

The Teen Empowerment Model: Youth Building Peaceful Communities Together

Stanley Pollack 04 December 2017



Building positive youth, police, and community relationships one interactive experience at a time.

Photo Credit: Jennifer Bannister

Simmering beneath White House tweetstorms and federal budget proposals, longstanding tensions between youth, police, and community can boil over at any time in cities around the nation. In attempting to forestall violent

clashes and deadly incidents, many city officials have chosen to apply a law-and-order, stop-and-frisk approach to policing. Unfortunately, such policies serve to inflame racial animosity, erode trust, and rip apart the fabric of community that is essential to establishing peace on the streets. But, there is a better way: to recognize the assets that the youth in the community possess, to nurture their youthful hope for a better life, and to invest the time, effort, and money needed to develop their leadership potential to help solve the problems they face.

Over the last 25 years, the Center for Teen Empowerment (TE) has developed a model program that hires and trains urban youth to lead movements among their peers towards peace and reconciliation between youth, police, and community. In 1992, when TE started our first site in Boston's South End, the city was awash in violence among young people. The courageous work of the youth we employed to confront the bloodshed played a pivotal role in creating the period that's been dubbed "the Boston Miracle"—29 months when no one under the age of 19 died as a consequence of violence. Today in Boston, with the full support of Police Commissioner William Evans, TE continues its efforts—organizing dialogues between youth and police, community meetings, and social and recreational activities involving thousands of youth and hundreds of police officers

In 2003, TE began serving the youth of Rochester, NY. We helped lower violence in that city, and we created a robust

partnership with the Rochester Police Department to provide training to all new police recruits and to build relationships of trust and respect between police officers and the communities where they work. In 2004, the newly elected Mayor of Somerville, Joseph Curtatone, asked Teen Empowerment to help him deal with a crisis among the city's youth. There had been 21 recent teen suicides and drug overdoses, and there was serious gang violence in the city and a very troubled relationship between youth and the police. In response, Teen Empowerment hired and trained youth to organize meetings, conferences, and dialogues between youth, police, and the community, with an emphasis on human connection and common ground rather than confrontation. Since 2005, juvenile crime (ages 10 to 24) in that city has gone down more than 70 percent and relationships between youth and police have improved dramatically.

It Begins with What We Believe

The Teen Empowerment Model is based on the belief that with the proper support, training, and resources, young people, including those of highest risk, have the ability to think deeply about difficult social problems and take constructive action to address the challenges they face. Furthermore, we believe that their voices, energies, and ideas are an essential element of any effort that hopes to successfully intervene in destructive adolescent behavior patterns, establish and maintain healthy urban

communities, and build the capacity to create effective youth policies and practices.

In neighborhoods where high rates of poverty contribute to hopelessness and fear among youth, the lack of an effective means of including high-risk youth as partners gives rise to profound and dangerous levels of alienation between youth and adults. Without the opportunity to develop positive relationships with caring adults or access to legitimate sources of power, youth at risk become increasingly likely to use negative behaviors as a means of maintaining their survival and acquiring status and power among their peers. Thus, the lack of an asset-based approach, in combination with these difficult community conditions, precipitates a communication breakdown between adult and adolescent communities. This breakdown functions both to reinforce destructive behavior patterns among youth and to increase support among adults for punitive means of suppressing these patterns. However, this punitive response has the unfortunate and unintended consequence of making matters worse, as it communicates negative expectations that many high-risk youth then act aggressively to fulfill.

To intervene in this cycle, The Teen Empowerment Model works with all elements of the social service, educational, law enforcement, and governmental infrastructure to include high-risk young people as leaders in an effort to catalyze broad based changes in adolescent value systems and patterns of behavior. This inclusion of high-

risk youth in direct communication with community members, adult leaders, and police officials facilitates the creation of positive relationships by breaking down stereotypes and the tendency for demonization by both youth and adults, as well as creating forums for open and honest communication that lead to the development of more effective and humane public policy.

Furthermore, giving high-risk teens a chance to take on visible roles of leadership with their peers provides them with the opportunity to acquire power by working for positive change, rather than by involvement with the negative behaviors through which they have traditionally sought to acquire power and status. Finally, our experience has shown definitively that with proper support and training, many high-risk youth are willing and able to have a powerfully positive influence on vast numbers of their peers and to work as partners with adults to precipitate a movement to turn large numbers of young people away from negative behaviors and toward positive involvement with their communities.

Doing Things in New Ways: The Use of Interactive Group Methods

An important factor in TE's success is the Team Empowerment Model's approach to group facilitation, which emphasizes the use of interactive modes of work and communication as a means of significantly increasing productivity. Our approach to this critical element of

human relationships is documented in the book we published in 2005 entitled, ***Moving Beyond Icebreakers: An Innovative Approach to Group Facilitation, Learning, and Action***. The book contains more than 300 interactive exercises and explains how to use these methods to engage participants in meetings, workshops, and classes that lead to productive outcomes. Since its publication, more than 10,000 copies have been sold.

