YOUTH WORKER VOICE MATTERS:

A case and framework for developing autonomous youth workers

By Ryan Kirk

Today's youth-serving organizations face a complicated, challenging, and oft-changing landscape. Many of these problems are considered typical of non-profit work. Funding is difficult to come by, especially in uncertain economic times. While there have been great strides made in identifying best practices, it is challenging to adapt and apply these best practices to the wide range of environments and situations that organizations work in. At the very heart of all of these tensions are the youth workers, responsible for the success of both the organization and the clients they serve. It is of paramount importance to recruit, train and support high-quality youth workers, but is also a significant challenge for many organizations.

To best serve both young people and organizations, youth-serving organizations must develop both the autonomy and authority of their youth workers. Doing so carries several benefits: organizations will be able to retain talented youth workers longer, they will benefit from more numerous and creative ideas and they will ultimately see better results for their youth. However, the process of providing greater autonomy to youth workers is one that requires commitment and a willingness to introduce change. It must be an intentional process to infuse autonomy and authority into the organization, not one seen as response to a lack of oversight.

A CASE FOR A NEW MANAGEMENT APPROACH

To create more autonomous youth workers organizations must commit to providing more *process* and *content* choices. These choices are often referred to in management literature as operational and strategic/administrative choices, respectively. Content (strategic/administrative) choices are the choices that shape and determine the goals of the program. Process (operational) choices are the means the organization uses to reach those goals.

Standard management philosophy states that autonomy increases as an employee climbs the organizational ladder (Raelin, 1989). A brand new employee may not have many choices, either process or content. In the least autonomous situation, familiar to many new employees, they are told not just what to do but how to do it. As they mature within an organization they may be given more freedom to decide how they will carry out their tasks, but their goals still come from employees above them in the management structure. Only once an employee has reached management do they traditionally have any significant authority to make content choices.

While a traditional structure does carry benefits to organizations, it is also weak in certain circumstances. Raelin (1989), in his examination of standard organizational autonomy, states that more autonomy is needed in fields where there is a high degree of innovation and client interaction. In the field of youth work, both of these factors are common, and the existence of those factors creates significant challenges for youth-serving organizations seeking to create systematic change.

CHALLENGES FOR ORGANIZATIONS DOING YOUTH WORK

Perhaps the most significant challenge to a traditional management structure in the field of youth work is the separation between decision-makers and the client. This can happen in any organization, but the

problem is of great import for youth-serving organizations. The youth worker who is spending hours every week working with students and families has a much more holistic view of clients and their needs than the manager higher up in the organization. The youth worker is more familiar with strategies and goals that have worked in the past. Within any youth-serving organization, it is the youth worker who has direct contact with the youth, and who best knows the needs and desires of the client. This is a tremendous challenge to a traditional framework of autonomy, and methods must be found which give youth workers a significant voice in the content choices which shape their organization's interactions and interventions with the youth.

The unique structure of non-profit funding exacerbates the problem. Youth-serving non-profits are unique in that their sources of funding are typically not the clients they serve. With money comes the power to influence decision-making. This is not a criticism of funding partners that act out of best intentions, but the role this plays in the ability of an organization to respond to the needs of their clients must be acknowledged.

A second challenge to traditional management structures is that youth workers rarely stay with a single organization long enough to advance to a position where they have the ability to make content choices. In a traditional structure, employees advance within an organization. While this certainly does occur in the field of youth work, it is more likely that youth workers will leave their current organization to pursue positions of more responsibility with a new organization. Because of this dynamic, those who make content choices often lack the institutional memory that can greatly aid in making wise decisions.

The final challenge of a traditional management structure is that it lacks the flexibility to adapt to rapid change. One of the unending challenges of the youth work field is how quickly situations develop and evolve. While working with highly-mobile families and youth who are going through significant life changes, the methods and practices that worked the year or month before may no longer be as effective. Traditional structures make it difficult to experiment and attempt new solutions to problems. By the time the decision has reached the appropriate level and trickled back down, it is too late.

