

The Art and Challenge of Being the Director of a YouthBuild Program

*by Dorothy Stoneman
President, YouthBuild USA*

Young people in our programs consistently say that there are three things that matter most about staff: they need to be competent, caring, and unified.

A competent and caring staff results from wise hiring plus orientation, training, and the occasional firing required by errors in hiring. Sites are succeeding easily in getting competent and caring staff.

A unified staff is another matter.

Getting a group of people unified around a complex and emotionally draining task — when the members of this group have different professional training; come from different professional backgrounds; are of different races, class backgrounds, religious persuasions, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds; and have different political ideologies — is not easy, even when all the individuals are profoundly cooperative, ethical, and mutually trusting and the director is skilled and experienced in supervision, team building, and management.

When you have irrationality, distrust, judgmentalism, insecurity, defensiveness, hostility, ignorance, rigidity, and other distress-based behavior, found in virtually any human group, added to the average level of inexperience and uncertainty about the use of power found among directors, you have a potential mine field at every site, within every staff group.

Every member of your staff has been conditioned by different aspects of a racist society.

Virtually every human group, when asked to describe good leaders, will answer: “They know how to listen. They hear what matters to the people. They care. They know how to translate what they hear into actions that meet the needs and express the will of the people.”

When you ask this group not only to combat this conditioning in themselves, but also to help a group of young people overcome its effects in their own lives, you are asking for a small miracle of love, respect, wisdom, and commitment.

Be assured, no site has magically produced a united staff team. Each one — over a 12-year period—has suffered serious errors and agonies. Those that have emerged successful have learned some priceless lessons.

As YouthBuild programs multiply, we are seeing that a key element deserving attention is the difficulty of producing a unified staff team.

Interestingly, many YouthBuild directors are filling a director’s or executive director’s

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role for the first time. You have all been moved by passionate commitment to take on a new level of responsibility. Many of you do not have experience or training in personnel management or team building.

We have decided to give special attention to the art of management as it affects team building.

In general, not enough attention in our society is given to training people to lead in a multiracial, multiclass, politically active, profoundly human, and caring context. We can't build leadership skills among young people if we don't build ever-increasing leadership among adults.

The Primary Issues for Directors

There are several issues around which staff conflict, discontent, and demoralization generally swirl.

Staff complaints will revolve around these themes: bossiness, arrogance, decision making without consultation, poor communication, behavior that seems racist (or, on the other hand, attitudes that seem anti-white), withholding of information, overwork, favoritism, disrespect, expressing opinions intrusively or in a dominating way, unpredictable uses of authority (sometimes letting things slide and sometimes reacting too abruptly, not seeming to be accountable to anyone except oneself). On the other hand, staff may complain about indecisiveness, about the director not handling things quickly, forcefully, or thoroughly enough.

These are universal issues, expressed to varying degrees in every situation where someone is in charge.

Respect, inclusion, sharing of information, consistency, involvement in planning and decision making, genuine appreciation, profound mutual respect, training, thoughtful and honest supervision, openness to criticism, avoidance of conditions which cause burnout, thorough understanding of the history and reality of oppression for their particular people: these are some of the

things staff want and need from their director and each other.

Directors typically are not sensitive to the ways other people relate to people with power. Even the relatively small power that a director holds is enough to trigger the feelings about authority, parents, and a person's place in the family that all staff members bring with them. As director, you will automatically be associated with every hope, fear, resentment, past experience, need, and confusion about authority that every staff member holds.

To compound the difficulty, as a black director, white director, Asian director, or Latino director, you will automatically be connected to every hope, fear, resentment, past experience, need, and confusion about authority in the hands of your race that every other staff member brings with him or her.

This is not to say that you should expect to act as counselor or therapist for all these feelings. I mention them here to remind you not to take them too personally, because they come with the territory of being the boss.

As a set of general expectations, you can expect that white directors will be called racist; black directors will be called anti-white; male directors will be called sexist or macho; female directors will be called overly emotional. All directors will be accused of abusing their power and disrespecting staff, or of not deserving power because they are incompetent. (If none of this happens to you, consider yourself extremely lucky or highly skilled.) To some extent, all these accusations will be true; to another painful extent they will all be exaggerated and irrational. Whatever the particular weakness of a particular director, it will be blown way out of proportion and seem to obscure his or her strengths and commitment, at least periodically or temporarily. It will hurt.

