

Enhancing Youth Leadership and Agency

A Toolkit for Successful Leadership Programs



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Table of Contents

3

Introduction and
Methodology

4

Best Practices for
Leadership Programs

9

Building Capacity To
Deliver Successful
Programs

15

Engaging And Supporting
Marginalized Youth

21

Conclusion

Introduction

This toolkit is designed to assist grassroots and nonprofit organizations in effectively delivering **youth leadership programs**. Our focus is specifically on designing programs that enable youth to cultivate **lasting leadership skills**, supporting them to contribute to **positive change in their communities** beyond the program's conclusion. To enhance comprehension of this intricate subject, we have organized the toolkit into three distinct sections.

The first section delves into the **characteristics that contribute to the success of leadership programs**, centering on both youth participants and program design. Moving to the second section, we explore **strategies for organizations to bolster their capacity** in effectively delivering these programs. Lastly, we address the crucial theme of **marginalized youth**, aiming to identify **best practices** for engagement and leadership development.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How should a youth leadership program be designed in order to make a lasting impact on the community?
2. How can organizations enhance their capacity to successfully deliver youth leadership programs?
3. How can JEDDI principles and values be implemented in youth leadership programs?

The repositories “Community Scholars Portal” and “Policy Commons”, made available by Simon Fraser University Library, were used to identify both academic and grey literature on the topic.

Different combinations of the words “NGO”, “non-profit organization”, “grassroots organization”, “capacity building”, “youth”, “youth programs”, “leadership programs”, “youth leadership”, “youth community development”, “evaluation”, “best practices”, “civics”, and “climate action” were used to search the literature database.

A total of 27 papers were ultimately retained for analysis. 15 of them were journal articles from academic sources, and 12 were reports published by nonprofit and grassroots organizations.

BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

1 YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Build Trusting Relationships among Cohort

Members: foster a safe, supportive environment that encourages **trust**, **solidarity**, and **cooperation**. Youth should develop a sense of **responsibility** towards each other and their communities, and truly practice **care**.

The group should develop a **collective identity** as social agents, rather than learning and practicing leadership individually.



BEST PRACTICES

How to Foster Positive Relationships among Cohort Members:

- Design activities that enable youth to collaborate within **horizontal power structures**, emphasizing shared decision-making
- Focus on **youth wellbeing** in every stage of the program, creating a safe space where youth feel comfortable expressing their needs
- Incorporate **storytelling** as a valuable activity, encouraging youth to share **personal narratives** connected to the program's addressed issue(s)
- Cultivate an environment where youth learn to **support** each other. Encourage them to inquire about their **peers' needs** for thriving and emphasize the **importance of caring** for others, fostering a focus beyond individual learning processes





Prioritize Participants' Voice, Put Youth at the Center: engage youth from the outset to establish a strong **sense of ownership** of the program. Given the evolving nature of youth needs, it is crucial to genuinely listen to them and seek continuous **feedback**. Acknowledge youth as **experts, partners**, and the driving force behind the program's agenda, allowing them to articulate the skills they deem essential to their learning experience.

BEST PRACTICES

How to Prioritize Participants' Voice:

- Always **let youth speak for themselves**, their lived experiences, and the issues they are facing
- Allow youth participants to **identify the skills** they wish to acquire and practice, either at the program's commencement or beforehand
- Even when collaborating with external partners, **let youth make decisions** regarding the projects they want to engage in, taking ownership of the entire process and its outcomes
- Create **designated spaces** at the conclusion of the program for youth to express their **reflections**, provide **feedback**, and share their **learning experiences**
- Establish a **diverse and inclusive Youth Advisory Council**, instrumental in shaping program content, activities, partner engagements, and desired outcomes



Create Alumni Networks to Keep Fostering Change After the Program: establish platforms for alumni to exchange **resources, connections,** and provide both professional and emotional **support.** These networks serve as avenues for youth to initiate **collaborative projects,** sustain their **learning** journeys, and progress in their **careers.** The creation of **social spaces,** whether virtual or physical, is crucial for maintaining youth connections and fostering ongoing leadership skill development.



