delivering a predetermined program model, complete with defined spaces for youth voice. Instead I saw that my role should be to engage young people as capable youth workers with real responsibilities that carry high expectations. I should use my position of authority to develop a space for youth staff to adapt our program model to meet the needs of young people in our community. I have clarified my understanding of what my role should be and what this work should look like through conversations with professional youth workers and other members of the NorthStar Fellowship.

In this paper I will argue for the necessity of a youth staff model, identify elements of an effective model, share specific strategies for supporting youth staff drawn from the stories and wisdom of professional youth workers, and recognize the model's challenges. For the purposes of this paper "professional youth worker" refers to adults who are employed by youth serving organizations to manage youth programs and supervise program staff, "youth staff" refers to young people between the ages of 14 and 22 who are employed by youth programs to work directly with program participants, and "participants" refers to young people who are not employed by the program but who attend program offerings.

Establishing a model for employing young people as program staff has several important repercussions for the youth development field. This model represents a way for youth-serving organizations and professional youth workers to empower and engage young people in creating change. Recruiting past participants to be youth workers will help grow the youth work field and make it more representative of our young people. By recruiting from their own ranks, youth-serving organizations have the opportunity to develop internal leadership and make more youth-centered decisions. Youth programs have the opportunity to engender a greater sense of community ownership, pride, and respect. Monica McDaniel (personal communication, February 12, 2014), a former Beacons participant who now supervises a cohort of young people in Youth Farm, identified that "having spaces where teens can be themselves and have ownership over their lives and the direction of their community is very powerful, and adults in the community can see that."

Youth staff members develop professionally as well as personally. The youth worker skill set they gain is valuable not only within the youth work field but also within other settings. These young people engage in planning, facilitation, relationship building, public speaking, and so much more. They learn employment skills and will be better prepared for the workforce. Beyond improving on specific skills, the youth staff role creates opportunities to grow as healthy and competent young people. This is apparent as youth staff experience belonging, make decisions, engage in reflection, experience accountability and contribute to their community. One example from my work includes a young person I have worked with over the last five years. When I first met him he was a new youth staff member who was too shy to say more than one or two

sentences in a two-hour staff meeting. Today he is recognized as a community leader who is comfortable speaking in front of large groups of parents, and when he speaks he encourages participants to join him.

There are many ways to engage young people in decision-making and to support this sort of professional and personal development. The model outlined in this paper may not work for all programs, but it can work for many more than are currently employing it. Several movements within the youth work field have introduced young people into spaces that have previously been reserved for adults, such as youth-adult partnerships (National 4-H Council, 2007). Creating a model for how to effectively employ young people as youth workers within their own programs can deepen and improve our youth work and has the potential to have a great impact in our field.

## ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MODEL

There are program strategies and supervisory practices that can help youth staff be better youth workers and strengthen the impact of their work. I had already learned the importance of some of the practices through my own supervision, and I was well versed in the Youth Farm model. I was surprised to hear how many of my colleagues had come to similar conclusions and to see commonalities in our programs. Several elements of an effective youth staff model were clear: a) recruiting from program participants, b) a pre-employment training period for participants, c) peer mentorship within a group cohort of youth staff, and d) specific supervisory practices. These youth workers were engaged in programs at Youth Farm, the Kitty Anderson Youth Science Center at the Science Museum of Minnesota, and the City of Burnsville's all-ages music venue The Garage. Additionally, the Youth Development Institute's 2009 series, *Practices to Keep in After-School and Youth Programs* provides a wealth of information on the Beacons program and its supervisory practices.

I focused on models that employ young people from the age of 14 to as high as 24. This is a wide age range that creates opportunities for mentorship within a group cohort of young people. While 14 may seem too young by societal standards for the set of responsibilities of youth work, a youth staff member that was previously a participant will be able to begin contributing at a much higher level than their age might suggest. Furthermore, setting expectations of any person solely based on his or her age is a totally inadequate way to support and supervise no matter whether young or old.

Through their earlier participation, youth have essentially been trained into the basics of the program structure and have ready examples and models for how to do youth work. Many are readily able to step in from their first day to contribute to the culture of the organization and experience of participants. Youth staff members already know many of the participants from years of being in the program together and have established relationships to draw upon in their position as mentors, role models, and youth workers. Participants benefit from having staff that better understand their specific strengths and challenges and who can provide youth voice in a staff decision-making capacity. Participants feel a greater sense of belonging, develop relationships with role models and mentors who have similar life experiences and share their cultural background, and develop a positive self-identity. Young people may also feel more comfortable sharing personal issues with someone they identify more closely as a peer before sharing with an adult.

