The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development is a Washington, D.C.-based organization engaged in programming, research, and policy development related to youth civic engagement. Its mission is to unleash the potential of youth, adults, organizations, and communities to engage together in creating a just and equitable society.

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Leading, learning, and unleashing potential: Youth leadership and civic engagement

Wendy Wheeler with Carolyn Edlebeck

LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT learning, listening, dreaming, and working together to unleash the potential of people's time, talent, and treasure for the common good. Too often, young people are excluded from community leadership roles, or relegated to age-segregated opportunities such as service learning and youth commissions. Young people are not only key stakeholders of a community, but they also represent a huge and often untapped reservoir of human energy, talent, and vision. Youth civic engagement works to unleash this potential to create individual, local, and society-level change.

Plenty of young people will not ever be found in traditional youth development organizations. These young people tend to be older, more challenged, and less likely to participate in group activities. As

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a result, many organizations write them off as alienated and impossible to reach.

Through the Innovation Center's work with organizations and communities across the United States and the world, we have found that these young people can find a place for themselves in organizations focused on civic activism. They are ready and willing to get involved when it means they can act on their own values and bring about changes that will affect their daily lives and the lives of people about whom they care.

Some civic activism organizations have become successful youth leadership programs. Working outside the realm of the traditional youth development world, they have invented creative ways of engaging young people, challenging them, and spurring them to achieve more than either the organization or the young person might have accomplished alone. Youth leadership programs that achieve great outcomes with youth employ the following four strategies for success:

- Build young people's connections to their own identity, culture, and community.
- Recognize that young people are assets to and experts about their own communities.
- Engage young people as community leaders on issues that matter to them.
- Create developmental opportunities that are sustained and supported over time.

A fifth strategy, to bring young people and adults together to work as equal partners, is pushing the understanding of not only youth leadership but also the fundamental concepts of community leadership development.

Build young people's connections to their own identity, culture, and community. In communities across the country and around the world, organizations are working with young people to help them understand who they are, where they came from, and what their heritage

offers them. Armed with this understanding, young people can appreciate their own identity, understand how historic injustices affect them, and use this knowledge to make positive changes.

These programs support critical thinking skills and instill in youth the values and attitudes that help them recognize and take action against injustice. Often these programs also create a positive, safe space for marginalized young people to explore their identity as a part of fostering positive development.

Recognize that young people are experts on their communities. Ask a young person about his or her community and you will hear perceptive insights and clear ideas about ways to improve it. Ask a few more questions and you may find deep passion for equity and the desire to make the world better.

Too frequently, adult-directed community service is the only pathway of civic engagement open to young people. While service is important, such programs often offer young people only passive roles in which outcomes are counted in terms of hours served, not in results achieved. When adults write off youth as inexperienced and view them simply as passive service providers, they miss out on some of the richest resources in their community. Just as important, young people miss out on a chance to make a real difference, build their own skills, and gain the confidence that comes when others value their work.

Engage young people as community leaders on issues that matter to them. Through civic engagement, young people can channel their frustration with injustice and devote energy to leadership for positive change. Driven by a desire to create change, they are ready and willing to take on leadership roles—and to develop the skills to do the job well. Organizations that capitalize on this interest can help young people develop new competence, confidence, and long-term goals through the experience, while at the same time gaining from the passion, creativity, and strengths that young people bring to their work.

Create developmental opportunities that are sustained and supported over time. Often youth leadership is perceived as a one-time opportunity for a young person to contribute. For many educators, the toughest part of youth leadership development is creating

structures for ongoing growth and pathways for the application of the learning in action. In order for youth to be successful, they need continued support in the form of consistent, structured activities that deepen knowledge, commitment, and opportunity for action.

Bring young people and adults together to work as equal partners. Young people's enthusiasm, energy, idealism, and capacity for innovation have served as a catalyst for social change across time and culture. Yet they cannot do it alone. True community leadership is inclusive. It requires crossing the boundaries of age, culture, background, and political beliefs. It demands openness to seeking the new—opportunities, potential, understanding—while building on the old—traditions, experience, history. It is about youth and adults learning and leading together as partners for community change.

Recent advancements in the understanding of leadership development have highlighted the importance of transformational relationships and change. This is an area that is only beginning to be understood in the field of youth leadership development. For those who approach leadership as an opportunity to engage in transformational relationships with others, the potential, results, and rewards of their work are unimaginable and boundless. Youth-adult partnerships are intentional relationships between youth and adults that afford each person equal access and opportunity to learn from the other, use their skills, dream together, and engage in community change and leadership.

In the work of the Innovation Center, youth-adult partnerships are a vehicle for contextualizing learning and youth civic engagement. Place-based experiential learning among youth and adults together allows both parties to build new knowledge, skills, and understanding of themselves and their community, and to engage an intergenerational lens to discover new perspectives and potential for action.

Youth-adult partnerships in collective learning and action promote leadership that is

Effective, responding to diverse community needs and building sustainability

Inspiring, as people realize they need each other and the opportunity to work in cross-generational partnerships; hope, new understandings, and previously unknown dreams and possibilities are all unleashed

Mutually dependent, where the "declaration of interdependence" among individual partners spreads to an understanding of the importance of crossing boundaries and contributing to the common good

Strong relationships between youth and adults create patterns of opportunity for idea sharing, dreaming, and decision making that, when infused into community change initiatives, can lead to powerful results.

