

# Leading Through Transition: Common Goal, Different Approach

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*We sat down with two of Philadelphia Youth Network's (PYN) leaders, Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend, president and CEO, and Stephanie Gambone, executive vice president, to talk about their new leadership roles and the future of PYN. Chekemma and Stephanie have only been in their new roles for 60 days but have worked together for the past eight years. They admitted to thinking very differently, but they have a mutual respect for each other and the dialogue and conversation that it creates. Both mentioned that this is "the beauty" in their working relationship. Both are extremely passionate about their work and the organization and strive for excellence in all that they do. Together, they are committed and looking forward to the next leg of our journey"*

**Q: Describe your leadership style and how it helps you make a difference at PYN and in Philadelphia?**

C: I would describe my style as a servant leader. I enjoy working with colleagues, and I am energized by my peers and by challenges. I think that everything is possible, and

leading is about figuring out how to get to where you want to be. I think that my greatest strengths are being strategic and practical and being quick on my feet. My art and gift is seeing the larger picture and quickly mapping the steps needed to attain success. At PYN, this has led me to engage others, be transparent and to appreciate the discovery phase of the process. I appreciate the strengths and talents of others and promote self-awareness and reflection.

S: I strive for excellence and try to be self-aware, empathetic and to lead by example. I promote a culture of collaboration and encourage people to learn from mistakes and to grow. Having fun is also something that I value. We spend a lot of time at work and I enjoy the people that I am around and find something to laugh about each day. In terms of PYN, I am extremely passionate about our work. I was born and raised in Philadelphia and chose this work so that I could impact my city.

**Q: Talk about the road to your current leadership position.**

C: My love for this work started very early, and I see myself in the youth that we serve. When I was in second grade, I had a library teacher that introduced me to a level of excellence in myself that I was unaware of. I have held on to the idea that excellence is not only attainable but expected of me. When I reflect on the journey and share

what I do, it is always humbling for me when I say Say that I am currently the president and CEO of PYN. I am driven by the pursuit of the highest quality of service. I want to create a world where our young people can not only achieve but thrive.

After I graduated from the School of Social Work at University of Pennsylvania, I was turned down for a development job here at PYN. A few years later, while I was working for the Philadelphia Workforce Development Center, I became a provider and funder to PYN and had to audit and monitor their performance. I was asked to come on as a project assistant and have had various roles and responsibilities since then. All the opportunities have given me a unique vantage point of our products and services from the outside in.

S: I have been with PYN for 14 years and was one of the first staff hired after we incorporated in 1999. When I graduated, I didn't want to do anything with the degree that I had. I greatly benefitted from an internship that I held during my junior year with the DA's office, but I realized that I didn't want to work with people at this stage, then it was too late. I took a job that summer at Olney High School and fell in love with the work. I found a job that fall as a career counselor with Communities in Schools and was transferred when the organization was integrated with the district. I have evolved at PYN as it has evolved over the years. I have continued learning both formally as I completed work for my master's in nonprofit

leadership and informally on the job as I've held many different roles at PYN.

**Q: What is the best advice that you have ever been given?**

C: Make excellence your signature.

S: Make sure that your voice is heard. No matter your level of comfort, especially as a young woman.

**Q: What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?**

C: The ability to listen. I mean authentic listening, and the ability to integrate multiple forms of communication, body language and the energy of a room. I also think that you need to have a willingness to learn and to be curious. This propels you to the next level, keeps a level of freshness and newness and makes you stay on top of your game.

S: You have to be able to inspire others while believing that others are competent.

**Q: How does PYN align with the current needs in the city, and how do you see it evolving in the future?**

C: PYN plays a critical role in workforce development for young people to enter and succeed in the work place. By engaging our emerging talent, we are creating a viable workforce in our future community. We provide valuable career-connected education experiences for youth

considered at risk and a seasonal economic stimulus to their communities. Moving forward, it is critical to collaborate effectively across systems, especially seeing the resource challenges that the city is facing. We will work to collaborate and align resources to have the most impact.

**Q: What type of leader will it take?**

C: A leader that is flexible and able to take calculated risks.

**Q: How do you prioritize? What are the most important decisions that you make as a leader?**

C: Balancing the needs of the system; the needs of youth and the health of the organization. When I am faced with difficult choices I look at the impact on the overall system and on the organization. Resource allocation is a tough challenge for me, in terms of what to invest in first.

Another important decision is how to align youth-centered causes, for example, balancing the celebration of the potential of young people and the realities that they face and how they are portrayed in the media. We take an asset-based approach to young people and see them as untapped resources.

S: I try to maintain balance between external and internal responsibilities. No day is the same, which I like.

Sometimes prioritization is hard because I love almost everything that I do and I want to do it all. In making

decisions with my team, I consider mission alignment and advancement of our work.

**Q: What does it take to develop and sustain a partnership?**

C: Oh boy, lots of work. It takes an authentic desire to partner and collaborate. You have to really want to partner to advance the work for the systemic change that you believe in, and you must believe that sustainable solutions are found in collaboration. It is in the time that we spend together thinking about the challenges we face as a city that make us most effective. It takes a lot of time to build trust. They say trust takes the longest to build but it's the quickest to lose. Partnerships must have a trusting foundation or they aren't as impactful. If you're in a partnership for your own personal advancement, it can jeopardize the work for the greater good. Real partnerships are more than the relationship between two people.

