

Practice What We Preach: Supervisory Practice for Youth Worker Professional Development

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Abstract

As a practitioner-researcher in the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship and a youth program supervisor, I have seen that adults who work directly with youth need to be partners in their own development just as they partner with young people to encourage their development. A workplace that partners in developing its youth workers actively encourages three things: authentic relationships, emotional safety, and reflective learning. In this article I share how I began exploring this topic and its implications for organizations. Bringing authentic relationships, safety, and reflective learning into the workplace provides a model of effective professional development of front-line youth workers.

Introduction

Have you ever lain awake at night contemplating quitting youth work because you didn't feel valued by your organization? Do you ever feel more connected with the young people than with colleagues in your field? Ever wonder what might change if workplace leaders showed that they value your development as much as they expect you to value the development of youth? If so, you realize that how an organization's leaders treat the people doing direct service has a significant impact on the development of youth workers as professionals in the field.

As a practitioner-researcher in the Northstar Youth Worker Fellowship and a youth program supervisor, I have seen that adults who work directly with youth need to be partners in their own development just as they partner with young people to encourage their development. A workplace that partners in developing its youth workers actively encourages three things: authentic relationships, emotional safety, and reflective learning.

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In this article I share how I began exploring this topic and its implications for organizations. Bringing authentic relationships, safety, and reflective learning into the workplace provides a model of effective professional development of front-line youth workers.

How I began

In 2009, after five years of working in after-school programs, I had finally graduated from college, and I was asked to apply for my dream job. I became full-time coordinator of a K-8 academics-focused after-school program at a settlement house serving low-income immigrant and refugee families, mostly from East Africa. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to give back what had driven me toward professional out-of-school-time (OST) youth work: skillful supervision and professional development.

As I began the job, I realized the level of challenges I faced. My team consisted of college volunteers and work-study students. My program was filled to the max with youth, many of whom needed one-on-one support. As a direct-service worker with experience measuring quality, I knew that the way to overcome these challenges was to raise the quality of the team and thereby raise the quality of the program.

I found support for this task in the Northstar Youth Worker Fellowship, where, with peers, I conducted action research on a specific question and worked through my learning in a caring professional community. This community helped me focus my research question from an exasperated "How am I supposed to run a youth program with no youth workers?" to a more approachable question, "If I support the young adults who are my staff in the ways I support youth, would it inspire and support them to behave as professionals?"

Research by the David P Weikart Center, creators of the Youth Program Quality Assessment Tool, also asserts that the direct-service supervisor holds the most critical role in the facilitation and execution of quality improvement initiatives, and can increase quality in direct service through "tightly coupling" management styles with quality instructional methods (Smith et al., 2012). For four years, I attempted to raise quality in the direct-service workers by providing a few formal trainings, exposing them to networking events, and, most of all, by using parallel practice supervision. As I tried these tactics, I gathered data through observations, interviews, informal conversations, surveys, and reflections from youth workers. From this data and numerous secondary sources, I have concluded that, yes, this values-based approach to supervision, which paralleled the approach of our direct practice, was effective in giving the

youth workers the sense that they and their professional development were valuable to the organization.

Implications for organizations

Supervising in ways that improved relationships, increased safety, and encouraged reflection took a large investment of time and energy at the outset. I relied on support from my professional community and my director. I struggled to balance my time between my other agency responsibilities and this heavy investment in creating a culture of experiential professional development for my team. Dana Fusco (2012), in *A Conversation with Ellen Gannett*, quotes the head of the National Institute on Out of School Time (NIOST) as saying,

We will never get out of this cycle of mediocrity and poor quality if we don't address the issue [of professional development]. It's not either/or. We have to make sure that at the same time we are focused on quality programming, we are also focused on quality staff. It is part of the same solution, and investments need to be targeted as such.

I found myself challenged in a new way as a supervisor. I felt as though the rest of the agency didn't understand how important it was for me to spend time in supervision in order for this program to operate successfully at a high level of quality. I hope this article will support other direct-service supervisors to advocate for devoting a large portion of their time to supervision and professional development.

We are not alone in knowing that this approach works. Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, and Craig (2010) assert that "the importance of supervisors modeling with staff the kinds of interactions and behaviors they want staff to in turn demonstrate with youth" is a key principle underlying the commitment to coupling management practices with quality-building initiatives designed to train and retain quality staff (p.5).

This type of change can be introduced at all levels in youth-serving nonprofits to build a culture of professional development that culminates in preparing people for agency leadership. 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

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time to recognize and acknowledge the strengths in those around you, regardless of their role in the organization (p.22).