All directors will agonize, should ask for help, and probably would do well to weep buckets at being misunderstood, unfairly

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criticized, isolated, or unable to figure out how to bring about unity. All directors will learn a lot!

The task of team building among adults is as complex as transforming the life perspectives of the young people. The burden falls on the director.

Below are some general guidelines to help you thread your way through this most important territory. I will touch lightly on the following topics:

- 1) regular meeting structure,
- 2) listening,
- 3) supervision and praise,
- 4) sharing of information,
- 5) sharing of decision making,
- 6) overwork,
- 7) staff training,
- 8) inviting and accepting criticism,
- 9) issues of oppression, and
- 10) firing.

Perhaps some of you feel comfortable and competent in all these areas of team building. But since these are the issues that typically plague directors and organizations, let's put them on the table for review and discussion.

1) Regular Meeting Structure

Set up a regular and reliable structure for meetings in order to have systematic communication and forums for discussing policy and philosophical issues.

- Meet regularly, no less than every other week, and weekly if you can, with the whole staff.
- Set up a management team and meet weekly with them, to unite the management of site and school and the integration of the two.
- Systematically discuss issues of policy, philosophy, and planning with staff on a regular basis. If there's a hot issue, it usually helps to deal with it out front starting with an equal time format.

2) Listening

Under all circumstances, master and practice the art of listening and of integrating others' good ideas into the program, policy, and procedure.

Listening is partly a tactic: do not interrupt people when they are talking (unless there is prior agreement on time limits) or they will feel disrespected, disempowered, and angry. Whether you agree or disagree, whether you think they are sharing brilliant insights or spouting garbage, do not interrupt (unless they are abusing you intolerably). Simply keeping your mouth shut and listening is useful.

Ask questions. Make sure you have understood before you respond or react. This is also partly a tactic. If you are thoughtful enough and focused enough to ask questions, people will feel you are actually concerned about understanding what they are telling you.

But listening goes well beyond tactics.

Actually hearing, acknowledging, and acting on what you have heard, consistently pulling the important piece of truth from what is being said and making sure that individuals' good ideas or sound group consensus are acted upon — this kind of listening is an art. It is an essential art for leading and team building in all contexts. Using your own role to integrate, synthesize, and validate the best contributions of the members by weaving them into an integrated whole: this is your central function.

The wisdom of the group, gathered, restated, put forth, and used as a guide for action, is a powerful tool for unifying. When people see a tapestry being woven from their own and each other's threads, they relax, they belong, they can trust, they are working together.

When they feel that the director is preoccupied with imposing his or her own point of view, with coercing, convincing, directing, it is extremely hard for a team to form — unless it's an anti-authority team.

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3) Supervision and Praise

Make sure people are appreciated often and sincerely for what they do well and for the efforts they make, even when they are not successful.

Make sure they get regular (at least every two weeks), thoughtful feedback and collaboration on what they are doing. Make sure they get regular information about how they could improve. A formal evaluation every six months is not too often.

People need to know where they stand. Some people need more reassurance and praise; some people need more feedback, direction, and correction; some people need to be included more in planning and thinking about the future; some people have a greater need to be treated as peers of the director; some people bring more personal issues that need attention. But everyone needs some of the above, and supervision should provide it. When people are getting what they need individually from their supervisor it is easier to build a group, because people will bring fewer of their frustrations, isolation, and needs for help to the group as a whole.

Supervision is an art on which courses of study are given. Directors may do well to enroll in such a course!

Part of supervision is deciding what to delegate, to whom, and how to make sure it gets done well even after it's delegated, without stepping on the toes of the person who has been given an assignment.

Your job is to figure out how to bring out the best in staff people as long as they are part of the staff, and how to assist each person to grow through new assignments. This cannot be done without arranging for

each person to get individual attention. It is useful to ask people how things are going, what's going particularly well, what's giving them trouble and what they are thinking about the possible solutions, what new challenges they are starting to take on, and how you can help. The more individual attention staff get, the more they are able to pass it on to the young people.