S: Getting people involved varies depending on the type of partnership that you want. You need to go to meetings and meet with people and cultivate relationships. You can't only go to people when you need something. You need to demonstrate value to the partner and explain why they should work with you. I outline to employers why to invest in young people and why to work with PYN, and the benefits they will get if they work with us. After you lay out a value statement, the key is how to ensure how you will

deliver what you say you will. The quickest way to kill a partnership is to not follow through on your word. Don't make promises you can't keep and set realistic expectations. You also have to check in, be responsive and accountable, and make changes timely when necessary. Maintenance is important. Make sure that people feel that their time, money, etc. are being utilized. When I don't get calls, that means that things are going well and all of the needs of a partner are being met; however, it is important for people to know that they can reach out whenever they need to. It is also important to thank people; for example, Mayor Nutter sends a letter to all of our investors.

For the most part, we have a proactive strategy in forming new partnerships and finding new funders. There is intentionality around the potential investor or partner, though sometimes it starts from being out and about in the work and talking with people. I try to communicate and get a sense of all of the ways that we can fit and work together with a new partner. Sometimes we need to be able to say no after evaluating if the partner can help us move our work forward and if we have the internal capacity to do it.

**Q: What is the biggest challenge that you have overcome?**

S: One of the critical turning points in my career was when, as a young manager, I realized that I was doing

great with external partners but not with internal people. I had the attitude that that way was the only way, which created an environment that wasn't productive or enjoyable. I had three choices, to leave, to stay the same or to change. I wanted to grow as a leader and be a more accomplished professional. Through reflection and working with a coach, I learned how to develop and lead a high-performing team. When colleagues said they saw a difference, it was a big accomplishment. I made the choice to be different and to work on being more self-aware. Any leader needs to be aware of how people react to them.

**Q: What is the biggest challenge that you are facing today?**

C: Defining in very specific and measurable terms the investment that it takes for the success of this work. In our work this can be particularly delayed as we provide youth opportunity and access to workforce development and introduce them to twenty-first century skills. The results are often seen long after youth exit our programs and transformation is hard to measure in the short term. For example; there is no way that my library teacher in second grade knew that her investment in me was preparing a CEO of one of the largest intermediary organizations in the country. We don't always get to see immediate results of our work but we have to express the value to stakeholders in a time-bound way. We know from research that connection to an adult is important for youth

development, but this is not easily measured in terms of outcomes that funders seek. Our mission talks about youth taking their rightful place in society, which is hard to measure. We need to determine how to quantify the benefit to society in creating engaged citizens.

**Q: What advice would you give to someone starting a leadership position for the first time?**

C: One, find a mentor. You cannot make all the mistakes yourself, so find someone to learn from that is willing to share their journey. Two, read. Read a lot. Be knowledgeable about your industry. Third, there is no substitute for competence.

S: Invest in the people that work with you. Be self-aware and reflect on what you need to work on. Believe that you can always keep growing and figure out a strategy to work on what you don't know. Don't be afraid of your weaknesses. Figure out who you want to be, and evaluate if everything that you are doing and saying reflects it. You have to be consistent as a leader or you will have trouble establishing yourself. Immerse yourself in things that you need to learn, find someone that you know does what you want to do well and talk to them.

**Q: What do you do to ensure that you continue to grow and develop as a leader?**

C: Connect with other leaders and see what they are doing. I keep up with what is happening with nonprofits,

with young people, with workforce development and read a lot. I seek authentic feedback from people that I trust, and to be quite honest, I pray a lot. I am accountable for every decision and every person, and I see this as a source of energy, not a burden.

S: Get out of my comfort zone and take risks. The rewards on the other end can be far greater than the small discomfort. A little over two years ago, one of the senior leaders was leaving and I asked to do her work for three months. If I was terrible at it in three months, then I would be done. If I was good at it, then it would become part of my portfolio. The CEO saw it as a win-win and gave me a try. I was nervous about asking, but since then my role has evolved three times in the last two years because I decided I wanted to do something even though I wasn't sure if I could. One of my favorite questions is - what is the worst thing that can happen?

**Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend is currently serving as the acting president and CEO of the Philadelphia Youth Network. She joined PYN in 2005 and before being appointed to her current position, Chekemma was the vice president of program services. In this role, she oversaw all programs managed by the organization, which served more than 15,000 youth annually. Her team was responsible for the program design, implementation, evaluation, compliance and continuous improvement of PYN programming.**

**Drawing on her experience as the senior director of**

**the Emerging Workforce at the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation, her research work at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and her years at PYN, Chekemma is tasked with leading the organization in line with PYN's vision and mission. In 2013, Chekemma was honored with Philadelphia Business Journal's 40 under 40 award. Get out of my comfort zone and take risks.**

**Stephanie Gambone is the executive vice president at PYN. In this role, she advances PYN's local, regional and national efforts to increase the city's capacity in improving the educational and economic outcomes of young Philadelphians. Her responsibilities include strategic leadership, organizational development, governance, brand management, policy and advocacy and the expansion of business partnerships.**

**Stephanie has led efforts to raise \$12 million from the business community since 2003 for WorkReady Philadelphia. Additionally, Stephanie is a 3CI member for the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Intermediary Network, a national organization that shares knowledge and expertise among cities and counties.**