As I saw my team improve, I found myself increasingly asserting to my superiors the importance of this culture-building supervision, an assertion that was reinforced by my observations of how much quality was increasing. Still, I frequently felt overwhelmed by doubt in my own ability to fulfill agency obligations, primarily because the culture of professional development I was working so hard to build seemed not to be understood, valued, or practiced in the larger agency.

Direct-service youth workers I interviewed from other agencies reported feeling more accountable to program youth than to program leaders who do not show they value them. Similarly, I felt that I was living the agency's mission by staying true to values-based leadership over some other hierarchical business expectations that were placed on me. This conundrum, which made me feel quite uncomfortable for a long time, must be addressed by agency leaders in order to retain quality youth development workers and supervisors, who may one day continue on to agency leadership positions.

Beyond my own experience, others have noted the need for leaders who are equipped to succeed baby boomers as they retire. Kunreuther and Corvington (2007) describe this transition as a crisis. Conversations about how values-based workplaces can strengthen the impact of our youth-serving nonprofits must not be limited to youth program teams. "If an existing organization cannot become flexible enough to change with the generations, dynamic, younger leaders will bypass it to start their own, where they can pursue their passions for making a community impact in their own ways" (Wolfred, 2008, p 17). Shifting the larger organizational culture to support positive development and learning will retain workers and prepare them for nonprofit leadership in an uncertain future.

Building safe, relational, and reflective structures within my supervision and staffing plans facilitated this type of positive leadership development. Even better, once the structures were in place, a culture of learning developed among leaders in the team. They embodied the process, allowing my role to increase in scope and proving that this investment in workplace culture can have exponential returns. The investments and their return are outlined in the following sections: authentic relationships, emotional safety, and reflective learning.

Authentic Relationships

"It's easier to do your job well when you have the relationships surrounding you that will help you through it." (B. Z., Youth Worker, 2012).

Just as I had done with youth in my previous years of direct service, I began the process of positive development of the volunteers and work-study students by attempting to build authentic relationships with them. This was made very difficult by the drop-in culture of volunteerism that had developed in this program over the years. We were never certain how many adults would be on hand from one day to the next. "I don't know if they're volunteers or what" (T. G., Youth Worker, 2009). There was no master list of names, contact numbers, schedules, or any other identifying information about who was working in this after-school program.

Raising quality began with simply making it clear that all volunteers reported to me, having meetings one-on-one with each of them, getting identifying information about them, and clarifying their roles in the program. I first reached out to the coordinators of the 8 different programs that were sending volunteers and work-study students to us. I built relationships with these coordinators through multiple face-to-face meetings and ongoing emails so I could pinpoint the requirements of each volunteer or work-study program. The coordinators of these partner programs, understanding our need for skilled staff, supported my efforts to hold student workers and volunteers accountable, and were grateful for our commitment to developing their skills.

With the coordinators' help, I revamped the volunteer intake forms and process to specify information relevant to their particular program requirements, and communicate our shared high expectation for volunteers at the site. On first meeting, I would ask how much work-study money they were awarded for the semester and their commitments to activities and classes. I would get to know their interest and experience in working with youth and share the basics of our program. This screening allowed me to select only those candidates who could commit to at least two 2-hour shifts per week throughout the entire semester without running out of funds or hitting conflicts with other responsibilities, and those with sincere interest in youth work.

Photos of all volunteers and workers were posted outside the youth room with their names and a master schedule so youth and families, as well as other volunteers and workers, could hold

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people accountable to their schedules. Both the partner coordinators and I made it clear that in order to get credit or payment for their time with us, workers had to sign in and out of their shifts in my office. This requirement created better accountability and gave me opportunities to continue building relationships.

While I had always had an “open-door policy” in my office, the office itself was no larger than a janitor closet—a problem faced by many after-school program coordinators. After much budget calculating, I convinced our director to consolidate our three small and scattered youth program supply and office rooms into one larger shared space with storage. The other two spaces could be rented to community groups to offset costs. This shared space opened great opportunities for relationship building; staff and volunteers now had a gathering space with a conference table and white board, as well as a shared area where they could gather supplies, prepare, and sign in and out for the day. One staff member in 2012 reported that the most helpful aspects of fostering open and clear communication with his supervisor and coworkers was “the big office” and “being okay with admitting mistakes.”

