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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Let Go and Let Them Lead—Empowering Youth to Lead a Regional Event

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Abstract: "Empowerment" is the buzzword in youth development today. As youth development professionals, are we truly allowing our youth to be equal partners? Do we provide them the opportunities to practice and gain mastery of the leadership skills we teach them? This article presents a proven model that has successfully empowered youth to lead a leadership event for their peers. The Eastern Oregon Youth Council Training was the first of its kind in Oregon and has been successfully modeling a true youth-adult partnership for over 25 years.

Introduction

"Empowering Youth," through a youth-adult partnership, is the buzzword in youth development today. Youth organizations like 4-H have historically claimed to foster an environment of empowerment for youth. The aim of empowerment is to build the efficacy and motivation in the individual to be drawn to and complete the task. Empowerment is not simply power and delegating (Anderson, 2009). Empowerment is about sharing decision making and authority among individuals in the group; however, studies indicate sharing leadership is simply not enough (Yukl, 2006). If the tasks are meaningless or are assigned without proper resources and training, individuals may continue to feel powerless (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

It is common to see youth members on community planning councils, but they are often just "token" members, not truly accepted by adults as equal members of the group (Rennekamp, 1993). The Eastern Oregon Leadership Retreat (EOLR)-Youth Council Training is a proven model that truly gives youth the authority to plan, teach, and lead a leadership event for their peers. Through a variety of teaching methods, adults instruct, model, then share leadership roles with youth council members. This empowers youth with feelings of confidence and ownership, and increases leadership skills. Youth council members come to recognize the power they have in determining the success of the leadership event they will plan for their

peers.

Program Overview

Since 1985, the Eastern Oregon Leadership Retreat (EOLR)-Youth Council Training program has provided a select group of youth with the opportunity to learn and practice leadership skills by planning and implementing a youth leadership event for their peers. The EOLR Youth Council Training is a 2-day event for 8th-12th grade youth selected as Youth Council members. Twelve youth, representing six counties in eastern Oregon, make up the council. The leadership event the council plans takes place over 3 days and draws over 80 teens from throughout eastern Oregon region.

Adults (4-H agents) serve as coaches by helping the council identify leadership roles and responsibilities needed to implement a leadership event. Specific leadership skills are taught to the youth so they can be successful in teaching a class to peers and in hosting the ultimate event. With adults acting as "coaches" instead of "dictators," the adults and youth bond to form a true youth-adult partnership. This creates a sense of empowerment in the youth. Council members demonstrate increased self-confidence and the ability to complete their tasks independently and in timely manner. Youth gain an appreciation for their individual role in the overall planning process. A strong sense of ownership and pride in the event develops, leaving youth with the feeling of truly being in charge.

Program Design and Delivery

The Youth Council Training begins by adults explaining the purpose and goals of the training program as well as the regional leadership event the youth will plan and conduct. At the beginning of the training, agents teach council members skills in organizing and teaching a leadership class, speaking in a microphone, and how to effectively lead group activities. Agents then step back and let the council members take over. Youth spend the rest of the training session planning the 3-day leadership event they will conduct for their peers.

The delivery methods used by both agents and youth include role-play, group discussion, teambuilding activities, lecture, planning outlines, and presentations. During the training, youth are in small groups, brainstorming ideas on an event theme, logo, menus, bonding/social activities, and committee responsibilities. After sharing their ideas, members vote to finalize decisions. Public speaking skills are practiced when youth report in front of the group. A planning workbook distributed to each youth provides a template for developing job descriptions and types of committees and duties, and serves as a guideline for teaching a leadership class. Using these tools, Youth Council members develop task lists and timelines, and create their own leadership lessons to teach to peers.

During planning sessions, every youth has a lead role. Each youth has a turn in sharing his or her ideas and leading a group activity. Teams of two youth select a leadership topic that they will teach to their peers at the regional event. The teaching teams plan their class and must equally share teaching tasks.

On the last day, youth and adults share what worked well and what needs improvement for the council members to be successful implementing the actual leadership event. After the training session, youth continue to communicate and finalize plans for the actual 3-day leadership event that is held a few months later. The ongoing communication and interaction is led by youth chairmen for each committee. Once the regional leadership event begins, council members are in charge and run it. Agents act in an advisory capacity only. This is the ultimate opportunity for youth to apply the skills acquired during the initial council training.

Best Practice

Anderson & Sandmann (2009) identified 5 key practices that youth practitioners can implement to create an environment that fosters empowerment in youth. The EOLR Youth Council Training program utilizes these 5 key practices. The table below (Table 1) correlates the key practice elements to youth council member statements. Data was collected through IRB evaluations completed by council members from 2002 through 2008.

Table 1.
Youth Council Statements Correlating to Key Practice Elements

Key Practice	Statements from Youth Council Members
Fostering self-confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having the chance to decide which leadership role I wanted to do • working together in a group to problem-solve and plan • the positive attitude of the adults gave me confidence
Understanding my responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the workbook gave me ideas and organized my responsibilities
Setting boundaries for decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being a committee chair gave me responsibility over my peers group discussion defined our committee responsibilities • working in groups allowed me to come up with new ideas
Understanding they are in charge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had the opportunity to design my class and decide on the event theme • I like leading songs and teambuilding activities
Adults coaching for performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the attitude of the adults gave me confidence to lead • when adults participated it contributed to trust and bonding

Conclusion

As adults, it is difficult to let youth take charge. Even when we plan for them to help with decision making and planning efforts, we often disregard their input if they differ from our own preferences. If we are to raise a society of leaders who are confident and trained in positive leadership skills and can effectively lead organizations, we must empower our youth with opportunities that truly build their competence. Youth

taking on leadership roles and interacting with adults has shown success in establishing positive youth-adult relationships (Jones & Perkins, 2005), which builds a stronger society for all. A challenge goes out to fellow youth development professionals. Give thoughtful consideration to program planning. Provide youth with opportunities to truly practice and gain mastery of the skills our youth organizations can provide.

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