4) Sharing of Information

Information from inside and outside the program flows to the director — often more information than you can even process. Staff are hungry for information about funding, the budget, the future, the community, the big picture. But the director is usually unaware of how much information she has that others want. Staff easily get the idea that the director is actively withholding information, when in most cases the director is just going about her business, dealing with information overload as best she can, not actively thinking about what information to share.

Sharing of the following types of information is helpful for staff and helpful for establishing that you are sharing information.

Budget and Fiscal Reports

Everyone likes to know where the money is coming from and where it is going, and how much is available for what items. Furthermore, everyone would like to have input into the budget in advance. (If you have a policy, or think you should have a policy, of not sharing individual staff salaries, just provide a budget which lumps salaries together into one item.) Whenever you give a financial report to your board, consider giving it to your staff, too. They will appreciate it.

Dilemmas

Part of the excitement of being director is that you get to struggle with the solutions to problems that will affect everyone if they are not solved. Sharing your struggles with staff whenever it will do no harm to share them, and getting staff advice, is not a waste of

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staff time (unless it crowds out helping them solve their own dilemmas). Let them in on what is going on.

Plans

Short-range, middle-range, and long-range plans are all of interest to the staff. Avoid springing things on them. Avoid making unilateral decisions that will affect them when you can just as easily include them in the decision.

5) Sharing of Decision Making

It is a short step from sharing information to sharing decision making.

Of course, in both cases, balance is needed. Staff don't want to spend all their time being flooded with information, and they don't want you to be paralyzed, acting as if you can make no decision without their input.

The staff should be engaged in making a decision in those cases where you need all staff to cooperate in the implementation, you need the staff's best thinking, they will be affected by the outcome, and the staff having thought about the issues will improve the program as a whole.

Of course, don't make unilateral decisions within someone else's domain of responsibility.

Of course, don't impose unwise and arbitrary decisions on people. Don't impose decisions that are an expression of your personal opinion, untempered by others' knowledge and wisdom.

It is an art and an ongoing challenge to make the distinction between decisions that should be made by yourself, and those that should be shared with the whole staff, the management team, the Policy Committee, the board, or any combination of these groups. Think about this. It doesn't come naturally, but has to be considered.

6) Overwork

It is the nature of each of us to work extremely hard. I know some of you are con-

sistently working late nights, weekends, and occasionally overnight. Sometimes this is necessary, and your willingness to do what is necessary to succeed is part of why you are the director. Oftentimes when young people see the director working so hard, they are extremely impressed and touched that someone cares so much; that's a useful message. They need to know that we're not in it for the money; it's not "just a job."

But remember that your general well-being is important. You will do better if you're in good shape physically and emotionally. You matter. Take your vacations. Take long weekends when you need them. You're a role model too; if people watch the leader burning himself out, they'll say, "Leadership is not for me." But if you're having fun and are full of love and laughter and seem fundamentally relaxed, and you're making a difference for other people, leadership looks pretty good.

7) Staff Training

Notice the areas where individuals, sub-groups, and the whole group need training — either new information and skills, or facilitation in thinking well together. Keep "upping" the level of functioning, as well as the level of intellectual engagement, by providing for training.

Individuals can sometimes go to workshops, seminars, or conferences elsewhere.

With groups, if you bring in outside people for training (including YouthBuild USA), be sure to discuss your staff's particular needs with the trainer. A trainer may have great skills and information, but they will be better used if the director provides guidance.

Then be sure to ask for advice from the trainer when the training is done. Any outside person on your site, with your people, will have useful and interesting perceptions about what is going on and what needs to happen. Try to have both a pre-training conference and a post-training conference with anyone who spends time with your program.

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8) *Inviting and Accepting Criticism*

People are generally very hesitant to criticize their boss. Find genuine ways to invite it that will not result in any negative repercussions for staff who give it. The self-estimation process described in our Leadership Development handbook is a good way to do it.

Bringing up problematic, neglected issues may also allow criticism to surface, or it may declaw criticism.