All volunteers and workers attended team meetings, which included food, one Friday evening a month. Much of what was accomplished in those meetings will be discussed in the section on reflection. However, many workers told me that the relationship building at these meetings, especially those we held off site, was a key aspect of the structure that positively affected their pride, ownership, communication, and professional development. Quarterly one-on-one check-in meetings with these workers included conversations about school, future plans, and other areas of life that might be challenging or happy for them. One worker credited these conversations with encouraging her pride, ownership, and professional development in the program. “It does make us feel good and comfortable to be open knowing you show some care about our lives and what we are doing, not just at work but also at school” (Y. S., Youth Worker, 2012).

Through this structure—the initial half-hour meeting, daily face time in shared space, public identification of all workers, quarterly one-on-one check-ins, and monthly opportunities to engage with the whole team in a relaxed atmosphere—the team began to solidify as a group. Leaders began to emerge. Individuals held each other accountable, provided support, and built the foundation of a positive development culture.

Safety

"I always feel like I can talk to [my supervisor] about any issues that arise. She makes her office feel like a safe and welcoming place to be that reflects in the rest of the center" (L.B., Youth Worker, 2013). For this article, the idea of "safety" includes having a sense of personal power and control, not being afraid to try new things and address mistakes, feeling cared for by your coworkers and supervisor, and feeling a sense of emotional safety in the physical space. Of course building relationships builds safety in a group. However, the safety that was needed to raise the quality of the workers from a group of friendly college students who knew each other's names to a team of devoted professionals required additional interventions. All emotional safety improvements relied heavily on maintaining a positive, strengths-based approach. Individuals in the first year were given small self-care gifts and hand-written cards at the beginning and end of the sessions to show they were valued. The notes were positive feedback about specific observations of their work with youth that exemplified quality. One worker described her favorite day at the center as the one where they were recognized with personalized awards and gratitude for their work. This encouraging and strengths-based approach made all other interventions possible.

Research on the millennial generation at work shows that transparency is of high value to this group (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). I therefore set up a large three-month calendar in the shared office to allow all workers to see what was coming and communicate any concerns in advance. Everyone had access to the schedules of all the programs and staff, along with contact information so all workers could connect with others if they needed shift coverage or additional support. At the beginning of the year, we communicated our youth outcomes and how we measured them to the direct-service workers and volunteers. Ongoing check-ins about progress and interventions that were working or not working ensured that everyone knew what was expected of them and by when.

Many of the inexperienced volunteers and staff reported in check-in meetings that they felt the program needed a "rule book." They shared that they felt unsafe making decisions about kids' behavior without explicit written rules. Though the center of course posted some basic rules, these new youth workers wanted to feel supported in every decision they made. A large part of working with youth in OST is making many, many decisions from moment to moment that we hope will improve the lives of youth while staying within the boundaries of quality practice.

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When these new workers were asked what type of rules they'd like to see, they overwhelmingly started each rule with "NO...." They frequently said that they wanted to "make them listen."

Instead creating a rule book filled with all the things kids should not do in order to make the new youth workers feel safe, I dedicated a monthly meeting to developing a set of core values unique to the program. These core values formed the basis for youth workers' decisions. The team members knew that they would be supported if they were able to frame a behavior in terms of how it was or was not supportive of our core values. I ordered rubber band bracelets with a different color for each value; staff used these bracelets as rewards for youth who exhibited these positive values in their behavior. We also consistently used and discussed our reflective time-out consequence so all direct-service staff felt comfortable reflecting on behavior and values with the kids. These steps offered staff members a sense of safety and security in decision making so they felt empowered to take the lead in groups of youth.

Turnover of staff is one of the largest problems facing quality improvement efforts in OST youth programs. A regular topic of discussion in one-on-one meetings was whether or not a reliable worker planned to return the following year and why. By 2012, those who had been with the program since 2009 were beginning to graduate college; they were asking for job security, higher pay, more hours, and benefits. Others who had built skills in our program and were ready for additional leadership opportunities also needed additional hours beyond what their work-study program allowed. Because this process and the partnership with America Reads had been so successful in training and retaining youth workers over multiple years at no cost for wages, I chose to reallocate funds to these workers rather than hiring one AmeriCorps worker for one year of service, as I had originally planned. As a result, three workers who had been staffing the program for years were paid both by America Reads *and* by our program, thereby ensuring that skilled direct-service youth workers were leading activities on a daily basis. "Being here every day helps a lot toward feeling open to others" (R. S., Youth Worker, 2012).

Eventually, it became a priority to provide living wages and benefits to our direct-service youth workers who had graduated college and desired to continue working with our program. With the support of the agency director, we budgeted for and employed five benefit-eligible youth development educator/advocates at 80% of full-time. This step provided workers with a sense of financial, physical, and emotional safety and increased their feelings of being valued not only within the program but by the agency and field at large.

