



**April 2009**  
**Volume 47 Number 2**  
**Article Number 2FEA5**

[Return to Current Issue](#)

## **Toward a Model of Empowering Practices in Youth-Adult Partnerships**

**Kimberly S. Anderson**

Leadership Specialist, Public Service Associate  
[kanderson@fanning.uga.edu](mailto:kanderson@fanning.uga.edu)

**Lorilee Sandmann**

Associate Profession, Adult Education  
[sandmann@uga.edu](mailto:sandmann@uga.edu)

University of Georgia  
Athens, Georgia

---

**Abstract:** Environments that foster empowerment lead to youth leadership development. Linking the concepts of empowerment and youth-adult partnerships, this article provides a context for youth professionals to reflect on their work. Empowerment is defined, its antecedents are identified, and a model of empowering practices for the context of youth-adult partnerships is posited. Five key practices that youth practitioners can implement to create an environment that fosters empowerment are presented, along with examples of empowering practices as a tool for reflecting on our practices.

---

Throughout the United States, there are countless organizations designed to develop the leadership of young people. These organizations aim to equip young people with the skills and abilities for making decisions and carrying out organizational responsibilities. Such leadership development is a result of sharing leadership and empowering young people to take the reigns of the organization. However, in many cases we find adults sharing meaningless roles and responsibilities (Benson, 1997). It is important for us as practitioners to reflect on our organizations and our leadership practices that lead to or inhibit youth engagement.

Reviewing the literature in youth-adult partnerships unveils the challenges and inhibitors of youth engagement more so than strategies to increase partnership. However, based on their recent research with county and state level youth development professionals, Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2007) identify a set of promising practices for practitioners to increase their success in implementing youth adult partnerships. The leverage points within these promising practices contain many of the facets that comprise empowerment theories (e.g., building a sense of ownership, translating the vision). Therefore, one avenue to explore youth-adult partnerships is through the lens of empowerment. To maximize the potential of these partnerships, it is critical to understand how empowerment happens and to identify the practices adults can implement to foster empowerment.

Given the intent of developing leadership within young people, youth organizations like 4-H have historically aimed to foster an environment of empowerment for youth. Many youth organizations are formally structured for youth and supervising adults to share decision-making power in an effort to foster leadership development in the youth. The challenge is for adults in youth organizations to go beyond simply including youth in a participative leadership process. Participative processes can still leave group members feeling powerless if the

work is meaningless (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). For empowerment to increase, responsibilities should have meaning to the individual, allow for self determination of how the tasks are completed, build the efficacy of the individual, and make an impact in the perceived world of the individual (Spreitzer, 1995).

Thus, one goal for adults managing youth organizations is to build a partnership with the youth in which the shared leadership process results in empowered youth. It then becomes evident that a challenge for entities and organizations serving youth is to provide trained adults that understand how to create these empowering environments.

The youth-adult partnership is a prime context for empowerment. This article defines empowerment and identifies its antecedents to then posit a model of empowering practices for the context of youth-adult partnerships. Additionally, the article provides examples of empowering practices as a tool for reflecting on our practices.

## Empowerment

### Defining Empowerment

Traditional theories of leadership tend to view the dynamic as unidirectional, with the leader having influence over the subordinates. Organizations and leadership are not that simple; they are complex social organisms. One lens through which to view this complexity is shared leadership, a decentralization of power that fosters the empowerment of individuals. This process of empowerment leads to fertile ground for discovering how to create environments that lead to empowered individuals.

The aim of empowerment is to build the efficacy and motivation in the individual to be drawn to and complete the tasks. In this paradigm, leadership is more focused on making the tasks attractive by creating meaning and connections for the individuals rather than the leader pushing individuals toward a task (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowerment is not simply sharing power and delegating. Empowerment indicates how "the intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of people are influenced by leadership behavior, job characteristics, organization structure, and their own needs and values" (Yukl, 2006, p. 107). The empowerment process strives to develop followers who can lead themselves by thinking and acting independently (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). It is this process that encourages commitment, risk taking, and innovation (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Shared leadership is at the root of empowerment. However, sharing the leadership in the organization is not enough to create empowerment. Shared leadership doesn't automatically result in a sense of empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). To foster empowerment it is important to understand what creates the powerful feeling within the individual. Powerful individuals are viewed as more likely to succeed; therefore, research has investigated the conditions under which a person's sense of power is increased.