BEST PRACTICES

What an Alumni Network Could Look Like:

- A platform facilitating **ongoing communication** between the organization and its alumni to gain insights into their evolving careers
- Platforms offering alumni **access to diverse resources** such as job postings, internships, volunteer opportunities, training sessions, workshops, and professional development events
- **Networking platforms** enabling alumni to connect with each other, fostering exchange of resources and mutual support
- Provision of **physical spaces** for alumni meetings and regular in-person alumni **networking events**
- A **hybrid approach** combining the above strategies

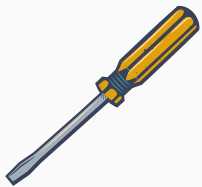


2 PROGRAMS CONTENT AND DESIGN

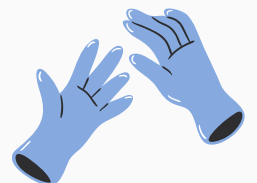
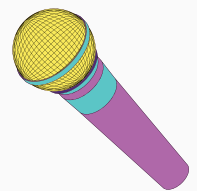
Include a Training Component: tailor modules to align with identified project specifics, ensuring a consistent focus on educating youth about **civic processes** within their communities. Incorporate training on **direct action** and **political mobilization** to empower youth to autonomously lead civic processes. **Prioritize youth input** in determining the skills and information they wish to acquire, placing their learning experience at the forefront.



WHAT SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR FOSTERING YOUTH LEADERSHIP?



- **Communication Skills:** translating complex information and ideas, public speaking, facilitation, advocacy
- **Social Skills:** community engagement, negotiation, managing multi-stakeholder relations, building organizational cultures
- **Hard Skills:** legal knowledge, design thinking, complex systems thinking, data analysis, accounting*



*depending on the program's topic, different hard skills could be explored

Hands-on Projects with Community Partners:

offer hands-on project opportunities with different **community partners**, allowing youth to choose projects aligned with their interests. Encourage youth to take **full ownership** of these projects and treat them as **equal partners**. To ensure that youth comprehend and experience the potential benefits of their contributions, keep them informed about **project outcomes** even beyond the program's conclusion.



BEST PRACTICES

What a Project with Community Partners Could Entail:

- Participation in **political campaigns** for the development of leadership and advocacy skills
- Collaborative efforts with **grassroots groups and local communities** to collectively identify and address pressing issues
- **Mentoring** groups of **students** for the implementation of civics and sustainability-related projects
- Strategic partnerships with specific **companies** to acquire and enhance **practical skills**
- Collaboration with **research institutions** and **nonprofit organizations** to acquire skills in **grant writing**



BUILDING CAPACITY TO DELIVER SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

Consider the “Big Picture”, Embrace “Theories of Change”: clearly articulate the organization’s **mission, vision, and goals**, effectively communicating them to staff, donors, and program participants. This facilitates the creation of a **“roadmap to success”**, outlining both short- and long-term **outcomes** the organization seeks and the **strategies** for achieving them. To foster **transformational change** and **collective impact**, it is crucial to articulate a **“theory of change”**.



WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

A Theory of Change (ToC) serves as a **comprehensive framework** illustrating how young people are currently creating change, strategies to further support these transformative dynamics, and the diverse roles that various stakeholders can play to contribute to this broader societal transformation. A ToC is a **conceptual model**, and each organization should draft a theory tailored to its mission, values, goals, and overall capacity to effectively bolster youth leadership, engagement, and participation in a rapidly evolving world. Frequent updates of a ToC are important and should be done collaboratively by staff members to ensure adaptability to a changing environment and priorities.

Build Partnerships to Create Community-wide Change: to address the complex, intersecting issues affecting youth, organizations should **foster collaboration** with partners rather than working in isolation. Collaborative efforts allow for the exchange of **expertise, ideas, and resources**, enhancing program sustainability through **shared funding**. **Transparency** is key in collaborations, and it is crucial to always **meet partners where they are**.



BEST PRACTICES

How to Build Long-Lasting Partnerships:

- If funding permits, conduct a "**social network analysis**" to gain insights into existing connections your organization has established and identify opportunities for further collaboration.
- Prior to collaborative program design, allocate time and resources to foster **meaningful relationships** with partners.
- Organize **dedicated meetings and events** to facilitate interactions among partners, fostering discussions on shared goals and the **collective impact** desired.
- **Meet partners where they are**, assisting them in areas where your organization has expertise, while seeking their support in areas where they possess greater competencies.