A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

After having worked in the field of youth work for more than ten years as both a youth worker and a manager, I have seen firsthand the challenges that a traditional management structure creates. I have seen bright, eager youth workers with innovative ideas and approaches forced to follow a particular structure or to teach grant-mandated topics and activities that do not meet the students where they are. I've seen youth worker after youth worker move on to other organizations to find roles with greater responsibility. But I've also seen organizations that give tremendous voice to youth workers, and I've seen the success that is created in doing so.

In an attempt to explore this topic in more depth, in the spring of 2014 I released a survey that investigated the feelings of autonomy and authority that individuals in the youth work field held. The results largely confirmed my initial working assumptions: there is cause for optimism, but there is also a lot of work that has yet to be done to create greater autonomy for employees.

The survey asked individuals in the field of youth work to identify their role in their organization and to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 their feelings related to their authority in five different areas: program implementation, behavior management, budgeting, grant outcomes and program priorities. I classified program implementation and behavior management as process choices. Grant outcomes and program priorities were content choices. Budgeting sits somewhere in the middle. In practice, budgeting often bridges the gap

between the process and content choices. I expected that as youth workers advanced to higher levels in the organization structure they would feel greater authority, as is typical in traditional management structures. Figure 1 shows the autonomy ratings for three different employee groups.

FIGURE 1

Autonomy ratings for three employee groups
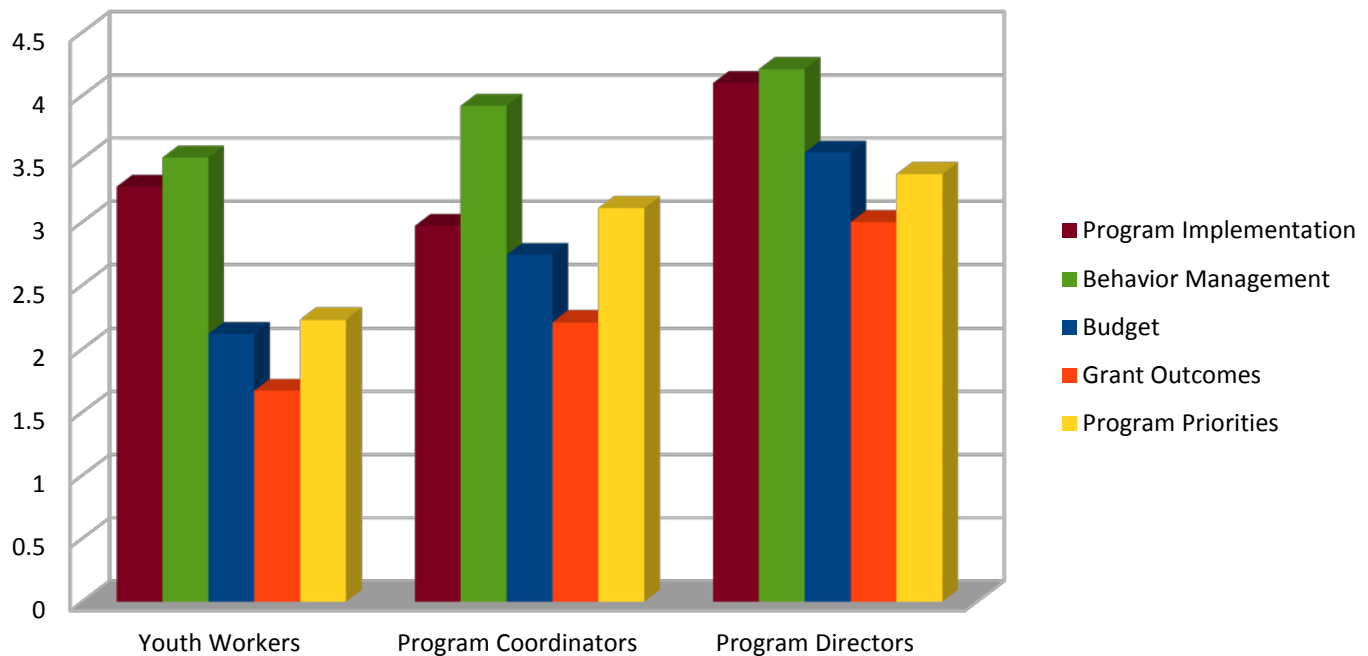
One hundred ten youth workers responded to the survey. They were primarily based in the Twin Cities metro area, with some coming from other cities in Minnesota. The majority of respondents self-identified as youth workers and activity providers. The next greatest segment was program coordinators, with program directors making up just over a quarter of respondents. The results confirmed anecdotal evidence from the field.

