

"Effective Youth/Adult Partnerships: What It Takes!"

Six Skills and Personal Attributes that Lead to Effective Youth/Adult Partnerships

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The Erie County 4-H Youth Voices Project has as its primary goal the development of youth community action groups throughout Erie County and New York State. The purpose of the project is to introduce young people to service learning, Internet technology, community asset mapping and youth civic participation for the sole purpose of empowering youth to bringing about positive change within their own lives as well as in their community. This project has allowed young people to use their voice to influence decision makers, as well as provided them with the opportunity to gain an understanding of the democratic process. Based on the Erie County Youth Voices Project, we have found that these Six Skills and Personal Attributes lead to Effective Youth/Adult Partnerships. The method used to gather this information/data was through: surveys, personal interviews with participants, personal impact statements from participants, videotape analysis, and on site project observation...

- **Mutual respect between youth/adults:** mutual respect enables youth to gain a sense of belonging, ownership, and a sense of self-worth. Mutual respect leads to positive relationships between youth/adults, and helps create an environment in which youth/adults are able to establish and carry out a common mission and vision for their communities. Through mutual respect adults are able to see young people as assets and positive contributors to organizations and communities.
- **Patience for one another:** Patience is a key attribute in getting positive results when youth/adults take on large-scale community development projects. Patience is the glue that holds the partnership between youth/adults together. If it were not for patience when undertaking such intricate and detailed projects, it is very likely these two groups would get frustrated with one another and not be able to successfully complete the task.
- **Shared Leadership between youth/adults:** Shared leadership has been a central issue in the youth development field. Researchers have identified shared leadership as a vehicle to empower and increase youth participation in planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation of programs. The 4-H Youth Voices Project has adopted the concept of shared leadership and has observed its benefits to youth, adults and organizations. We have found that youth who participate in shared leadership have had major behavioral changes. These behavioral changers have been prevalent in the areas of: increased academic achievement, decreases in risky behaviors and community vandalism, as well as enhanced self-esteem. The benefits to organization/programs have been in the areas of: increased youth participation, organizational/program creativity, innovation, increased levels of energy, as well as the opportunity for adults to gain mastery through working collaboratively with youth.

- **Open communication:** Communication is definitely a key when having youth/adults effectively work together in achieving a set goal. We have found through practical application in the 4-H Youth Voices Project that when youth and adults openly communicate: conflicts are more easily resolved, capacity is increased and the establishment of an open forum for youth voice to be heard is developed. Active listening skills are vital when establishing open communication between youth/adults. Youth in our program have stated that when adults take the time and listen to them, it makes them feel like the adults care about their well-being. This also leads to positive relationships being developed between youth and adults where the two can share information with each other and gain new knowledge through process.
- **Trust in one another:** Trust is the foundation that all relationships must be built upon, and when that trust has been established, youth and adults are empowered to make the impossible possible. Adults become more apt to delegate as well as share power with young people. We have found through practical application in the 4-H Youth Voices Project that when youth and adults trust each other: emotional support systems are established, friendships are developed, mentoring opportunities surface, and long-term support systems are developed.
- **Commitment and dedication to personal growth:** In the 4-H Youth Voices Project we have adopted the belief that leadership is a continual process. As we individually strive for excellence, it is imperative that commitment and dedication to personal growth become our motto. In order for both youth and adults to receive the rewards that come from effective youth and adult partnerships, each one must be open-minded and willing to learn from one another. This process of learning connects and teaches adults about the youth culture today, and provides adults with first-hand information on how to address the needs of America's youth. Adults are able to share their life experiences with the young people. This in turn, empowers them to become socially mobile in society through the sharing of the adults' failures and successes in life, so the young people do not have to experience some of those failures in their own lives. These statements reflect the 4-H Youth Voices Project and what it takes to have effective youth/adult partnerships: "It is not what we can put into youth and adults, but rather what we can pull out of them" and "Anything that is not growing is dying" (Anonymous).

Tips and Tricks for Working with Youth as Partners

Taken from "Younger Voices, Stronger Choices," Kansas City Promise Project. 1997

- Criticism doesn't necessarily equate to condescension.
- Adults may not be aware of how capable you are.
- Adults will feel responsible for the success or failure of the project.
- Adults are just as uncertain as youths; they have just learned to disguise it more.

Tips and Tricks for Working with Adults as Partners

- Don't expect more from the youths than you would from another adult.
- Make sure that you don't hold the young person to a stricter standard than the adults.
- Conversely, don't excuse all indiscretions just because you are dealing with a youth.
- Treat youths as individuals; don't make one youth represent all youths.
- Be careful about interrupting.
- Remember that your role in a partnership is not to parent.
- Don't move too fast.