

CASE STUDY 3.2

YOUNG WOMEN'S PROJECT

Being a woman is a beautiful thing. . . . I believe I can do anything I put my mind to, and [I believe] that change starts with us.

— BOARD MEMBER AND TEEN WOMEN IN ACTION TRAINER

Washington, D.C., is one of the hardest cities in which to organize. Traditional organizing begins by finding the person or agencies responsible for an issue and then designing a campaign to put pressure on them. But in D.C., says Nadia Moritz, executive director of the Young Women's Project, "No one is responsible for anything." So when the Young Women's Project became aware through young women living in group homes that the D.C. foster care system had no regulations for group homes, it took a different tack.

Project representatives did the traditional organizing work: They "harassed the mayor's office for months," according to Moritz. But they also collected models of effective systems elsewhere to get an idea of how the regulations should look. When the mayor's office finally hired a new staff member who was interested in working on the problem, the Young Women's Project was ready with a whole set of regulations, and that's what's in the system now, word-for-word. "It's what we're good at," Nadia says. "If you don't have time to do it, we'll do it for you!"

The Young Women's Project evolved out of that kind of creative response to frustrating issues. It started when a loose collection of women in their early to mid 20s acknowledged to each other that young women's needs were largely being ignored in Washington, D.C. They began to gather resources, do training for each other, and support each other. Soon they were organized as a volunteer collective. After three years together they saw how underresourced teen women were in the city and narrowed their focus to this issue. With the Center for Community Change as a nurturing fiscal sponsor, the Young Women's Project hired Nadia, a member of the original collective, as executive director. Since then, the organization has grown to 6 full-time staff members and as many as 30 part-time teen staff members during summer programs.

The Young Women's Project now works through two basic programs: the adult-led Teen Women in Action (TWA) program and the youth-led Teen Leadership Project (TLP). TWA is an intensive leadership-training program with a curriculum that covers advocacy, issues, and social justice. After a series of workshops, teen women work together on a project. At the start of the project, adult staff members take leadership roles. Then they gradually move out of those roles, becoming resource and process monitors while the young women handle the project. The result, says 17-year-old Olivia Ricks, is that young women learn "the most important skills a leader should have . . . patience, active listening, and speaking." Cheryl Ross, a Young Women's Project member and Teen Women in Action trainer, adds to that, "commitment and an open mind."

The TWA curriculum builds on itself; if it is to be effective, the young women must show up for at least 55 percent of the workshops. The Young Women's Project has discovered that one of the best ways to get young women in the door is to offer a stipend for their participation. Once they get in the door, only about 25 percent of the teens remain motivated by the stipend; the others appreciate it, they say, but stay for the program itself. Each teen who participates in 55 percent of the project receives \$2.50 per hour; those who participate in 75 percent or more get \$4.00.

That may seem like a lot of money for an organization to distribute, but Nadia says that the Young Women's Project was spending a similar amount on staff to recruit and retain young women. Instead of using the resources to pay staff, the project decided to apply the principle of wealth redistribution to the problem. It's been a significant learning experience for the Young Women's Project to find that switching to a stipend system had a major positive effect on recruitment and retention, respected the needs of young women who had to have jobs, yet ended up as a relatively insignificant part of the budget.

Meanwhile, the TLP is gaining strength. This project brings young women on staff for part-time school-year or summer positions where they become part of a team working on a specific issue. First, with help from adult staff who pass on what they know about training, the TLP teams create a peer workshop on their issue; then they take it out into the community, especially middle schools.

Over the three years of the process, the Young Women's Project has found that teen trainers are more effective than adults with middle-school audiences. They design and offer workshops on reproductive health, mental health, violence, and sexual harassment. Recently, a youth team has begun to deal with foster care issues. Once they have mastered an issue through the process of designing and facilitating the workshop, the TLP teams analyze the problem further to identify a critical area in which they'll organize.

The TLP has created a need for a new social change curriculum and a new decision-making structure that reflects the TLP's core value: Young women need to have the power to make decisions for everything they do. Each team has rotating leaders who meet once a month as a council to make decisions for the whole project. This new system has brought to light a lesson that's become important to the Young Women's Project: Giving people power—even members of the constituency—without the benefit of knowledge and responsibility puts the larger constituency at risk.

Early in the evolution of the TLP, staff noticed that team members were likely to make decisions that worked for them as individuals or for the members of the team but that affected other teens in ways that were not always positive. In response, staff members sought a way to shift decision-making values from an "individual mind to a community mind." They created a process that enables teams to start out with small, low-impact decisions and move on to larger ones.

Staff use a process borrowed from YLDI partner Youth United for Community Action called “red-flagging,” in which staff members never vote on organizational decisions and don’t interject their ideas unless a decision seems to be going against a core value articulated by the team. For example, when one team was about to decide to hire a person they liked a lot for a foster care project, even though they had clearly said they would only hire from within the foster care system and that teen had left the system, Nadia spoke up. “I was transparent about it,” she says. “I told them it sucked and that I felt uncomfortable saying it, but . . . I needed to red-flag. They were about to go against their own core value.” The young people on the team were gracious, Nadia said; though some had feelings about her intervention, they eventually understood that their decision needed to be about the community, rather than the person they liked or themselves.

