# Youth Worker Values and Approaches

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For the past three years, I have been systematically gathering observations, interviews, informal conversations, surveys, and reflections from youth workers both at my urban Minneapolis community organization and at a few similar organizations. The goal in this data gathering for me was to learn what it takes to be a great youth worker supervisor. From this data and numerous secondary research sources, I have compiled a set of values that echo the voices of these community youth workers in Minneapolis.

The values and approaches that arose were the same or similar to those which quality research shows achieve positive outcomes for youth. These positive outcomes include increased confidence and skills, community culture reinforcement, health and emotional resiliency, increased self-worth and contribution, leadership for change, and positive role models for future generations. Minneapolis youth workers know what quality is and how to achieve it.

## YOUTH WORKER WORKPLACE VALUES AND APPROACHES

Interestingly, what began to emerge was a common sense of frustration with the personal and professional dissonance youth workers felt when their deep commitment to these values in practice conflicted with the business management style of professionalism expected by their employers. Situated in the role of the youth worker supervisor, I chose to ground my supervision style in the values and approaches proven successful in developing quality outcomes for youth. Would the transposition of these youth work values and approaches to the workplace environment have an impact on the professionalism of the youth workers I supervise?
The answer was overwhelmingly yes. Employee, volunteer, and youth retention steadily increased, with those who stayed increasing their capabilities and confidence, and taking on more responsibility. A number of college student youth workers were inspired to change their major or add a minor in youth studies, and at least four chose to apply for career youth work jobs with our agency after receiving a 4-year degree (one of whom also had an employment offer from Google and chose youth work).

Staff attributed this increased professionalism to the values and approaches I had used with them. They also increasingly expressed an understanding that these same attributes represent youth work values and approaches. I saw my positive youth development approach with the staff change our program from one that promotes youth leadership development to one that also provides professional leadership development.

## YOUTH-SERVING AGENCY WORKPLACE VALUES AND APPROACHES

A dilemma remains that is crucial to the professionalization of the field as well as for the creation of quality programs through youth worker professional development. For a former direct service youth worker, it was almost second nature to provide this type of positive workplace environment for my supervisees. But, when I found myself most in tune with my team, and them with each other and the participants, I found myself feeling at risk within the agency. I became bitter when my supervisor or other agency leader asked me to do things because I didn't feel respected in the way I valued so highly for the team I had created and the youth in the programs.

Requests for work came through email or a quick interruption, many times in an urgent flurry from individuals who did not take the time to get to know me, or ask my opinion,

even when decisions were being made about our programs. The type and level of engagement I had worked so hard to foster within the programs and my team felt in opposition to the style of communication and decision making that was expected of me within the agency.

I am passionate and committed to this work, as evidenced by my very personal investment in the professionalism of the workers. Now, the dilemma of the front line was not gone. I had lifted it from the daily experience of the workers and begun to carry it myself. Worse, the impact of negotiating this dissonance from my position held an amplified risk due to the nature of my role and experience as non-temporary and career-committed. My livelihood depends on my ability to work as a full time youth programs coordinator, a rare position. This dissonance, for me, was personal and painful, leaving me feeling that if I were not able to have a voice within the agency in the way in which I so strongly believed for youth and staff, I would no longer have the option of staying. I would have to change jobs, and would have to start a new career.

Most direct service supervisors have come from direct service themselves, and many struggle with the transition into this role. Some find it unfulfilling. A number of frontline supervisors I interviewed also expressed the feeling that they were faced with expectations from non-youth-serving supervisors that were misaligned with the values they know achieve the highest outcomes for youth.

Assuming that the David P. Weikart Center's research is accurate, the direct service supervisor holds the most critical role in the facilitation and execution of quality improvement initiatives (Smith, 2012). With this role being so crucial to the quality of programs, doesn't it seem just as crucial to support and retain youth workers at this level? In fact, why not begin viewing our nonprofit, social change, youth-serving agencies as a model of human leadership development not only for participants, but for employees as well?
I am fortunate to work for Pillsbury United Communities, because I was not forced to make the decision to change careers. The president of our agency took the time to listen to us youth workers, and together we have taken the first steps to begin to incorporate these values into our approaches, policies, and procedures within the agency. Another, even more challenging and wide reaching example of this type of organizational restructuring is the Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation. In her action research, Kathy Korum (2012) describes how through her cognitive and behavioral shift from a management perspective to a youth worker-oriented leadership role, she and her organization were able to increase quality and engagement in youth programs:

> Invite quality youth workers to teach you about working effectively with young people and be open to the learning. It is a time to recognize and acknowledge the strengths in those around you, regardless of their role in the organization (p.22).