Furthermore, participants aspire to be staff and take on greater leadership roles to give themselves the greater opportunity to be hired. I have seen participants make deep and concerted efforts within the program and with their peers for this reason. It is always a pleasure to tell these young people they have been appointed youth staff. One young person was so surprised she told me that no one had ever recognized her as a positive role model before. Now she is one of the most focused and dedicated members of our youth staff and often holds others accountable when they don't meet group expectations.

Youth staff programs primarily hired young people who had participated in a pre-employment training program with the organization. These training programs most often focus on young people between the ages of 12 and 15 and create a pathway for employment. How these programs can best train and prepare young people is itself something that should be further explored and developed and lies outside of the specific context of this paper. That being said, young people within this role should have opportunities to practice some of the necessary skills to be effective program staff and to discover whether this is something that interests them. This also assists professional youth workers in determining a young person's suitability as a program staff member and creates a relationship based on trust and support that can be leveraged when the young person becomes a youth staff member. This period of pre-employment training can serve as a vetting process for discovering whether a young person is ready to be responsible to the program and participants. It is a space for learning communication skills, accountability, and how to be a positive role model. This period can also separate out young people who are only interested in having a job from the people who are passionate for doing the work because they love it.

Youth staff programs created a stronger support system by hiring a group cohort. While it is also possible to employ young people individually to be youth workers, the greatest impact comes from developing a group context for youth staff. Benefits to a group context include the ability for peers to give feedback, hold each other accountable, create collective expectations, and create a network of support. The group cohort creates avenues for the Beacons approach to supervision through social group work (Reilly, Supervision at the Beacons, 2009). At the Beacons, "this process of group development is the primary vehicle through which youth staff are taught and trained to supervise" (p.8). A group cohort creates space for each youth staff member to develop his or her individual style and strengths without the pressure of succeeding in everything. Youth staff members are able to support and be supported through each other's strengths and challenges, and this likewise teaches them how to support participants. Youth employees benefit from feedback not just from their supervisor but also from their peers and they often hear and respond to this constructive peer feedback more positively. Youth staff members also learn how to be better youth workers through the process of giving feedback to their peers. The ability to hire young people throughout the range of ages 14 to 24 is an added benefit. Within a cohort there are preexisting mentorship relationships between youth staff that can shift from participant-staff towards a peer-to-peer and mentorship support system. The group cohort also has benefits for participants, as McDaniel identifies, "having a bigger group allows [participants] to connect to a lot of different personalities" (personal communication, February 12, 2014).

## LEARNING TO BE YOUTH WORKERS

Clear expectations for youth staff lay the groundwork for a successful transition from program participant to youth staff member, and are an important element in the continued supervision of youth staff. New youth staff will be more effective if they understand that their role as an employee requires a greater contribution than what is expected of a participant. The aforementioned pre-employment training period begins the development of a staff lens, but is inadequate without clearly defined expectations. The most important role for the professional youth worker is helping to develop well defined expectations through communicating organizational policies and facilitating a space of reflective democratic process. Youth staff will be more effective if professional youth workers are able to hold young people accountable to these expectations.

The professional youth workers I interviewed argued that engaging young people in democratic process to generate these expectations sets a tone of greater ownership of their role. This is not so different a process from how I would generate a set of group expectations with participants. Participants may focus on "no swearing" as a key expectation, and it is my role as a staff member to introduce the importance of cleaning up our space or checking out before leaving, for example. Yet somehow the set of organizational policies as

they applied to youth staff seemed beyond this process, perhaps due to how I believed a supervisor should act. There was supposed to be a hierarchy of decision making because I felt ultimately responsible for the program. But the necessity for professional expectations shouldn't stop adults from engaging young people in the democratic process. The professional youth worker can add additional expectations in a democratic discussion without any necessity for being authoritarian. Part of this discussion should include professional requirements of the organization, such as policies and procedures, emergency protocols, attendance requirements, etc. Including these elements takes nothing away from the process becoming a collective set of expectations. Rather than my being singularly responsible for the program, we create a collective responsibility.

Through reflecting on their own experience youth staff members are capable of recognizing most of the skills and practices of an effective youth worker. Reflection on experience is essential as youth transition to staff and develop their role. John Dewey (1938) established reflection as a hallmark of experiential education. Youth staff have a host of experience in youth programs, and through facilitated reflection they create new layers of meaning from their time as participants. Reflection helps youth staff to recognize their areas of expertise and honors their knowledge. Through reflection they learn to identify elements of youth work practice they have experienced and begin to develop a concept of youth work. From this concept they begin to critically examine their own practice to learn how to improve their work. Multiple opportunities for reflection with many different people are essential to the youth staff model. Youth staff will be more effective if they reflect with participants, with their peer cohort, and with their supervisors. These reflections are more effective if they take place on a regular basis and take many forms, from quarterly self-evaluations to daily check-ins with peers and immediate supervisors on group dynamics.