Sustaining community change depends on engaging participants from diverse sectors of a community in the process. Too often, isolated pockets of a community—people already connected to one another by virtue of age, ethnicity, class, neighborhood, or religious affiliation—work collectively on behalf of the community to create positive change, only to finish their work with a job done, even a problem solved, but without sustainable community results. This happens in part because the process has not been inclusive from its inception, often because people do not know how. Inclusion requires skills, specific processes, and in many cases a paradigm shift.

Another shift requires embracing mutual learning. The paradigm of mutual learning requires two things: a deep commitment to it and an intentional application of it. The deep commitment includes genuine humility; no one can believe they have all the answers, or that the answers they have will apply to any given situation. It also demands attention to the variety of ways people learn, trusting informal learning as much as, if not more than, formal learning.

The *genuine partnership* paradigm replaces the notion, precious to many, of empowerment. "Usually," says Eric Jolly, president of the Minnesota Science Museum and chair of the Innovation Center's board of directors, "empowerment means I'll get behind you

and push you into the fray." Empowerment assumes just one party has something to give the other. Partnership assumes each can learn from the other and already possesses gifts to bring to the process.

Genuine partnership requires humility, mutuality, openness, and the willingness to share ownership for any new idea or understanding. Genuine partnership requires shared commitment and openness to a common vision of a just and equitable world. It requires trust and flexibility. It requires the willingness to try new things and learn from them, to consider them valuable, even if they fail.

Being able to implement these strategies requires a sophisticated approach to organizational development, a willingness to lead with values, and an in-depth understanding of community needs and desires. The results are well worth the effort.

Experiences of a young leader

Carolyn Edlebeck, seventeen, began her work with the Innovation Center in the sixth grade as a member of the Waupaca Healthy Community-Healthy Youth group. Here she relates her experience as a leader creating change within her community and herself.

To me, leadership means being open-minded, respectful, and receptive, eliciting ideas from others while being confident enough to speak your own mind. It means being optimistic and open to the contributions and gifts of everyone, helping them unleash their own potential while not being afraid to unleash your own. As a leader in community-change efforts in Waupaca, I have learned how to speak up and be involved, not as a token young person but as an experienced leader with something valuable to contribute to my community. This has not been an easy journey for me or for others in my community. For a long time, youth were thought of as problems, not as individuals with an important voice to share and gifts to help the community. But through dedication, true partner-

ship, and a commitment to our common vision, we have been able to really make a change in the way young people and adults think about the community, organizations, and themselves in Waupaca, with powerful results.

Before I started with the Healthy Community-Healthy Youth Program six years ago, we had no idea what youth and adults creating positive change would look like. Sharing power felt strange for both young people and adults. It required shifting our perceptions and stereotypes and relearning how to interact with one another and to recognize and appreciate the gifts each of us has, regardless of age. It was not easy, but the results were well worth the effort.

Through my experiences I have been able to learn a lot about leadership and how young people can play a crucial role as equal partners with adults in community change. Everyone, including adults, young people, and organizations, needs to make a conscious effort to reach out and really welcome and appreciate what everyone else brings to the table. In Waupaca we have made presentations to a number of local organizations to raise awareness of our work in the community and ensure that a diverse group participates. We make sure that not just the typical "high-achieving" young people are offered opportunities, but that everyone is invited to share their gifts and strengths with the group. In making presentations we do not just talk about youth engagement and youth-adult partnership; we model it, demonstrating how youth and adults can be equal partners in creating social change. We have been able to recruit so many other leaders of all ages simply by showing them what youth leadership and youth-adult partnership can accomplish.

I have also learned the importance of true respect in engaging young people as leaders. This often means meeting people where they are. In Waupaca, many meetings involving youth and adults are held in a designated room at the school, in the hours before school begins or after school lets out, respecting the requirements that govern a student's day and allowing young people to attend

and contribute. It also means providing people with the tools they need to participate fully, not expecting more or less of them because of their age or experience, but helping everyone reach a point where they can contribute. Contrary to what some people believe, young people do want to be involved in the things that matter to them; when given the opportunity to connect, there is so much we can and do accomplish.

In Waupaca our work has led to a lot of change, both in concrete events in the community and in how we look at and address community issues. With young people as equal partners and leaders with adults, we have been able to look critically and creatively at our community's needs and possibilities and together we have created a popular and cost-effective skate park, have encouraged private organizations such as the Lions to engage young people in their work, and perhaps most important, we have created a history and structure for youth and adults to work meaningfully together on committees and commissions that make real decisions about our community. When we started, young people were never consulted and rarely considered in decisions that affected us. Now young people serve on a number of organizational and city council boards as full voting members. We have just begun a three-year process to re-envision what we want for the community. I have been one of the leaders in this work, connecting with the school board, mayor, local priests, business leaders, and others to engage the full diversity of our community, and conducting surveys and leading sessions to help young people and adults celebrate our achievements and assess our reality, and helping us all work together to plan for the future of Waupaca.

New young people are involved in our community every day. Many do not realize they can be leaders and have never been asked to play that role, but when they are challenged to speak out about their community and when their voices are respected, they add amazing ideas, suggestions, and energy to our discussions. Young people have so much to add, and there is so much that a community can achieve when young people are involved, active, and leading the change.

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