The TLP has also taught the Young Women’s Project much about the impact of internalized oppression on peer leadership and decision making. When staff were pushing to redistribute wealth through the TWA, teens pushed back, saying that those teens who were not responsible enough should not have the money. The phased-in decision-making and red-flagging processes have served well to address that dynamic in decisions; teen leaders have an opportunity to gain the necessary perspective and knowledge to make just decisions based on core values, not on internalized ageism or other forms of oppression. Teen leaders begin to see themselves not as *above* those they lead but *for* them. Cheryl Ross says she has discovered that “Leadership means helping other people, not just [myself].” Judy Alvarez, an 18-year-old TLP staff member, writes that “Leadership is the power to help yourself and others; it doesn’t make a person idol-like, but full of humanity.”

The Young Women’s Project is, in Nadia’s words, “obsessed” with being “objective-driven.” After each workshop, both adult and youth teams immediately debrief using an evaluation tool that helps them determine which behaviors were affected by the workshop and gather evidence of the degree to which the objectives of the workshop were met. Using direct quotes or observations, teams report their progress at weekly meetings. Each team is expected to move forward on its objectives as demonstrated by workshop results and project results.

Progress in workshops is measured by recording behavior change. Organizing work is measured in small wins. A returned phone call is as much a win as a major public policy change. The point is to move forward—to see and measure the results of the work of the teams.

Seeing the impact of their work matters, and the young women learn to recognize it when they see it. When 17-year-old Tdisho Doe was part of a team working on reproductive health issues with young women in group homes, she “had a really good time,” but more than that, she says, “After our workshop we had some really good feedback. The kids at the group homes had some very positive things to say about us. And they invited us back.” A win, and Tdisho knows it: “When people invite you back, you know you have done your job right.”

The structure of the Young Women’s Project allows teens to gradually acquire the knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility they need for leadership. Judy Alvarez, who’s been with the Young Women’s Project since middle school, says that as a result of the structure, she feels “better prepared . . . to make better decisions about my health, my future, and overall my life.” Recently, she adds, she was in a meeting where she described herself as an activist. “It felt different, but nice,” she says, to understand herself as able to “better the lives of others in the community, as well as us.”

The Young Women’s Project is now determining how to grow. Each team has a constituency of members, but the membership has not yet been convened. Paid staff and the stipend participants in the TWA project currently do all the work. Volunteers are ready to become active, but the organization hasn’t yet designed the right structure for their involvement. Visions for the future include nurturing spin-off groups, much as the Center for Community Change nurtured the Young Women’s Center.

That approach would make sense. Judy Alvarez believes the Young Women’s Project “gives many teens options in their lives, options to better their lives as well as the lives of others, like a cycle.” As that cycle continues, more teen women will become young adults who have more to say—and more power to say it.

Young Women’s Project Lessons Learned

- ★ A stipend system had a major impact on recruitment and retention, respected the needs of young women who had to have jobs, yet was relatively low cost.
- ★ Teen trainers are more effective than adult trainers with middle school audiences.
- ★ To give people power—even members of the constituency—without the benefit of knowledge and responsibility can put the larger constituency at risk.
- ★ Youth leaders can play a role in documenting and evaluating as well as implementing programs.
- ★ Recognize and track small successes. Encourage youth leaders to celebrate the results of their work.
- ★ Encourage youth leaders to take on increasing responsibility within the organization.

Five Questions to Ask About Organizational Leadership

1. How does your organization define youth, and which decisions do youth make in the life of the organization?
2. Do those decisions pertain to day-to-day operations, long-term planning, or both?
3. Who decided on this arrangement?
4. If both youth and adults work in the organization, is there a fair division of labor according to strengths and interests?
5. Are particular young people being asked to take on too many roles because they are skilled youth leaders?

Five Things to Consider When Working With Youth Staff

1. Youth staff who have gone through a particular process understand it better than those who have not had firsthand experience with the program.
2. Youth staff members can often relate well to youth who are participants.
Some staff members may need time to grow into their positions. Others may not be able to make the necessary adjustment.
3. Young staff members deserve effective coaching and supervision.
Supervisors should communicate their expectations clearly, invite staff to share ideas, conduct regular check-ins, and prioritize staff development.
4. Do not overburden the youngest staff members early on.
Youth staff members are often balancing multiple commitments that compete for their time and attention.
5. Program graduates joining the staff can have a positive effect on other members or participants, providing an additional incentive for them to succeed.

This list has been created by Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice.

Organizational Leadership

TEAMS AND ROLES

Overview

This is a short activity with one-on-one conversations as a basis for discussion about roles in teams.

Purpose

To define the characteristics of successful teams and team members and to foster team building among participants

Time Required

25 – 30 minutes

Materials

Flip chart, marker, copies of Handouts 1 & 2

In this short activity, one-on-one conversations are the basis for discussion about roles in teams. The purpose of the exercise is to define the characteristics of successful teams and team members and to foster team building among participants.

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
Step 1: Set the Context	5–10 min	Explain to the group, “Teams take many forms, such as groups working together, organized sports, or friends. Visualize a time when you were a member of a successful team. What was it? What did you do?”	
Step 2: Discussion	10 min	Say to the group, “Ask a partner the questions on the flip chart.” Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ When were you a member of a successful team? ★ How would you describe your role and contribution to the team? ★ What did others do? ★ How did you know the team was successful? ★ What did you learn as a member of this team? 	Flip chart with the questions at left written on it

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
Step 3: Reflection	10 min	<p>Record answers to questions (2) and (3).</p> <p>Give people Handouts 1 and 2 to check against and look back on.</p> <p>In this short activity, one-on-one conversations are the basis for discussion about roles in teams. The purpose of the exercise is to define the characteristics of successful teams and team members and to foster team building among participants.</p>	Copies of handouts at the end of this section