Mirroring what one would expect in traditional management structures, the further up the ladder employees climb, the more authority they feel they possess. This was universally true among all factors except for one data point, program implementation; youth workers felt they had more control over program implementation on average than program coordinators. Besides that outlier, program coordinators felt like they had more authority across the board than youth workers, and program directors felt like they had more authority than coordinators.

The assumption that youth workers feel like they have very little control over budgeting, grant outcomes, and program priorities was confirmed. In a traditional management structure, none of this would be surprising. It might even be expected. But if the field is going to raise the level of its work, youth workers need to feel greater authority than they currently feel.

There is cause for optimism. Youth workers and activity providers felt that they possessed "moderate responsibility" in regard to program implementation and behavior management. This demonstrates that organizations are already doing work towards providing their youth workers process choices.

BENEFITS OF A NEW MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

After examining the results of the survey it is clear that the majority of youth-serving organizations do have a traditional management structure. It is also clear that there are significant challenges to maintaining a traditional management structure in the field of youth work. But to adopt any other system is a significant change that requires time, commitment and money. The benefits of the new system must be clearly articulated.

The primary benefit to providing youth workers with greater authority and autonomy is that it gives them the opportunity to use their knowledge and skills to the best of their abilities. Youth workers are responsible for the development of people, one of the most complex tasks that anyone can take on. While it is vital that every youth worker be well versed in the best practices in the field, it is also important that they recognize that not every youth will respond to the same intervention in the same way. Oftentimes youth workers feel constricted by the limitations imposed by their program.

By providing greater process and content choices to youth workers, organizations are acknowledging the truth that no one understands the youth better than those who work with them most closely. By making this explicit to their employees, it gives the employees much greater latitude to implement practices that work.

A second benefit to the strategy of providing youth workers more content and process choices is that it promotes design thinking. Design thinking epitomizes the "fail fast" philosophy. Its basic structure is illustrated in Figure 2. Through a process of researching, brainstorming, planning, implementing, and reviewing, it encourages individuals to try new approaches and solutions to problems and challenges. While many strategies may fail, it is also more likely that brilliant solutions may be found. By providing all youth workers with an environment that encourages them to try new strategies, organizations are much more likely to find new best practices that work for their students.