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As youth workers, we know that to try new things and admit our mistakes is part of learning. This progress requires a sense of safety. Being transparent and using a positive, strengths-based approach built trust for new youth workers to express feeling emotionally unsafe when providing behavioral guidance. Using a group process to address these feelings that aligned their values with the values of quality programming built a sense of belonging. Youth workers felt more secure in their decision-making, empowering them to step up into leadership roles in groups, and when the rung of a full time job was built, to climb the youth worker career ladder after college. The experience of feeling safe in the workplace taught these workers how important it is to help youth feel safe in order to learn.

Reflective learning

Perhaps the most crucial piece of professional development comes from learning to learn. Once the team felt safe enough to admit struggles and try new things, building reflective practice into the workday and providing leadership learning opportunities yielded bountiful results in the form of committed and inspired relational youth practice on the ground.

In order to build reflection into their practice, workers were scheduled to arrive 30 minutes before the program started so they could check in about the day and prepare. "Having a few minutes to check in during the meeting time before programming has been really helpful for me; just to get a feel for how we want the day to be and what might be different" (C. P., Youth Worker, 2013). Another 30 minutes of dedicated reflection time was added to the end of their shifts so staff could decompress in the shared office space, wrap up documentation, or put away supplies while chatting about the day. As their supervisor, I made a point to be present during these times so I could facilitate dialogue about strengths and weaknesses of the day's programming and ask questions about the team's ideas for improvement.

I really like the way Angel stops whatever it is she is doing in order to talk to you when you come to her. She asks a lot of questions, which shows how much she wants to understand (& resolve) any issues that arise. (L. B., Youth Worker, 2012)

As a seasoned youth worker who has worked in very successful programs in the past, I could easily have told these youth workers how to do things and held them to my decisions. However, being a seasoned youth worker also taught me that people tend to learn best when given some control over their learning with opportunities to reflect on their decisions. As we collectively

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created a values-based behavior improvement plan with the kids, we brought other program decisions to the staff for discussion.

Once they were comfortable assigning appropriate consequences for behavior issues, workers with longer tenure or better skills were given identifiable lead roles for various group times and areas; assignments were rotated to give more workers leadership opportunities. When problems were discussed, the leads during that time in that space were asked their opinion and given the opportunity to try a new approach with the support of the team and myself. "It felt good to be trusted with the supervision of groups, and also let me have an opportunity to build stronger relationships with the girls that participate in them" (B. Z., Youth Worker, 2012).

Frequently, staff members had creative ideas. They felt supported to try something new, but many times their experiments didn't turn out as planned. I observed new ideas in action and reflected with workers afterward. This way, they came to their own conclusions through experiential learning. This process not only reinforced the team's sense of being trusted, valued, listened to, and cared for, but also gave them a format to use with youth to teach creative problem solving through experiential learning partnerships. "I really dig working here. I've had few jobs that allow me to have a say in how the program will work" (T. G., Youth Worker, 2010).

Intentionally building reflection time and leadership-learning opportunities into staffing structures created a culture of partnership in creative problem-solving that valued ongoing improvement and learning. New volunteers, as well as new youth and families, were efficiently on-boarded into this positive developmental culture, supported across all programs by the youth workers. Not only were youth outcomes now measured and understood by direct-service staff, they were being achieved. In large part through creative, relational interventions they developed within this culture of safe reflective learning.

Conclusion

In 2009, when our college student youth workers were interviewed, they frequently expressed proximity to school and the casual, drop-in environment as primary reasons for choosing our site. By 2013, as a result of its good reputation, our program was partnered with the Youth Studies department at the University of Minnesota and served as a site for multiple volunteers and interns who valued the program for its quality.

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Supervisors of direct-service workers don't have control over entire organizations. Still, they can use their experience and knowledge of quality youth development to intentionally create safe, relational, and reflective learning environments to improve the skills and motivation of those youth workers, whoever they may be. The adults who thrive within this shared, supportive learning environment can make each moment meaningful for youth.

In this program, modeling the desired behaviors, attitudes, and values of quality youth programs created a sense of unity, shared values, and belonging, raising the quality of programming we created with youth and families.

As committed youth development professionals who know what quality youth work looks like, we have a responsibility to partner with adults who desire to contribute. They need to know from experience what a thriving developmental environment feels like. The most effective way to do this is to create a relational, safe, and reflective learning environment within the workplace to consistently reinforce the value of healthy development for adults as well as youth.

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