
Mentoring Youth For Success on Boards and Commissions

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One key element in fostering successful youth-adult partnerships on boards, commissions, or other governing bodies is to create an environment in which more experienced members take personal responsibility to orient and support newer members. Through this process, the more experienced “mentors” will also learn from the newer “mentees” experiences and perspectives.

While this dynamic can develop informally in your group, it's a good idea to create a formal mentorship infrastructure to orient young people and facilitate adult board members' individual learning from youth colleagues. Although this section applies more directly to organizations that plan to add youth seats to an existing adult governing body, organizations with youth advisory boards can pair mentors from their adult boards of directors with youth advisory board members. After the first group of youth is integrated, you might also wish to experiment with youth-to-youth peer mentorship structures.

After youth participants in our Young Active Citizens' pilot project had been on their respective governing bodies for several months, we hosted an informal workshop for them to share successes and challenges. Although the youth were overwhelmingly positive about their organizations, some who did not participate in a formal mentorship process reported the following:

“I was given a written orientation packet, which helped. What's more difficult was the unwritten culture – the group dynamics and informal culture.”

“I was taken on a tour of the center, its staff and its programs. The other board members were nice and mellow, but I wasn't sure what I brought to the board and what others expected of me.”

“It took awhile to figure out dynamics and roles – who's doing what and why.”

“When I first joined, I wanted someone to explain Robert’s Rules of procedures and general board processes. I was frightened and felt awkward.”

“It was great to get informal mentoring from the board president and my adult subcommittee members. I was often invited to lunch to talk about current projects, board dynamics, and other things not necessarily available in written form.”

By creating a formal mentorship program in which adult members take responsibility to get to know and work with the new youth members, your group will help orient the youth members to your group’s informal processes, dynamics, and overall culture. And remember, the benefits will flow in *both* directions! The adults will inevitably learn a lot from their youth mentees as well.

The next few pages will set forth some basic suggestions on how to create a mentor-mentee program, including:

- How to formalize a mentorship structure
- Suggested mentor responsibilities
- Guidelines for how mentors can provide support regarding group meetings
- A sample mentor/mentee agreement
- How to create informal supports of youth members beyond your mentor/mentee program

How to Formalize a Mentorship Structure

1. Obtain organizational and personal commitments:

In order for it to succeed, your mentorship structure will need the following components:

An adult individual (or group committee) to oversee the mentorship program. This could be your board development or governing body recruitment committee, if such committees exist, or a wholly new mentorship committee. Make sure you have adults to match with all your youth members.

2. Clarify oversight roles, such as:

- Supporting the mentors in fulfilling their duties.
- Clarifying mentor’ duties.
- Providing training and necessary background information to mentors.
- Ensuring a certain level of consistency across the mentorship program.

3. Determine who will be the mentors

If youth will serve on particular committees or subgroups, mentors from those committees or subgroups are ideal. Try to recruit mentors who will be open to learning and growing from their relationship with the mentee.

4. Create a letter of agreement for mentor and mentee pairings:

Both mentor and mentee should sign the letter, and copies should be saved in the mentor's and mentee's files. The letter should cover:

- Roles and responsibilities (as shared below).
- Standing meeting times.
- Length of mentor term
- You should also create a blank to insert each mentee's individual needs – the same roles and responsibilities may not apply to each pair.

5. Structure: How often should mentors and mentees meet separately from meetings?

They should have designated meetings *before and after each group meeting*.

Ideally, meetings (especially the pre-group meeting) should be in person but a phone-check would suffice if either party is on a tight schedule. These meetings could be immediately before and after group meetings, or scheduled on other occasions like over lunch. They should, however, take place within a few days of group meetings.

6. Mentor ratio and terms

There should be one mentor for each youth mentee. Depending on how often your board meets and what works for your group structure, mentor terms can last for 6 months or 1 year.

7. Evaluation

Set aside time for a check-in with all mentors and mentees in your group halfway through the term. Your group president and/or executive director should be present at this meeting. This meeting can provide invaluable feedback and allow you to do course correction if things are not working out. At the last board meeting of the term, recognize the contribution of youth members and their mentors. Invite both to share their experiences as mentor/mentee and help inspire other adult members to become mentors.

Make sure you also check in periodically with mentors to see how they are learning and growing from their relationship with the mentees.

Mentor Responsibilities

You can probably think of many things that would have helped you when you first joined the board or leadership group of your organization. Here are some responsibilities we suggest when outlining the roles of a mentor:

■ Before the mentee's board or leadership group service begins:

- Make sure youth members are prepared and given a thorough orientation of the who, what history, mission, structure of the board or group leadership, and of the organization as a whole. It may be helpful if the board provides bios of each group member.
- Spend informal time together getting to know each other before the mentee's first group meeting. Help the mentee think about which committee(s) s/he would like to serve on.
- Get to know and learn from the mentee's experiences and perspectives.