The Role of Staff: recruit youth with **unique skills** and **lived experiences**, **valuing and compensating** them for their hard work. Implement individualized **professional development plans** to foster staff growth within the organization. Provide **ongoing learning opportunities**, including trainings, workshops, courses, and conferences, ensuring that staff feel **supported** both emotionally and professionally.



BEST PRACTICES

How to Best Train Staff:

- Establish **formal training structures** aligned with the organization's objectives and theory of change to effectively train staff.
- Create an **internal training program** for employees to enhance their skills and knowledge.
- Allocate a **dedicated budget** to support staff participation in conferences, workshops, courses, and external training initiatives.
- Collaboratively develop a "**learning plan**" with employees, addressing their **professional growth expectations** within the organization.
- Ensure that young staff members possess the **necessary skills and preparation** for transitioning into various sectors or organizations.
- Acknowledge the benefits of **staff exchange**, especially as the organization expands and establishes multiple offices



The Importance of Program Evaluation:

evaluating the organization's programs and activities is essential for enhancing its **capacity** for **growth** and **learning**. This process should consistently align with the organization's main **goals** and **mission**, placing a strong emphasis on prioritizing youth. Although numerous evaluation tools are available, **qualitative methods** should be particularly valued when gauging the impact of programs.



MEASURING SUCCESS: THE CASE OF "GET HYPE PHILLY!"

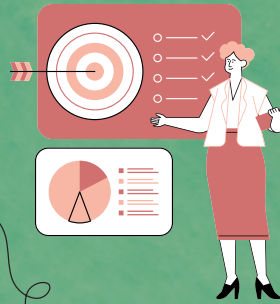
"Get HYPE Philly" is a grassroots collective comprised of ten non-profit partners in Philadelphia, united in their goal to empower young leaders in addressing urban challenges. Acknowledging the pivotal role of program evaluation in meeting the needs of young people, the organization consulted an **external partner** to create a tailored "Roadmap for Collective Success." This guide was adapted to the organization's needs through **consultations with staff and project partners**. Emphasizing **continuous learning**, program evaluation became an ongoing process, utilizing **interviews, focus groups, and surveys** with youth participants. The insights gained were consistently applied to shape new programs. **Results were transparently shared** with partners and donors to foster growth and **knowledge exchange**. "Get HYPE Philly" recognizes the investment of time and resources in evaluations and understands the need to adjust expectations based on **available resources and capacity**, highlighting a commitment to utilizing evaluations as a tool for improvement and collective success.

KEY PHASES FOR A SUCCESSFUL EVALUATION

Before Evaluation

Define Evaluation Design

- Determine an evaluation design and structure by addressing key questions such as, "How does the evaluation align with the organization's mission?" and "What specific goals do we aim to achieve through the evaluation?"
- Identify the stakeholders to be informed and consider the ultimate users of the evaluation resources



Assemble Evaluation Team

- Form an evaluation team comprising essential staff members, an external evaluator, and program participants

During Evaluation

Diversify Evaluation Methods

- Utilize not only quantitative methods but also qualitative evaluation methods like interviews

Contextual Adaptation

- If employing an external evaluator or existing evaluation resource, ensure the information is adapted to the local context and the organization's specific circumstances.

Tailor Communication

- Communicate in a language that resonates with the audience, crafting evaluation questions for youth participants and presenting findings in resources tailored for partners and donors



After Evaluation

Build Staff Capacity

- Enhance staff capacity to regularly employ collected data in evaluations for continuous organizational improvement. Include program managers in the "learning team."

Resource Sharing

- Share evaluation resources with other organizations to collectively build capacity and with donors to enhance opportunities for securing additional funding



The Challenge of Funding: funding stands out as a primary obstacle for organizations striving to enhance their capacity. Overcoming this hurdle requires establishing a **clear and robust financial management system**, coupled with **transparent communication** with donors. Additionally, forging **partnerships** emerges as a powerful approach to broaden funding opportunities. This involves not only expanding one's network of potential donors but also collaboratively sharing programs and initiatives with other organizations.



