

# The Power of Engagement

By Karen Pittman, September 1999

"Problem-free isn't fully prepared." I coined this phrase more than a decade ago to explain quickly to diverse audiences the fundamental difference between the goals of prevention and preparation, and the practices of working from strengths rather than addressing deficits. It stuck. I have threatened to have bumper stickers made, but haven't.

Good thing. Because while "problem-free isn't fully prepared" served as an adequate mantra for the 1990s, something stronger is needed for the decades ahead. We are not doing well by our youth. Far too many are poor, marginally literate and marginally connected to school, work and community.

So I am adding a second line. It is not as catchy as the first, but it addresses a concern about some of the work that goes on in the name of youth development. The expanded phrase: "Problem-free isn't fully prepared. And fully prepared isn't fully engaged." Supporting youth development is not just about building the competencies, confidence, character and connections of our future leaders. It is about actively engaging young people in their own development and that of their peers, families, schools, communities, cultures and country.

There is something developmental about engagement. Young people (like adults) often must address their own issues in order to be contributors or change agents in other arenas. But the engagement is not linear. Just as "fixing" happens often best through the development of other strengths, development often happens best through participation in causes bigger than oneself. Skills, attitudes, values and insights grow more quickly when there is purpose, especially when that purpose is immediate, relevant and external.

Talking about the many forms of youth engagement (such as governance, organizing, advocacy, activism, service, voice, entrepreneurship and apprenticeship) and reviewing the literature on leadership has led to two sets of humbling questions. First, what are the attitudes, values, skills and knowledge bases that young people need to take action? How are these best nurtured? Second, what kind of actions might young people take? How are youth best involved in social and organizational change? Pursuing these led to more conversations with adults, trying to tease out the real and perceived distinctions among youth governance, organizing and service. But the conversations with young people helped the most. They didn't care about labels. They wanted real, ongoing opportunities to learn, work and make a difference. The operative adjectives for all three types of opportunities were "real" and "relevant:" connect it to our lives, hopes and struggles.

What do they want from adults? They want more adults in their organizations and communities who are leaders, who have hope and take action. They want those adults to unlearn what they think they know: Leave their assumptions at the door, listen and understand what teens are going through. They want those adults to work with them to create a space where they can voice their complaints, share their ideas, build relationships, create agendas, do critical research, help identify the sources of power and plan and take action.

How did they describe themselves? Some shunned the term leader, some did not. All agreed that they were individuals who acted on their beliefs, listened to others, looked for opportunities to make a difference, were internally motivated, initiated things, sought experience and taught. The self-ascribed characteristics of young leaders are amazingly close to the “clusters of strengths” that Steven and Sybil Wolin found, after years of research, to define resilience: Insight, independence, relationships, initiative, humor, creativity, morality.

What do we do with this? We could do nothing. These are not new insights. Or we could really listen.

Young people need a language and a process for identifying and using their strengths to address their problems, and find ways to change their communities. Adults often need a language and a process for helping. Recognizing that resilience skills are also leadership skills (which are also important youth development outcomes) may help adults who work with youth further understand and value this important learning and reflection process.

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