Typically studies of empowerment take one of two perspectives: relational or motivational. From the relationship perspective, empowerment is about sharing decision making and authority among individuals in the organization; however, studies indicate sharing leadership is simply not enough (Yukl, 2006). The motivational lens goes a step further to empowerment as enabling individuals. Leaders are charged with enhancing the self efficacy of individuals, which in turn enables and motivates individuals to carry out responsibilities. Four of the key sources of power are position, personal characteristics, expertise, and the opportunity to access specialized knowledge (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). These sources forecast the need to build self efficacy, self determination, and competence while sharing information and feedback with individuals.

The personal development sought by empowerment is not attained by participative processes alone. Participative processes might engage individuals, but if the tasks are meaningless or are assigned without proper

resources and training, individuals may continue to feel powerless (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). For empowerment to increase, responsibilities should have meaning to the individual, allow for self determination of the how the tasks are completed, build the efficacy of the individual, and make an impact in the perceived world of the individual (Spreitzer, 1995). This paradigm of leadership is more focused on the attraction of the task rather than the push from managers. The task has to have meaning and connection with the individual, which leads to commitment to the task (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

## **Antecedents of Empowerment**

To understand empowerment, it is key to understand its antecedents. In general, the three categories that either foster or decrease feelings of empowerment are the work, the people, and the organization (Yukl, 2006). Empirical studies on the antecedents of empowerment find slightly different definitions of constructs; however there is notable overlap among the results. We will draw upon three studies that have particular relevance: Conger and Kanungo (1988), Thomas and Velthouse (1990), and Spreitzer (1995).

### ***The Work***

One common thread among all the studies is the need to create a context in which individuals believe they have control over their behavior for the task and how the task gets done. Spreitzer (1995) notes that once individuals recognize the degree to which they determine the outcome, they see themselves as causal agents, which increases their commitment to the work and organization. Empowerment is increased when individuals share in the key decisions of the organization either through representation or direct input. Menial decisions do not contribute to the fostering of empowerment; individuals should be included in key decisions that influence the work of the organization (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

The style of the leader plays a key role in creating this context for self determination. Conger and Kanungo (1988) point out that the power of choice can be diminished by the leadership style of the leader as well as the organizational procedures put in place. Authoritarian styles of leadership limit the control and power held by members, thereby leading to powerlessness. With limited control, individuals become dependent on the leader and do not practice the self expression and creativity that lead to innovative thinking. Leaders need to allow for some level of discretion to cultivate empowerment. Empowerment is fostered by leadership that encourages commitment, risking, and innovation. Transformational and charismatic styles lend themselves to empowerment as they energize workers through meaningful goals (Burns, 1978; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Additionally, bureaucratic organizations have established rules and routines that direct member behavior, in turn limiting self expression and autonomy (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Another common thread is the need for work to have meaning for the individual. Individuals determine how meaningful the work is based on their personal set of ideals and standards (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowerment is optimized when jobs and assignments are challenging and have meaning for the individual (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). To set the context for these challenging assignments, roles should be clear and manageable to create the autonomy, which, in turn, builds self efficacy. In addition to the notion of having meaning, Thomas and Velthouse's research (1990) shows that individuals are more empowered when they understand the big picture and can connect to the extent in which completing the tasks makes a difference or impact.

### ***The People***

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995) both name an antecedent related to self esteem and the ability of the individual. Thomas and Velthouse point out the need for individuals to have the competence to perform the task skillfully. Spreitzer extends this notion by focusing on self esteem. She notes that the

individuals must recognize their ability to perform the task and view themselves as a valuable resource with talents that can contribute to the organization.

Recognizing an individual's contribution through a reward system is depicted as an antecedent by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Spreitzer (1995). Spreitzer points out the importance of recognizing individual contribution because individuals do not always make a connection to their role in a group or organizational award. Individual rewards make a clear connection between an individual's performance and the benefit to the organization. The types of rewards also reinforce performance levels that should be continued by the individual. Conger and Kanungo note that rewards must be valued by the members in light of their contribution. These rewards are designed to build their self efficacy through recognizing their abilities to do the work. Shifting the perspective from the operation of many organizations, rewards are not solely about achievement, they should recognize competence, initiative, persistence, and innovative thinking.

## ***The Organization***

Spreitzer (1995) defines one construct that is not explicitly named in the other studies. She reports that individuals are more empowered when they have information about the organization's performance. She found that individuals increased their sense of empowerment when they understand the mission and goals of the organization, in turn being able to determine how their tasks fit into the bigger picture. Furthermore, understanding the direction of the organization, individuals are able to take initiative and think innovatively about how to carry out responsibilities. Linked to other constructs, information allows individuals to create meaning and purpose (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Spreitzer also found that empowerment increased when individuals had access to feedback on the performance of the organization and work teams. Having knowledge of their unit's performance, individuals are better equipped to make and influence decisions. This idea of organizational performance feedback relates to the earlier discussion of self esteem and competence. Feedback provides benchmarks from which individuals can measure their performance and value to the organization.