For the mentee's first group meeting:

- The mentor and mentee should try to arrive a few minutes early
- The mentor should introduce the mentee to other group members as they arrive.
- Once the formal meeting begins, the mentor should introduce the mentee to the convened group. The other members should introduce themselves and give information such as their positions (president, secretary, etc.), what committees they're on, their occupations, why they chose to join this group, etc.
- All members should wear nametags.

Before, during, and after group meetings:

- Make sure the mentee knows about and attends each meeting (via reminder calls, emails, etc.) Check-in with the mentee about safe transportation to and from meetings and events.
- Whenever possible, meet with the mentee before each meeting to prepare. If a meeting isn't feasible, check in via telephone. Let the mentee know it's okay to ask questions!
- Support and encourage the mentee to verbally participate during meetings.
- For the first few meetings, try to schedule a quick check-in during a break at the group meeting to gauge how things are going. However, as time goes on this may be unnecessary.
- Debrief with the mentee after meetings, either by checking in informally immediately after the meeting or through a follow up phone call or lunch. Assist the mentee in choosing and shaping projects (for example, development, program, etc.). Continue examining what you're learning from your relationship with the mentee, and incorporate that knowledge into the work you do for the organization.

Relationship-building

- Check-in with the mentee's family to make sure they are clear and reasonably supportive about board commitment, activities, etc.
- Communicate with the designated mentor coordinator or coordinating committee on a regular basis about your mentor/mentee relationship.
- Think about ways for the youth member to share his or her experiences with peers.
- Respect and advocate for his or her ideas and contributions in group meetings.
- Provide informal supports – for example, introduce and orient youth members if they attend adult receptions and events with you.
- Share personal information such as your motivations and life experiences – such exchanges will help the mentee feel more connected to the group.
- Trust your mentee as a full partner in your endeavors!

Detailed Meeting Check-in Guide

Pre Meeting

Mentor and mentee should meet before each meeting to:

- Preview the agenda, answer any questions.
- Discuss possible contributions and opinions about agenda items.
- If mentee is hesitant to participate, remind him or her that it is important to participate and support him or her to feel comfortable doing so.
- Discuss how to contribute to committee work.
- Set goals for meetings (for example, young person speaks up at least 3 times)
- Plan for a way to reach goals.
- Mentors should ask: 1) Do you need any background on any of the listed agenda items?
2) What else would be helpful for us to discuss before the meeting?

Post Meeting

Build in time for a mentor-mentee check in after meetings. Some issues to discuss are:

- What were some highlights of the meeting?
- What worked or didn't work for you at this meeting?
- What questions or observations do you have about how the meeting was run?
- What questions or observations do you have about how the group interacted?
- What did you like about how you participated? What would you like to do differently at future meetings?
- What information do you need to help you participate more?
- Do you feel comfortable about the location and time of the meeting?

Sample Mentor/Mentee Agreement Form

Thank you for your commitment to serve on the _____. We have established a mentoring structure to help you, as a new youth member, feel comfortable in your role, and to make sure you're getting what you need from us. The mentoring term is _____mentors and mentees should meet in person or by phone at least once before and after each meeting, and check in as necessary. Here are some of the things you and your mentor formally agree to do:

As a mentor I will:

- Introduce you to each group member present at your first group meeting.
- Call you before each meeting and make sure you've received board packets. I'll also answer any questions you may have about the agenda.
- I'll meet with you in person or by phone before and after each board meeting so you and I can ask each other questions.
- Check in with your parents or guardians in case they have questions about the time you're spending with us.
- Encourage you to take leadership in committees and /or group projects.
- Call you ahead of time if I can't attend a board meeting.
- Continually reflect on what I'm learning from you about youth perspectives and about how we can further accommodate those perspectives in our organization.
- Be open to learning from you, your perspective, and your ideas.

As I mentee I will

- Meet with you before group meetings. I'll also meet with you after group meetings in case there are things I need to check in with you about.
- Let you know if I have questions about the agenda or the group itself.
- Call you ahead of time if I can't attend a board meeting.
- Ask questions about things I don't understand.
- Let you know about my perspective as a young person and give input on how our organization can better accommodate that perspective.
- Share my perspectives and opinions with you.

During the board year, the mentor/mentee coordinator will meet with you and the other mentors/mentees to see how things are going. We look forward to your feedback and your service in the coming year.

Mentor _____ Date _____

Mentee _____ Date _____