BEST PRACTICES

How to Overcome Funding Challenges:

- Designate a staff member to **actively research existing funding opportunities**
- Prioritize the enhancement of **financial management** and **fund-development skills** within the organization
- Foster **transparency** by openly communicating budget details, capacity constraints, and resource prioritization to staff members
- Forge **partnerships** with other organizations for **collaborative funding initiatives** and access to **new funding streams**
- Cultivate **relationships** with politicians and community advocates to enhance the organization's visibility and funding opportunities
- Utilize effective **partnerships**, especially for **expanding services and programs** into different geographic locations



ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING MARGINALIZED YOUTH

Be Intentional About Which Youth You Want To Engage: the commitment to involving a diverse range of youth in organizational programs extends beyond **initial engagement** and **recruitment efforts** —it encompasses **program design, outcomes, and evaluation**. Often, those who would benefit most from participation in the program are not the ones applying. **Actively involving** equity-deserving youth enriches the organization's understanding of addressed issues by incorporating **diverse perspectives**.



THREE KEY QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

The following questions serve as a foundational guide for organizations to engage in a critical reflection on their **recruitment strategies and practices**, as well as the inclusivity and **cultural sensitivity of their program content**:

1. Who should be part of the program, and which youth would genuinely derive the most benefit from it?
2. What factors hinder target participants from fully engaging, and how can these factors be clearly identified, evaluated, and ultimately addressed?
3. How can organizational strengths be utilized to overcome these barriers to participation?

BEST PRACTICES TO ENGAGE EQUITY-DESERVING YOUTH

Rely on Community Partners

Community partners who already work with equity-deserving youth should help drive the recruitment and selection process



Lower Barriers to Participation

- Cover transportation expenses to ensure accessibility
- Compensate for lost work hours by offsetting associated costs
- Offer online opportunities for those unable to travel
- Provide food and beverages

Select The Right Facilitators and Guest Speakers

In recruitment posters, present facilitators and guest speakers who align with the lived experiences and perspectives of target participants



Tailor Programs' Content to Target Participants

Who applies to the program depends on how they view their alignment with the program content. Critically reflect on how the issues and topics addressed by the program are described in recruitment material. How are you advertising the program?

Promote Positive Personal and Ethnic Identity:

Equity-deserving youth encounter additional **barriers** in having their voices heard. Effective leadership programs recognize and address these barriers by establishing a **safe and inclusive environment**. Here, youth are afforded the opportunity to cultivate a **positive personal and ethnic identity**, take **pride** in their **heritage** and **culture**, and utilize these strengths to tackle the intricate challenges they face.



HOW DO SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPACES LOOK LIKE?

Program participants and facilitators should collaborate to establish a **safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment**. Key elements integral to this environment include:

- Fostering a **family-like community** that encourages participants to build **supportive relationships** based on **empathy** and **care**
- Providing robust **support** for both successes and failures
- Encouraging and supporting **open dialogue** and **sharing** throughout the program
- Ensuring dedicated space for **emotional processing** and **sensitivity**
- Co-creating **shared experiences**



“A safe space is not just a space where you are welcome. It’s a space that was made for you”

BEST PRACTICES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE PERSONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Design Programs That Fit Marginalized Youth's Culture and Values

Teach skills that are culturally appropriate, specifically tailored to the history, culture, and socio-economic context of participants. This may encompass connections to the language, traditional ceremonies, historical knowledge, and the land, among other.



Encourage Youth to Embrace Their Identity

Encourage participants to forge a connection to their own culture, identity, and community by fostering an environment where youth embrace who they are, acknowledge their origins, and understand how their heritage influences both themselves and the solutions they can contribute.

Do Not Expect Youth Participants To Represent Their Community

Marginalized youth frequently experience the burden of representing their community, showcasing "minority excellence," and proving their value in terms of success and productivity. Youth participants should not feel this pressure.

Prepare Staff To Work With Marginalized Youth

Effectively managing diversity demands facilitation, communication, and negotiation skills, in addition to a profound understanding of the cultural and historical aspects of marginalized youth experiences. Staff responsible for these programs should undergo JEDDI trainings and attend relevant courses and workshops.