The empowerment literature provides a rich base in how to build the efficacy and motivation in people. As we consider youth-adult partnerships as an avenue for empowerment, it is important to consider how to create an environment that fosters the antecedents for empowerment.

## **A Model of Empowering Behaviors in Youth-Adult Partnerships**

The underlying concept of youth-adult partnerships is one of mutuality. In the general sense, for partnership to occur both parties must be considered valuable contributors to the decision-making process. Norman (2001) points out that, in partnerships, both parties have voice that is recognized and valued. Furthermore, the partnership is viewed as an interaction of mutual learning. In genuine partnerships, both parties bring expertise and experience to the table, which, in turn, provides an opportunity for the other party to acquire understanding and learn new skills (Panitz, 1996).

Typically, the various aspects of youth-adult partnerships are explained without the presentation of a concise definition. However, Jones and Perkins (2005) present a definition that attends to both the context and characteristics of the partnership. Jones and Perkins define youth-adult partnership as: "A fostered relationship between youth and adults where both parties have equal potential in making decisions, utilizing skills, mutual learning, and promoting change through civic engagement, program planning and/or community development initiatives" (p. 1160). This definition recognizes the mutuality in teaching, learning, and action posited by

Camino (2000), Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Lorens (2001), and Zeldin, Petrokubi, and MacNeil (2007).

A typology has evolved of adult attitudes toward partnering with youth. In 1989, Lofquist introduced a spectrum on youth engagement for prevention and youth development purposes. The spectrum included adults' views of youth as objects, recipients, and resources (Lofquist, 1989). This typology is cast from the perspective of the adult only. While the category of *resources* recognizes the contribution youth can make to a situation, the idea of partnership acknowledges that youth make more than a contribution; they are viable partners with the ability to exercise power and make decisions (Camino, 2000).

Youth development programs differ along a continuum in how much input, daily decision making, and authority is vested in the adult partners relative to the youth. Larson, Walker, and Pearce (2005) note that a youth-driven approach to governance establishes a partnership between the youth and adults in which both contribute somewhat different things to the collaboration. For this engagement to happen, a culture of well-articulated and justified roles for both youth and adults must be established.

Youth-adult partnerships happen when youth and adults come together in partnership for a common purpose. The key aspect that sets the youth-adult partnership aside from other youth-adult relationships (e.g., parent-child, student-teacher) is the mutuality of teaching, learning, and action (Camino, 2000; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2007). This approach recognizes youth as assets, contributors, and partners to the organization or community.

The youth-adult partnerships within organizations like 4-H create an interesting dynamic of youth leadership development. Through shared leadership, both the youth and the adults make decisions and carry out tasks to manage the organization. As a result, much like any company or organization, the adult and youth engage in working relationships and therefore actions that lead to leadership and skill development. It seems apparent that because the youth organization strives to be a shared leadership organization where the goal is to develop youth leaders to lead themselves, one critical aspect of this leadership development quest is the role of the adults in the program in creating an environment that nurtures growth and development through implementing empowering behaviors.

Viewing empowerment through the lens of youth-adult partnerships provides an opportunity to develop a model of empowering behaviors specific to this context. The inherent power and responsibilities of adults in the youth-adult partnership require the empowerment theories, which are based on business models, to be tailored for the youth-adult context. Based on the literature of empowerment and youth-adult partnerships as well as personal experience, we posit a five-construct model of empowering practices for youth-adult partnerships.

For the youth-adult partnership context, we have defined empowering practices as *actions taken by adults for the purpose of enabling youth to execute leadership in the organization*. Given the definition, the following five constructs were identified: 1) fostering self-efficacy, 2) setting a context for action, 3) structuring the task, 4) creating a sense of ownership, and 5) coaching for performance. Table 1 provides definitions of the five constructs.

**Table 1.**  
Definition of Empowerment Constructs

Construct Name	Definition
Fostering Self Efficacy	Increasing a member's belief in their capabilities to perform responsibilities.

Setting a Context for Action	Increasing a member's understanding of how responsibilities fit into the mission and goals of the organization.
Structuring the Task	Setting the boundaries for members to carry out responsibilities and decision making.
Creating a Sense of Ownership	Increasing the degree to which members understand they are in charge of how the work gets done.
Coaching for Performance	Actively supporting members as they work to achieve their goals.