A youth staff member's ability to recognize the elements of effective youth work practice is strengthened by his or her past participation in the program, as noted within the Beacons program: "When they transition to the Counselor-in-Training program, these young people begin to practice the group work skills they have absorbed over the years" (Onserud, Brockway, & Mancell, 2009). Youth staff members have essentially been trained into being youth workers by their years of participation within programs. They know the games, and now they develop the skills to lead the games. They know the conflict mediation process, and now they develop the skills to create a holistic approach to behavior management. The expertise of youth staff enhances youth programs, just as adults bring their own experience as professional youth workers.

## **SUPERVISING YOUTH STAFF**

There are many tools we use when youth staff struggle to be effective youth workers. Youth staff can lean on their group cohort for feedback, can step back from challenging responsibilities to more comfortable roles, can be coached and mentored, and can see effective practice modeled. Specific expectations for the performance and responsibilities of a young person should grow and shift over time. There is a learning curve as young people develop their skill sets in facilitation, mentorship, and program planning. When supervisors acknowledge what Gerison Lansdown (2005) referred to as the "evolving capacities" of our young people, youth staff are able to take on greater roles in running programs. As youth workers we are able to draw upon our relationships with these young people to support them as they grow and push them through the discomfort of attempting a new role or skill, as noted by Beth Ringer of Youth Farm:

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*I think another thing that makes it successful is using that authentic and positive relationship in order to provide clear structure and guidance and appropriate roles. So balancing—if a youth is not comfortable facilitating a game, you don't just throw them in there and they go and do it and you don't help at all. [The adult role is] finding appropriate balance and ways to guide and support.*

*—Beth Ringer, personal communication, February 12, 2014*

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Most young people will encounter periods of struggle. The transition to program staff carries greater expectations, and youth staff will be challenged to adapt new skills in a rapidly shifting environment. When supported effectively, most young people will find these challenges are surmountable and this process will support their healthy development.

Youth staff members also learn how to do youth work based on the example set by their supervisor. If we model trust, honor their expertise, and create a democratic space, then our youth staff will be more autonomous youth workers. If we accept ambiguity and are adaptable within our authority, then our youth staff will have more confidence to tap their expertise and develop their vision. We create more flexible and democratic space when we accept the limits of our knowledge and acknowledge the mistakes we make. Eric Billiet, formerly of The Garage, described the working relationship:

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*I know more about how to make a budget. I know more about how to plan something. I don't have knowledge about what its like to be Latino. I don't know what its like to be a 14-year-old girl. You teach me your expertise. I'll teach you some of mine. And that's how we're going to work as a team. At the same time sometimes I'm the boss and we have to work on job skills like being on time. But that's pretty age-irrelevant too.*

*— Eric Billiet, personal communication, March 20, 2014*

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The youth staff model does entail a shift in focus on the part of the professional youth worker. In our work that has meant less time spent facilitating programming and in direct contact with participants and more time spent managing programs and staff.

Accountability is one of this model's greatest challenges. As supervisors we struggle to hold youth staff accountable without enabling their negative behaviors. We so dearly care for these young people whom we have seen grow into their staff roles, and we want to see them succeed. Many youth staff members do not have a developed employment skill set that includes being on time, showing up when scheduled, and communicating absences and tardiness. Supervisors' greatest challenges within this model are recognizing when they have been enabling a young person to take advantage of their situation and making the decision to remove a young person from their position in the organization. Supervisors must balance personal feelings with the long-term benefits to the young people.

## **UNDERSTANDING ADULTISM**

There are several extrinsic challenges to the youth staff model, and they have the potential to be overcome. To my initial surprise and befuddlement, the most common barrier I heard from youth workers was adultism. It didn't make sense to me that youth programs, which are spaces for the empowerment of young people, would be victim of something so insidious. I wanted the barrier to be something tangible that I could work to overcome. After several hard interviews and lots of digging, I began to understand how adultism influences adults to undermine youth staff and how it creates structural barriers, both legal and financial.

John Bell (1995) defines adultism as, “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement” (p.1). Adultism creates a societal belief that young people are not qualified to take on adult roles such as being a youth worker and are incapable of making appropriate decisions for their programs and for themselves. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai (1988) argues that our societal perception of young people underestimates their potential power and ability entirely, “contemporary images of childhood are united in their failure to acknowledge the potential of young people to contribute to the social order” (p.116). Young people are primarily assigned menial tasks in the workplace, reflecting a lack of expectation to contribute to community. When society carries expectations of young people it is through their potential as adults-in-the-making or as future leaders.

Legal restrictions based in the social construction of youth are significant barriers to hiring and empowering youth staff. Many programs require the presence of a staff person over the age of 18, regardless of other qualifications. However, a responsible 16-year-old youth staff member who was a participant could be better qualified to care for a group of children than a recent college graduate who has little youth work experience. Recognizing the potential for youth staff under 18 challenges the credentialing movement, which would presumably restrict these young people from becoming youth workers. The legal barrier doesn't preclude the youth staff model if we include young people through the age of 24. These young adults can take on mentorship roles with newly appointed youth staff, have scheduling availability during the school day, and can take on additional responsibilities within the program setting.