Hire And Collaborate With Marginalized Youth

Ensure that community partners, facilitators, and members of the Youth Advisory Council come from diverse backgrounds, allowing them to share experiences that can positively impact youth participants and serving as role models.



Adopt an Intersectional Lens: Recognize and openly discuss the **interconnected nature** of topics addressed in programs, acknowledging the **intersectionality** of youth participants' identities. Embrace "**systemic thinking**" and an **intersectional lens** to appreciate the nuanced experiences of marginalized individuals, gaining insight from a diverse range of perspectives. A youth-inclusive program aligns with **feminist, anti-ableist, and anti-racist principles**, prioritizing a comprehensive and equitable approach to address various social problems at their core.



HOW TO MAKE YOUTH PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS TRULY INTERSECTIONAL: EXISTING RESOURCES

Intersectionality serves as an **approach** and **mindset**, influencing one's way of thinking, reflecting, and working. Its effectiveness hinges on the user's willingness to **challenge themselves** and **critically examine** their attitudes and approaches; it cannot be achieved through checklists or prescriptive processes. Nevertheless, there are **resources** and **toolkits** available to assist organizations in gauging their progress on the intersectionality path and gaining a clearer understanding of their current position:

- [Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women's Intersectionality Toolkit](#)
- [Advocate's for Youth's Creating Safer Spaces For LGBTQ Youth: A Toolkit for Education, Healthcare, and Community-Based Organizations](#)
- [Young Friends Of Earth's Toolkit For Intersectional Movement Building](#)
- [UN Women's Intersectional Resource Guide and Toolkit](#)

Acknowledge, Do Not Ignore Power: raising awareness of **power structures** and how they operate is a fundamental component of leadership development, because it ultimately allows youth to recognize that **systems of oppression exist**, and how to challenge them. Youth programs should never ignore **power relations**, but rather engage in deep, critical reflections about how these relationships impact participants and separate them from the future they would like to build.



HOW TO TALK ABOUT POWER: CRITICAL SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Grassroots organizations employ diverse strategies to **cultivate power consciousness** as a tool for leadership education, with **Critical Social Analysis (CSA)** emerging as an important instrument. CSA involves participants in a **collaborative process** of **sharing** and **reflection** facilitated through **dialogues, narratives, and visual expressions**. These varied forms of expression allow youth participants to connect their individual experiences with **broader social structures** and **systemic power dynamics**. Through this guided exercise, youth can articulate how **systems of power**, as well as those who wield power, influence their lives and community dynamics. They can also explore how these systems hinder their ability to shape the future they aspire to create.

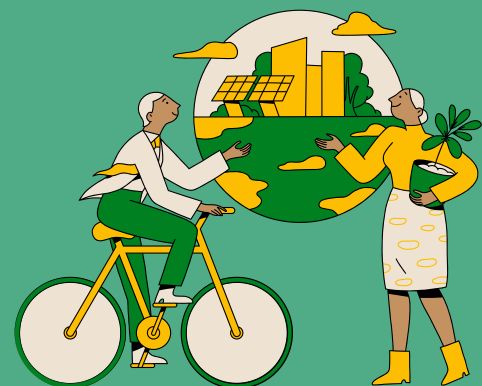
Conclusion

This toolkit provides a general guideline for grassroots and nonprofit organizations to better understand how to deliver successful leadership programs and provide their youth participants with the skills they need to initiate broader change within their communities. However, it is essential to recognize that this document does not provide a rigid prescription but rather serves as a foundational starting point.

Organizations, in collaboration with their community partners, possess an intimate understanding of their participants' needs and concerns. It is within their discretion to determine which aspects to emphasize and how to effectively translate them into practice.

It is evident that, like numerous other resources centered on youth engagement and leadership, this document is inherently dynamic. As the urban environment evolves, so does the lived experience of youth, necessitating adjustments in strategies for engagement and leadership programs to align with new contexts.

To address this, it is crucial to consistently involve youth at every stage of the process. Their active participation ensures that grassroots and nonprofit organizations receive valuable feedback and suggestions, enabling the delivery of programs that remain relevant, successful, and effective.



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Thank you!