TE's reliance on interactive methods is based in the belief that groups function optimally when everyone's voice is heard and when group members are given the tools they need to develop relationships based on mutual trust and respect. In this kind of caring and safe environment, people of all ages become willing to take chances and experiment with new forms of creative problem solving. Furthermore, the use of interactive methods brings out thoughts, feelings, experiences, and skills that would otherwise remain hidden, thus creating a much broader basis for reaching a consensus to take action and to maintain the motivation to see that the chosen actions are successfully implemented.

Teen Empowerment uses these interactive methodologies in every aspect of our work with youth, police, public officials, and community residents. We have found that the thoughtful application of these methods helps groups to effectively achieve their goals. Furthermore, Teen Empowerment uses interactive techniques to continuously reinforce the vital link between a group's

mission and its current work -- thereby increasing the group's investment in the ultimate success of its community-building efforts. Thorough integration of these methods into all aspects of our work allows Teen Empowerment to engage the hearts, minds, and energies of diverse groups of people of all ages and backgrounds in coming together, building relationships based on cooperation and respect, and working together to find solutions to difficult problems.

How Does the Teen Empowerment Model Work?

Teen Empowerment operates sites in Boston and Somerville, MA, and in Rochester, NY. All sites follow the same extensively documented process to hire young people, train them in the work they have been hired to do, supervise them in the implementation of a community change strategy, and work with them to develop the learning and workplace skills required for their demanding jobs.

Youth Leadership Hiring Process

The initial phase of a TE Youth Organizing project is the Youth Leadership Hiring Process, which is used to identify youth, including those at highest risk, who will form the Youth Organizer group. The hiring process includes an extensive recruitment of applicants; a first interview consisting of a two-hour interactive group session and a

ten-minute individual interview; and a second interview, using the same methods as the first, conducted with about one-third of the initial applicant pool.

Following the second round of interviews, site staff consider each of the applicants. TE seeks to hire a group at each site that is gender-balanced and reflects as closely as possible the diversity of the community where the site is located, including hiring at-risk and proven-risk youth, such as court-involved youth, teen parents, and those in the care of the state. Through this process, staff identify youth who both are connected to all of the various subgroups of the targeted community and are willing and able to learn the skills they will need to bring people together, to build relationships of cooperation and respect in the community, and to lead the subgroups that they represent toward the creation of better lives for themselves and their communities.

Training and Planning

Once hired, Youth Organizers meet four to five afternoons per week for three hours per day during the school year and four to five hours per day in the summer. During the first two weeks, they complete an intensive training using TE's unique curriculum, designed to: build group and individual relationships; examine the issues identified in the hiring process and place them in a larger social context; develop a strategy to address youth violence and create a year-long action plan timeline; plan the first

strategic initiative using TE's Ten-Step Planning Process; and orient youth to the work contract, which establishes expectations for behavior and clearly outlines the consequences if youth organizers fail to meet those expectations.

Following the initial training period, Youth Organizers work within the context of TE's planning process to plan and implement the initiatives that comprise their community-change strategy. The first session of each week is used to address group issues and implement the Behavior Change System.

Community-Building Initiatives

The core of the Youth Organizers' work is to plan and implement a series of initiatives designed to achieve their goals of resolving conflicts; building relationships based on cooperation and respect; and creating consensus and commitment to work for positive community change. Initiatives range from the large scale, reaching up to 800 participants in youth-run conferences, healing ceremonies, and social events, to smaller scale -- meetings and gatherings engaging 20-100 people, in police/youth and community/youth dialogues and youth-to-youth community building and conflict resolution sessions.

In addition, youth organizers and youth volunteers from all sites participate in city, state, and community forums to

bring an informed and prepared youth perspective into the civic dialogue concerning issues that affect their lives. Finally, all sites in each city work together to plan and implement community-wide initiatives. The largest of these are the Youth Peace Conferences, which draw approximately 800 youth for daylong, completely youth-run gatherings. To date there have been 41 conferences held including 25 in Boston, 11 in Somerville, and five in Rochester, involving more than 25,000 youth.

The most significant impact of these gatherings, however, is not the total number of participants but the quality of the experiences, engaging hundreds of young people from extremely high-risk backgrounds in telling their stories, expressing their emotions, and committing themselves to creating communities based on respect and cooperation, while building enormous good will among youth and between young people and the adult world. One indication of the power of these events can be appreciated by the fact that, even though they have intentionally included youth from warring neighborhoods and gangs, in 25 years there has never been a fight or physical confrontation of any kind at a Teen Empowerment youth conference. This is directly due to the fact that young people are communicating a powerful message of mutual respect, which creates an environment where healing is possible and violence unthinkable.