When you do put issues on the table, remember the principles of good group process. (If you don't remember, see the article in the Appendices and in the Leadership Development handbook, or call up the Leadership Development Department at YouthBuild USA.) Remember to give everyone roughly equal time to speak. Head off arguments by listening to all perspectives with equal respect and not allowing anyone to dominate.

When people have dared to criticize you constructively, be sure to respond. Either give them the information they need to understand what you are dealing with or try to make the improvements they suggest. At least acknowledge that you haven't yet been able to make the changes they requested, but you did hear it and take it seriously.

Some criticism will be exaggerated, especially if people are mad at you. Some criticism will be muted, especially if people are scared of you or excessively admiring. But whatever you get will have some truth to it, and it is in your interests to correct the problem as soon and as well as you can. If you can't tell what is exaggerated and what is accurate, what is understated and what is truly minor, ask more people to help you sort it out (e.g., YouthBuild USA, or your board, or your best friend, or whomever you trust to see and tell the truth or at least a useful part of the truth).

Ask for a thorough evaluation of your own performance. This will be a useful process

for your board, staff, and Policy Committee, and it will be useful for you. It usually works best if it starts with a self-evaluation, so people know that you see your own weaknesses and so you can remind them of some of your achievements, which they may not remember. In many organizations evaluations of the director are overlooked. This is a big mistake.

9) *Issues of Oppression*

The general guidelines are as follows:

- Become increasingly informed about the history and struggles and current injustices affecting all the peoples you're working with — among both staff and youth, and in the particular local community. Treat everyone with respect.
- Deal with and aim to eliminate your own fears and prejudices, insecurities, guilt, and anger.
- Take positions that are pro-human, and stand up firmly against current injustices.
- Make real and deep friendships across the usual lines of division between peoples.
- Arrange for discussions of these issues among the staff, in mutually respectful and emotionally safe ways.

Remember that the issues are ever-present, sometimes gross and sometimes subtle, and that handling them well is critical. Ever-increasing unity of all people who understand and want to eliminate oppression, in order for all human beings to thrive, is required for us to succeed, and may be required for the human race to survive.

10) *Firing*

If you are convinced a person should no longer be part of the staff, and you have checked from every point of view to make sure that you are right, your job is to figure out how to remove that person with the least pain and insult, least disruption to the program, and least agony to yourself. Timing, consensus, documentation, and respectful communication are the key elements here.

Be very careful about firing someone whom the young people love and respect. Be equally

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careful about firing someone the rest of the staff think is doing fine. Talk these things through thoroughly with people you consider wise and experienced. Do not act reactively, or you will get double the reaction back.

Sometimes firing is the essential factor in building a team. This is most obviously the case when the rest of the staff is aware of and fed up with the problems caused by an individual staff member. Then your failure to fire will appear as weak leadership and will build hopelessness and disengagement among the staff.

But abrupt firing, unjustified firing, or seemingly unjustified firing can appear to be the abuse of authority which people fear the most. It will have its own bad effects.

Sometimes it's necessary to wait and tolerate a difficult situation until other people have perceived the problem. Sometimes it's necessary to act quickly before deep relationships are built. Sometimes the best course of action is just straightforward communication of the problem as soon as it becomes evident, repeated communication if it hasn't improved, and finally, agreement that it's best if the person leave the staff.

Check your personnel policies and follow them. If they make it inordinately difficult to fire a malfunctioning staff person, ask your board to correct them. If they make it too easy for you to act independently, subject to your own emotions and therefore subject to reactive error, it's a good idea to correct that.

Your personnel policies should be clear about the firing process. You can be sure that at some point you will need to fire someone, so make sure your organization has policies that both protect the program and respect the individual.

Some Final Words

This may be the hardest job you've ever had. Very strong, smart, good people go through tremendous changes as directors of YouthBuild programs. Don't be surprised by the roller coaster. It seems to be part of the

deal. We are trying to do very hard things that go against much of society's conditioning and allocation of resources. There is always a tendency to blame each other and ourselves for obstacles that have actually been created by centuries of bad policy.

Try to enjoy the challenge. And don't for a minute think you are alone! Congratulations on all that you have already done!

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