FIGURE 2
Design thinking
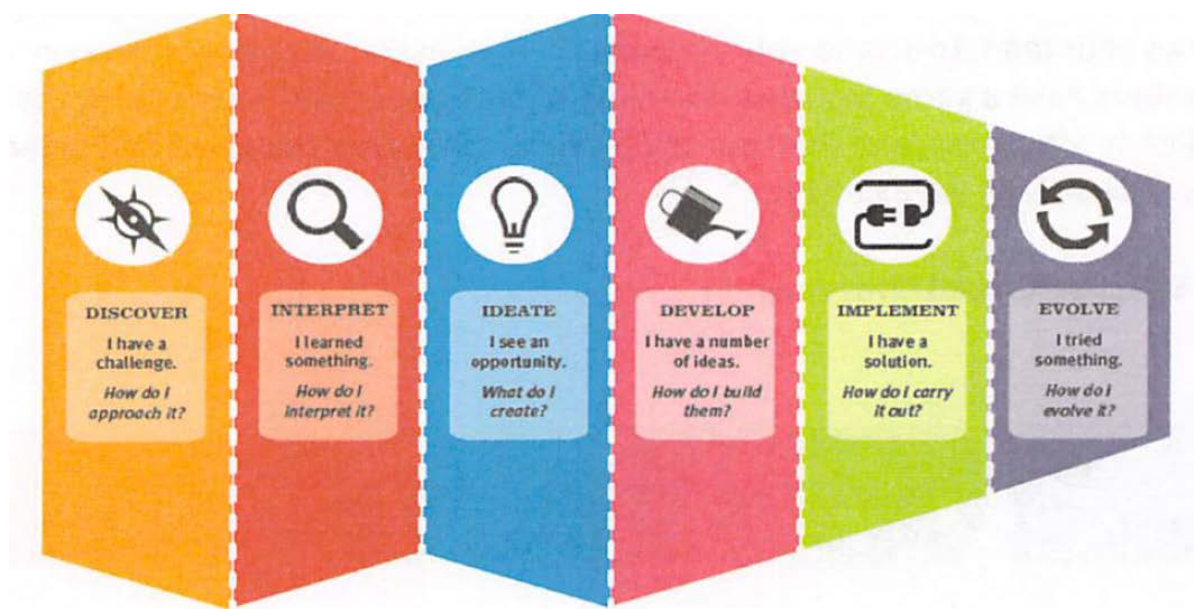
A further advantage to design thinking is that it is very flexible. As situations change and former best practices are no longer ideal, youth workers who are design-thinking oriented have a greater ability to move on and try new practices. It is a style of thinking focused on what demonstrably works. Due to the frequent reflection and examination of results, it allows for individuals and organizations to be much more flexible and adaptable.

The final advantage to creating more autonomous youth workers is that autonomy leads to commitment. It is an unfortunate truth that youth worker pay is not generally commensurate with the difficulty of the work. Average youth worker salary estimates hover between $25,000 and $28,000 per year. Salary is one of the major factors that leads to youth worker burn-out. While it is generally acknowledged that we need to generate more pay for employees, it is not always feasible given the current funding environment. If greater retention is a goal of an organization, alternative strategies must be found to keep their best employees.

Research has shown that when employees feel a greater sense of autonomy they are more likely to stay in their position (Liu, Zhang, Wang, & Lee, 2011). Autonomy leads to greater satisfaction with one's own contribution as well as a greater feeling of investment in the mission and outcomes of an organization. This was true in a study of high-performing teachers in low-income schools, which reported that "The freedom to engage in both individual and group decision making led to teachers feeling supported, trusted, and valued as professionals" (Gabriel, Day, & Allington, 2011, p. 4). This leads to a greater probability of retention over time, even if the organization is not able to extend significant financial incentives.

When an organization has solutions designed by the employees who know the students best, a flexible design environment and greater retention, better results will follow. An organization which is able to embrace the concepts of process and content choice will see the strategy pay off in the long run through greater results, higher employee satisfaction, and ultimately, a greater achievement of the mission of the organization.

COMMON CRITICISMS OF NEW MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Unfortunately, transitioning to a new management philosophy is not without its share of critics, many of whom voice justified concerns. While there would be tremendous benefits to incorporating these new content and process choices, there are challenges as well. It is possible that some organizations are not yet in a place to implement all of these changes, but it is a journey worth walking.

One criticism of this philosophy is that it succeeds only when the youth workers are of high quality. It is an unfortunate truth that not all youth workers are highly trained professionals. Many organizations are limited by their funding and cannot afford to hire the professionals that command higher salaries. If youth workers are not familiar or willing to work with and learn best practices, they are less likely to create meaningful contributions to the design-thinking process. There needs to be a base of excellent practice from which to innovate before effective innovation occurs.