## Implications for 4-H Professionals and Volunteers

The empowerment literature is one lens through which to view the relationship between 4-H professionals or volunteers and 4-H members. While the 4-H organization is designed to disperse the leadership responsibilities of the organization, the intent for such sharing is the personal development of the individuals. Thus, the empowerment literature provides a good foundation given its element of learning through leadership (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003). 4-H employs the elements of empowerment as it utilizes the various responsibilities throughout the club and community to prepare young people to lead, themselves, in future leadership situations. The design of the youth-adult partnership allows for guidance and coaching by the adults while enabling individuals to be innovative and determine how the tasks get done.

The enabling process of empowerment is essential to the development of self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Recognizing 4-H's mission to develop young people, this process for developing self-efficacy aligns with the intent of the organization. However, for empowerment to occur it is crucial that practitioners in the field of youth development understand how to create the dynamic of empowerment in the daily workings of the organization. It is important for 4-H professionals and volunteers to understand that participative processes alone are not enough; tasks must have greater meaning and be accompanied by the appropriate resources and training while allowing for self determination and autonomy. In the youth organization, empowerment may happen naturally to some degree. Yet an intentional focus on nurturing the antecedents of empowerment will increase the likelihood that the 4-H professional or volunteer creates an environment for this type of leadership development to occur.

To advance the field of youth leadership development, research in the five constructs named in this model could lead to greater understanding of how to train and prepare practitioners for roles in youth organizations. However, these constructs can also be used as a reflective tool to provide insight into current practice. Following are a few sample empowering practices for each of the five constructs. Practitioners can use these statements to reflect on current practice to determine areas of improvement to foster empowerment.

### Fostering Self Efficacy

1. How do I help members celebrate their successes to build their efficacy?
2. Do I share examples of others' accomplishments to build a member's belief in their own capabilities?
3. How do I build members' confidence by ensuring they have small successes along the way?

### Setting a Context for Action

1. Do I give meaning to responsibilities by revealing how they fit into the mission of the organization?
2. How do I help members understand how responsibilities help us to reach the goals of the chapter?
3. Do I describe how responsibilities are important to the success of the chapter?

### Structuring the Task

1. Do I set clear timelines for the responsibilities?
2. Do I make sure members understand the timeline before taking on responsibilities?
3. Do I outline the major steps necessary to completing responsibilities?

### Creating a Sense of Ownership

1. Do I increase ownership by pushing responsibilities back to members when they try to defer the responsibilities to me?
2. Do I resist taking back responsibilities once they are delegated to members?
3. Do I rely on members to make their own decision about how the work gets done?

### Coaching for Performance

1. Do I provide constructive feedback to members as they carry out responsibilities?
2. How do I actively support members as they carry out their responsibilities?
3. Do I have conversations with members to evaluate their performance?

As practitioners in the field of youth development, it is important to become cognizant of our own practices and determine if they foster or inhibit empowerment in young people. Tending to these practices could lead to more intentional youth development.

## References

Benson, P. L. (1997). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*(Suppl. 1), 11-20.
- Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1988). The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice. *The Academy of Management Review, 13*(3), 471-482.
- Fletcher, J. K., & Kaufer, K. (2003). Shared leadership: Paradox and possibility. In C. L. Pearce & J. A. Conger (Eds.), *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership* (pp. 21-47). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jones, K. R., & Perkins, D. F. (2005). Youth-adult partnerships. In C. B. Fisher & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Applied developmental science: An encyclopedia of research, policies, and programs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults [Electronic version]. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 57-74.
- Lofquist, W. A. (1989). The spectrum of attitudes: Building a theory of youth development. *New Designs for Youth Development, 9*, 3-6.
- Norman, J. (2001). Building effective youth-adult partnerships. *Transitions, 14*(1), 10-12.
- Panitz, T. (1996). *A definition of collaborative vs. cooperative learning*. Retrieved October 22, 2005, from: <http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/collab.learning/panitz2.html>
- Spreitzer, G. M. (1995). Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Dimensions, measurement, and validation. *The Academy of Management Journal, 38*(5), 1442-1465.
- Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: An "interpretive" model of intrinsic task motivation. *The Academy of Management Review, 15*(4), 666-681.
- Yukl, G. A. (2006). *Leadership in organizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D., & Lorens, M. B. (2001). Bringing young people to the table: Effects on adults and youth organizations. *CYD Journal, 2*(2), 20-27.
- Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., & MacNeil, C. (2007). *Youth-adult partnerships in community decision making: What does it take to engage adults in the practice..* Retrieved January 17, 2008, from: [http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/pv\\_obj\\_cache/pv\\_obj\\_id\\_7288E7A46D229B69CD2D2FB450CEF16BEE322600](http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_7288E7A46D229B69CD2D2FB450CEF16BEE322600)
- 
- Copyright* © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, [joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).
- If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#).