If more community-based, youth-serving organizations begin to operate under these values for all staff as well as their youth, we will be creating a generation of resilient, skilled, confident, seasoned youth work professionals. Not only will this strengthen the quality of community youth programs in Minneapolis, but our shared value of reflective practice will create authentic, useable knowledge to lead the discipline toward academic professionalization.

## NEW MILLENNIUM LEADERSHIP FOR RACIAL JUSTICE VALUES & APPROACHES

The shift that I am proposing is not unique to youth work. It is a shift that is occurring as businesses and large corporations are beginning to see the value of shared leadership, professional development, and caring workplace policies (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2008). In a global economy, those of us who are in our late twenties have a unique view of interconnected relationships, power, knowledge, and voice (Myers and Sadajhiani, 2010). We were the first generation to grow up

using the Internet, and we are more prepared for a global world where teams and relationships are more effective than American individualism.

So what does community youth work have to do with the global economy? The sad truth about this field is that full-time community youth work careers are scarce and uncertain. Our country has not adopted the United Nations Rights of the Child, nor have we created a governmental branch dedicated to the healthy development of our young people. We are behind in this area and do not currently support community youth work as we know it. So we are subject to shifting funding streams and expectations on a regular basis, and an environment where turnover is expected and youth workers are seen as low-paid, young adults with little experience and no expertise.

However, within this reality is the interesting opportunity for utilizing our strengths in leadership development to create career ladders for the field. What I propose is that by aligning our agencies with the approaches and values of youth workers, we will create a unique experience for workers that has the potential to slingshot them to any leadership position they wish to achieve, regardless of industry. The best part of this concept is that the youth worker values listed above are exactly in step with the leadership competencies defined by Keleher et al. (2010) and affirm the values of youth workers as values for racial justice leadership education.

- Many programs promote the individual model of leadership, which is associated with leadership "over" others, creates relationships of dominance, and has historically applied coercion, force, or influence to reinforce power and privilege. Leadership needs to be reframed as the process by which individuals and groups align their values and mission, build relationships, organize and take action, and learn from their experiences to achieve shared goals (p.9).

## YOUTH WORK VALUES ARE MILLENNIAL, RACIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP VALUES

The Annie E. Casey Foundation published a report called "Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis." When I started this inquiry, I did not expect that it would be connected to what some are calling a crisis. However the Casey research, which focuses on young, emerging leaders in the nonprofit field, reported that "[Young leaders] are frustrated that older leaders give them responsibility without delegating the authority they need to get the job done. These young leaders are looking to be included, but instead find their ideas and skills overlooked" (Kunreuther and Corvington, 2007, p. 8).

Wolfred (2008) suggested that those young millennial leaders who do take on executive roles in nonprofits "may seek to restructure the executive role, creating collaborative or shared leadership models and job expectations that allow for a healthier balance between work and life" (p. 4). The human development that comes from expanding the youth development approaches and values to the workplace is the answer to attracting, retaining, and preparing the next generation of nonprofit, social change leadership on a playing field that promotes health, learning, and equity for all. Infusing youth worker values at the organizational level is strategic leader development for the organization, as well as a potential future funding shift. Kunreuther and Corvington (2007) recommended, "Seek out and reward innovative organizations, including convening and tapping the knowledge of their leaders, no matter their age" (p.10).

By integrating the approaches and values of quality youth work into the structure of social change nonprofits through the corresponding leadership development approaches, a new generation of global leaders will emerge from the ranks of those passionate and hardworking enough to be youth workers. Done successfully, this model could create mobile career ladders for the field, as youth work experience becomes synonymous with participatory leadership experience in the eyes of employers from a variety of industries. It

will prevent burnout and transitions out of the field by seasoned professionals, thus building on knowledge and reflective practice, and increasing quality of programming. It could also provide future funding, potentially in the area of training for-profit businesses to utilize these approaches. Most importantly, it will model the workplace in which we are preparing youth in our programs to thrive. Organizations that mirror the youth work approach to leadership will attract and retain millennial leaders who have the skills to make change toward a more just and equitable global world.

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## AUTHOR BIO


**Angel** has been working with young people in out-of-school-time programs since 2002. She holds a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and Women's Studies from the College of St Catherine. In her current position she coordinates out-of-school time community youth programs for over 400 K-12 youth annually in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. Angel has received two fellowships from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development to produce action research on professional development of youth workers in Minnesota. Her professional goals include helping create equitable approaches to professional development of out-of-school time youth workers, with a focus on keeping male youth workers of color in the field.



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