Another criticism is that this management philosophy is ignorant of the real-world conditions in which youth-serving organizations exist. To truly embrace youth worker autonomy and accept youth worker voice, an organization must take a bold look at its operations including the sources of funding. This can be a difficult proposition for organizations that are used to a more traditional framework. It also means providing a greater level of trust and responsibility in the hands of youth workers.

 A final criticism of this system is that youth-serving organizations do not have the capacity to make the changes to give youth workers meaningful process and content choices. Systems are notoriously difficult to

change. Implementing these practices would require a substantial amount of effort to both create and sustain. If an organization is seeing some success with its current philosophy, why should it make the extra effort?

There is truth and merit to each of these criticisms, but the benefits to an autonomous framework far outweigh the risks and challenges associated with it. It is vital to understand that the entire organization must support these changes and everyone from the front-line youth worker to the board chair must work to achieve them. It is not an easy process, but if done correctly, it will have great power.

STEPS TO MOVE THE ORGANIZATION FORWARD

There are several steps for an organization to take to initiate this change. Like all processes, creating an autonomous environment begins at the hiring process. One of the most powerful criticisms of providing youth workers with greater autonomy and authority is that not all youth workers are prepared to handle the additional responsibility. This is true, and it is why it is essential that hire youth workers who are capable of adopting and innovating on best practices. If new hires do not come to the organization with a high level of skills, the organization must commit to providing the training they need.

Another step that an organization must take is to develop a logic model. This device, which lists the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of an organization, is essential to providing youth workers with authority and autonomy. It may seem counterintuitive that an organization that seeks to support autonomy would focus on a device that creates more structure, but as many youth workers know, it is only through greater structure that greater freedom can exist. A logic model provides youth workers the knowledge of exactly what steps the organization is taking to solve the problem they face. It also provides a base from which to make changes and test for effectiveness.

Upon hire and at regular intervals, managers should go over the logic model with the staff. There may be pieces of the logic model that do not change, such as ongoing outcomes written into grants. However, there may also be pieces that can be changed or adapted. This is the benefit of a strong logic model; it provides a map that everyone can follow. During regular reviews, youth workers will have the opportunity to provide input on the logic model and discuss their own innovations. A strong recommendation is to have a comprehensive logic model review at least once every six months.

Having an environment with well-established methods of communication is another key component to creating an environment welcoming to autonomous employees. Communication is important to all organizations, but if an organization's youth workers are going to be more autonomous, there needs to be clear communication. Youth workers need to be able to keep their supervisors regularly updated on their progress, to run their ideas by them and check to see if they are missing anything. Managers also need to know what actions their employees are taking. Thanks to developments in technology, it is easily possible to create regular meetings, even if employees are off-site. At a minimum, there should be at least one touch point per week between managers and their direct reports.

A final recommendation is to allow youth workers to create and manage their own budget. As mentioned earlier, budgeting is the one area where content and process choices really meet. It is the place where an employee claims both their content and how they are going to implement it. It is the financial expression of both the goals and the methods. It is, in a sense, the ultimate expression of autonomy and authority. Youth workers may need guidance and support on budgeting, but it is essential that there is a mechanism for youth worker voice in the consideration of financial matters. This expression of trust and responsibility allows youth workers to communicate clearly their goals for future years.

Creating an autonomous management structure for youth workers is not a task to be undertaken lightly, but it does carry incredible benefits. Traditional management philosophy is simply not sufficient for such a dynamic field. Youth workers with process and content choices are better able to make choices focused on the youth they serve, practice design thinking and stay in their jobs longer than those peers who do not enjoy an autonomous framework. In the long run this will translate into stronger mission focus and success for the organization as well as better experiences for the youth in the program. There will be challenges, but by taking a few intentional steps an organization can be well on its way to creating an autonomous framework.

Ultimately, those who benefit most from a new management system are the youth. They will have the opportunity to build longer relationships with caring adults as well as experience a program that is focused on their needs. If we are genuine about our desire to provide our youth the services they need to succeed, we need to provide more voice and more support to those who work with them every day.

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