Effective implementation requires organizations to invest in funding youth staff and supporting professional youth workers. Paying young people for doing real work requires financial resources. The Beacons argue that the narrow restrictions and requirements of funders are a significant barrier to securing adequate funding (Reilly, From membership to leadership, 2009,). This is also prevalent at Youth Farm where the organization is unable to offer more than a limited stipend during the school year. By paying youth staff we respect the real value of their work, thereby creating a greater sense of pride and investment in the program. Payment also creates a motivating factor among youth staff and participants who aspire to be youth staff.

Youth programs and professional youth workers who employ youth staff will be more effective if they authentically believe that young people are capable of running an effective youth program. Neither the opinions of young people nor of adults should be put on a pedestal. Soliciting the opinion of young people without dialogue, teaching, or mentorship reeks of tokenism. Likewise, adults, even youth workers, can too easily focus on the perception of young people's incapacities and inabilities and may invalidate the opinions or methods of youth staff. All youth workers must guard against approaching young people as vessels that must be filled with teaching in ways that we as adults validate. Shared goals are more likely to be accomplished if professional youth workers use their authority to work in partnership. There are many ways to be an effective youth worker, and youth staff will have many methods and opinions. Young people are less likely than adult staff to have a fully developed youth work tool kit, and their expectations may not be the same as a professional youth worker's. Seeing youth staff struggle and make mistakes is a challenge for supervisors, and sometimes these mistakes have repercussions on program participants. These moments can carry great weight in learning and development. Professional youth workers can support youth staff by setting them up for success and mentoring them through failure. The positive outcomes of youth staff outweigh the mistakes they make.

## CALL TO ACTION

This paper is a small window into a model that is insufficiently researched and supported. There are more programs doing this work and each has its own successes and challenges. More research should be done to document how youth workers are approaching this work. Many of the youth workers I interviewed felt a lack of support and were largely unaware of other youth staff programs. Youth-serving organizations and youth work networks could support these youth workers by creating professional development opportunities specific to supervising youth staff.

In summary, an effective youth staff model includes recruiting previous participants, a pre-employment program, and a group cohort with peer mentorship. Youth staff will transition more effectively through reflecting on their experience as a participant. Professional youth workers can support this transition and the autonomy of youth staff by facilitating a democratic space that sets well-defined expectations, and by holding youth staff accountable. Youth staff can learn how to do effective youth work through the modeling of their supervisors. Adultism creates legal and financial barriers that are surmountable and can interfere with authentic partnership between adults and young people.

This model is capable of being expanded beyond its current settings. Youth programs looking for ways to engage alumni and young people as volunteers should examine whether they can achieve greater outcomes by implementing a youth staff model. Youth programs will require the support of funders and organizational leaders. Supervisors of youth staff should examine their practice and question whether their youth staff members are being adequately supported and challenged as real youth workers. In some cases, this may require getting youth staff out from behind desks at drop-in sites and stopping adults from giving them menial tasks. Hashep Seka of Youth Farm recognized the difference as:

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*Our [youth] staff are able to create the programs that they want to see. And they're able to contribute their ideas and passions into making it come to reality. When I look at [other youth staff], they have no opportunity to contribute where they're going to be placed. ... they're sitting behind a desk or they're dealing with these kids they've never met before and telling them to be quiet.*

*-Hashep Seka, personal communication, February 12, 2014*

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The journey to establish a clearer model for my work has been both disquieting and inspirational. I have had to come to terms with not having easy answers for challenges like how to get some young people to show up to work on time. I have had to critically examine my work to ensure the decisions I make are in partnership with young people. I have had to come to terms with times when adultism played a larger role. The NorthStar Fellowship has inspired me to reshape my work to become more adaptable and trusting, and my youth staff has noticed the shift. Our program has never felt so strong.

Seeing the success of Youth Farm and these other youth staff programs gives me hope that more spaces can implement this model. Our youth staff members were trained into youth work based on their experience as participants; now they are experiencing how to democratically supervise this program model. Our field would do well to tap their expertise.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Phil Rooney** is the Lyndale Program Director for Youth Farm where he grows carrots along with leaders. He has been a youth worker for over eight years, including facilitating the City of Saint Paul's Youth Commission. Phil also has past experience teaching with the Jane Addams School for Democracy in St. Paul and Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) Scandinavian Urban Studies Term in Oslo, Norway. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Minnesota where he developed a passion for democratic education. He began his journey in Americorps' National Civilian Community Corps where he earned the President's Student Service Award.

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