

Check it Off!

A Youth Development Approach to Staff Training

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Did I leave that note for Maddie to order more basketballs for gym night tomorrow? Let's see, I'll stop by and pick up the chips and soda on my way back—

“ . . . Louis? Louis?”

—I suddenly realized the trainer was asking me a question. Of course, my name is Luis. But trainers never seem to take the time to get to know you anyway, because you're only with them for a few hours—then they are gone.

Let's face it, every trainer has had a session that has not gone quite as well as we hoped it would. People did not arrive on time or at all. We weren't as prepared for questions as we could have been. The time was cut short or one participant tried to monopolize the entire discussion. But clearly the loss of Luis's attention is a trainer's worst nightmare, not a situation you ever want to find yourself in.

Discovering the key elements to keeping participants engaged and making the training experience worthwhile for everyone in the room is difficult. In searching for the right ingredients we reviewed the trainings we have facilitated, those that went well and those that didn't. We thought about those times when youth workers went home rejuvenated and ready to resume their work with a greater sense of purpose. We thought about what makes youth programs work. We thought about the collaborations we have formed with practitioners to enable them to share with each other their struggles and successes. We discovered that there is no single recipe for the perfect training,

but the following checklist may help you conduct more successful trainings.

We found that there are some obvious elements of a good training. People are physically comfortable. The magic markers work. There is no construction work going on outside the window. The trainer is prepared and his or her voice is loud enough for everyone to hear, even in the back of the room. And, of course, the food is good. But even with all of these pieces in place, a training can be unfulfilling at best and, at worst, a complete waste of time.

When we developed our training recipe, or checklist, for a good training, we used a youth development perspective. Youth development focuses on assets and strengths, fostering the idea that you are not simply telling people what to do but are providing supports and opportunities so that participants can figure out what works best in their own programs. Our checklist challenges you to ask yourself whether your training provides caring relationships, engaging activities, opportunities for contribution, high expectations and continuity. When these resiliency factors are present in youth's lives, they help increase the chances that youth will survive and thrive against the odds (Connell, 1992). Structuring training around these ingredients will help participants provide better programming when they return to their centers.

In a training setting, using a youth development approach involves acknowledging the expertise “in the room,” which means that training participants already have many of the answers and abilities that trainers are trying to teach and model. As a result, a primary job of a trainer is to

Checklist for a Youth Development-Based Staff Training

Caring and Trusting Relationships

- Learn participants' names
- Learn something about participants that you can refer back to in the training
- Design both small and large group activities
- Schedule time for networking and socializing
- Establish ground rules that ensure respect and confidentiality

Engaging Activities

- Use a variety of activities: role plays, scenarios, physical and arts activities, etc.
- Keep track of what has worked well and what has fizzled
- Include activities and strategies that can be utilized back at the office
- Don't ask participants to do anything you wouldn't do
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Use warm-ups before asking group to do an activity where they have to present or perform before others

Opportunities for Contribution

- Conduct open question-and-answer sessions
- Create opportunities to share successes and struggles
- Ask for participants' opinions

High Expectations

- Set concrete goals and objectives structured around needs of people in the room
- Ask participants about their expectations
- Identify what everyone can offer and what they can get out of training
- Enable those with more experience to guide others
- Encourage participants to identify action steps to strengthen their programs

Continuity

- Circulate lists of participants with contact information
- Provide handouts and other resources that participants can take home with them
- Do follow-up such as mailing participants a copy of the letters and action plans they wrote

provide a forum in which individual talents can be uncovered and ideas shared.

Another central concept in youth development is establishing a relationship with a caring adult. Trainer, *you* are that caring adult! How can we establish a caring relationship in the limited time frame we often have as trainers? Learning participants' names and something else about them that you can refer back to in the training is one good strategy for keeping people actively involved. A practical way to do this is to write people's names down in the order that they are seated. Another strategy is to have icebreakers or name games during which participants can learn about each other. Years later, we have run into a training participant we remember well because we learned through an

icebreaker how she got her name or what three historical figures he would invite to dinner.

The other caring relationships in any training are those you want to nurture among participants. Concrete strategies for achieving this goal are designing small- and large-group exercises and scheduling time for networking and socializing. Make sure people have plenty of opportunities to talk about their successes as well as issues with which they are struggling. Friendly debates are good as long as you have established ground rules that ensure respect and confidentiality. The challenge is to give the people opportunity to express their opinions, to provide concrete information, and to offer a different perspective with-

out condemning them for their opinions or being condescending. Encourage participation without making people feel uncomfortable or on the spot.

Engaging activities may seem like the easiest item on our checklist, but in fact it involves knowing your audience, trial and error, and having a sense of humor. Role plays, games, scenarios, and

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physical activities are all good methods for keeping participants engaged. Some activities work better than others, and keeping notes about what has worked well and what has not will help your trainings improve over time. Engaging training activities should be exercises that can be used “back at the office” regardless of whether it is a youth or senior citizens’ program. Remember, never ask participants to do something that you are not willing to do yourself.

People who work directly with young people are usually terrific at role plays. Administrators frequently are not but may be willing to try anyway. Asking people to act out the opposite of what they would do in a situation, rather than what they would actually do, often provides more laughs while making the same points. A group that is quiet or reserved may need some warming up before participating in a highly interactive exercise. One strategy is to have participants answer a question in pairs, then in fours, so that they get comfortable with a smaller group of people first. And humor almost always works.

Checklist items for opportunities for contribution and high expectations may include many of the above strategies. As we said, the expertise is in the room. Your challenge is to create opportunities for people to share what they know, what they think, and what they feel can help other people. One strategy for giving people opportunities to contribute is to have open question-and-answer sessions rather than lectures. The same information that you want to convey can often be elicited from participants. The more opportunities people have to contribute, the more engaging the training will be.

Every training should have concrete goals and objectives that are based upon the needs of the people in the room, although fully assessing the needs of participants prior to the training is not

always possible. As a result, spending the first few moments of the training asking participants about their expectations is important. In every training there will be participants with varying levels of experience and expertise, but everyone has something to offer and everyone can get something out of the experience. Maintaining high expectations for all training participants is key.

Your mission is to help those with more experience guide others rather than allow one participant to preach. Some of the greatest training lessons have been gained from participants who hear their peers talking about how they dealt with issues or implemented a program. Encourage participants to identify one thing they can do to make their program stronger, better, or more connected to the community. One strategy we have utilized is to have group members write letters to themselves containing their action plans. We then send their letters and plans to them one month after the training concludes.

This brings us to the final item on our checklist: continuity. Make sure that participants have a way to reflect on what they have learned and on the goals they have set for themselves, along with a way to get in touch with the people they have met. Circulating a list with all relevant contact information will give them the opportunity to continue sharing ideas and learning from one another. We put our names on the list as well and find that people really do keep in touch, even if they change jobs. Handouts are also important. Handouts and resource sheets can serve as refreshers about the topics covered in the training and can also be tools for participants to use in their own work. Continuity is especially difficult if you are only doing a half-day or a one-day training, so utilizing these strategies really will help the learning continue.

Each of the items mentioned here warrants more description. This article is offered simply as a framework for thinking about how to strengthen your trainings. A good training is like a good program: flexible, yet structured. Participants have opportunities to provide feedback, and the design is responsive to their needs. There is time for fun and the space to be serious and reflective. Finding the perfect combination of ingredients makes for a great training experience that even Luis will appreciate.

Reference

Connell, J. (1992). *The importance of learning about and building on the policies, programs and effects of voluntary youth-serving organizations*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.