Behavior Change System

TE's Behavior Change System is used to develop work, learning, and communication skills within the context of TE Youth Organizing groups. The system also has broad application and has been used in a variety of projects that seek to employ participants in group-work settings to address communication and behavioral issues. The system consists of the following components:

- *Youth Organizer Contract*: The Youth Organizer Contract details exactly what is expected of each group member and the precise consequences for failing to meet the expectations. Expectations are clearly outlined and cover some 25 behavioral categories, including motivation and attitude and behavior within the group and the larger community. As importantly, the contract process takes place following the feedback within the weekly session, with the goal of communicating that behavioral issues are a consequence not of the youth organizer's relationship with the adult authority figure, but of the young person's own choices, and that these issues undermine their commitment to the group and to themselves.
- *Weekly Feedback*: In the feedback element, participants learn how to give and receive both criticism and praise and to view feedback as a set of skills that can be improved through practice and reflection. Feedback aims to connect positive emotions with both positive and negative information

about each group member. In the weekly behavior-change session, facilitators first lead the group through exercises designed to surface group issues. They then provide training in feedback skills. Finally, the facilitators open the feedback session: facilitators give feedback to group members, group members give feedback to one another, and group members give feedback to the facilitators.

- *Intensive Feedback*: Once a year, each TE site participates in a daylong Intensive Feedback session. In the morning of the session, an outside facilitator conducts interactive exercises designed to surface group issues. The afternoon consists of further training in feedback skills, time to prepare feedback, and approximately three hours of feedback. There are several formats for feedback, but generally Intensive Feedback is done using a format in which each participant takes a turn in the middle of the circle and receives feedback from all other group members. Intensive Feedback sessions are life-changing in nature and result in significant individual growth, resolution of group tensions, and noticeable gains in the group's ability to work productively to bring respect and understanding into their lives and their communities.

The thoughtful implementation of this step-by-step approach has helped the communities of Boston, Somerville, and Rochester to avoid much unnecessary

damage and to create relationships between youth, police, and community that have improved community-wide outcomes in dramatically positive ways. At times of crisis in each of these cities, leaders could have turned to policies that would have made a bad situation worse. Instead, rather than turn on their youth with military-style policing tactics, these cities asked young people to join them as partners in solving the communities' problems. Many hundreds of police officers working today in Boston, Somerville, and Rochester will attest to the power of direct, personal, youth-led dialogue to enrich their understanding of young people, challenge their stereotypes, and create productive relationships that enhance their ability to enforce the law and prevent crimes.

How We Know that it Works

In 2013, TE worked with Dr. Russell Schutt at the University of Massachusetts Boston to conduct an independent, multi-faceted evaluation of TE's work in Somerville, MA. This study established significant positive results for individual youth showing that, compared to peers, youth who work at TE enter the program with lower levels of self-esteem and employability than the control group and leave with higher levels of employability and greatly improved self-esteem and are more civically engaged, and these impacts are sustained over time. In addition, the study contained statistically significant

evidence that TE's efforts were responsible for a 50 percent decrease in the level of juvenile crime in Somerville's highest crime neighborhood from 2004 to 2013.

Why Teen Empowerment is a Must-Have

There are a multitude of programs that address the needs for counselling, drug prevention and intervention, tutoring, GED, mentoring, and many other laudable efforts. These one-on-one approaches are essential, but they are not sufficient because they do not address the need to impact the larger picture of the adolescent belief systems that determine the behavior patterns that most youth live by. Teen Empowerment is an innovative and essential program because it engages youth in leadership positions where they work to have direct impact on the belief systems of their peers. The work that TE youth organizers are doing is more than an exercise that helps them alone; they are successfully working to shift the adolescent culture away from gangs, violence, drugs, and irresponsible sexual behavior and towards positive involvement with their community. Teen Empowerment is an important addition to the service delivery system because it works on the macro level to create an environment where individually focused services can be more successful. Teen Empowerment provides urban neighborhoods with the missing ingredient that helps communities to reach a tipping point where rates of

murder, drug overdose, pregnancy, suicide, and so many other negative behaviors decline and positive educational and vocational outcomes increase. It is an investment that will pay off for youth, police, and communities, and all those who want a better future for our society.

Works Cited

Monroe County, NY Crime Laboratory

FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program

Schutt, Russel K. and Whitney Becker, "A Multi Method Evaluation of Process and Outcome." Department of Sociology. University of Massachusetts Boston, funded research, Fetzer Institute.