

**Successful Support for Youth Development:  
A Framework for Building Strong Youth Leaders**

Youth development is an ongoing process that can take days, weeks, months, or years. Of course there are some youth who already have many of these skills, and that is fantastic, but many youth need support in developing these skills. Here are some general tips for successful youth development strategies. For additional resources on the roles of adult advisors and allies, see FYA's other resources in the Adult Allies Series.

**1. All hands on deck.**

Initially, a tremendous amount of time, support, attention, and assistance from the entire adult advisory/ally team is required and central to the success of adequately preparing members to lead with minimal assistance from supporters and staff. Offering guidance to the chapter as a group as well as individual members one-on-one is important. Adults need to determine how this is put into practice by continually communicating with each other and the chapter and together identifying who will assist with which projects and how. Regularly check in with members and the other adults to evaluate how support for the chapter is working. Identify any areas to improve upon, adjust, clarify, etc. and make changes to better meet the needs of the chapter, the members, and the other adult allies.

**2. Offer concrete examples & guidance.**

Remind the chapter regularly that you're there to support them in the meeting and any tasks if they would like. A helpful analogy to keep in mind during this stage is you can't hand someone a hammer and tell her/him to build a house. Before leading on their own, members need to see useful and tangible examples of agendas, flyers, to-do lists, timelines, etc. Encourage members to find examples on their own to share/review with them with other members. You shouldn't feel shy about collecting real models too that illustrate different approaches/styles for the task at hand. If it's meeting facilitation that they need to see in practice, consider observing some outside meetings together and afterwards debriefing the pros and cons to the facilitators' effectiveness and style. Continually offer constructive input while they are working on their own tasks.

**3. Promote practice.**

Members need to be encouraged *and* invited to practice with you and/or other members or the entire chapter so they can learn through their own experience. The most successful ways to accomplish this is by prepping facilitators for the chapter meetings and helping them think through what they'd like to accomplish with each agenda item. If it's a task that involves

creating a document, help them identify the goals (e.g., make flyer that grabs the attention of younger youth; include date, time, location, topic, contact info), develop a vision (e.g., cool, colorful, pocket-size), form a timeline (e.g., today: look at examples & start draft; next week: complete draft & email to 2 members for review/feedback; in 2 weeks: incorporate feedback & complete final flyer; end of month: get flyer out), and an implementation/dissemination plan (e.g., email flyer to members, print 100 copies, deliver to youth center, middle & high schools).

#### **4. Foster creativity.**

Once members have a handle on the key elements of their tasks the next step is to help them build on this foundation by encouraging them to bring a unique approach to their work and continuing to support them while they seek-out and experiment with developing their own style.

#### **5. Honor and trust the process.**

There are many essential skills that members need to learn in order to create, maintain, and lead a successful chapter. Assisting members with leadership development is an ongoing process that generally occurs during meeting prep and debriefs. However, as necessary, supporters and members should gauge whether skills building is necessary and helpful during actual chapter meetings. If supporters are ever uncertain about timing of when to support and when not to, just ask the members, they will let you know. Regardless, remember to check in with members regularly about their leadership confidence and ability levels, help them self-assess, and provide feedback. Most importantly, the leadership development process has great potential to be powerful when members' efforts are acknowledged, their accomplishments are celebrated, and they are supported as they experience challenges, mistakes, and disappointments.

#### **6. Signals of success.**

The strongest indications of how helpful the hands-on support you are offering has been is when you see progress, little or big, in members' abilities and confidence in executing their projects. Other signals would likely appear as an increase in the chapter's capacity to deepen and focus their work/vision, have insight to broaden and/or narrow projects' scope, identify chapter's and individuals' strengths and challenges, lead productive meetings, have high member retention, etc.

#### **7. Re-evaluate support.**

When members feel proud of the work they are producing and are consistently reaching personal and chapter goals, this is a good time to re-evaluate the level and type of support that is now needed for the chapter. Meet with the adult advisor/ally team and also the chapter to ask the members for feedback on the support that has been offered and ask for input on how supporters can better meet the needs of the chapter and individual members. Consider creating an anonymous written evaluation in addition to an open dialogue just in case some members don't feel comfortable sharing openly. Re-evaluate yourself, with the adult team, and with the chapter on an ongoing basis, even after the chapter becomes well established and highly active.