

Building Leaders: Reflections from a PowerCorps PHL leader

By Mabari Byrd and Kisha Bird

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to present with a powerful leader, Mabari Byrd, at the 3rd Annual Cities United national convening in Birmingham, Alabama about employment pathways for opportunity youth. Mabari focused his presentation on lessons learned from the PowerCorps PHL program, where he is a Supervisor. PowerCorpsPHL is a City of Philadelphia AmeriCorps initiative that engages young adults, ages 18–26, in transforming their lives through service. PowerCorpsPHL members are predominately male (82%) and people of color (96% are African-American, 3% Hispanic/Latino and 1% White). Roughly 75% have been involved in the justice system and 20% in the foster care system.

PowerCorps PHL was featured as a promising model to improve employment outcomes for young men of color in a [recently released RWJF and Moriah Group brief](#) authored by CLASP. We know it will take more than strong programs to connect young men of color and opportunity youth to employment, career pathways, and opportunity including, public and private investment; robust federal, state and local policies; and attention to how policy and investment combat structural racism and target communities and populations in most need. Nevertheless, at the core, are leaders like Mabari and programs like PowerCorps PHL that inspire transformation and connect young men to economic opportunity.

Below Mabari shares FIVE KEYS that he has found effective in supporting opportunity youth in his community that addresses recidivism, leadership, mentoring, team building, and capacity building.

1. Recidivism: Breaking the Cycle by Changing the Circle

Many opportunity youth have become accustomed to leaning on social circles that have a negative influence on them for support. These connections are one of the strongest factors that can increase their chances of going back to prison. Many of their self-destructive habits and behaviors stem from the familial influence of "friends". We must address the need for youth to begin to identify and cut off those individuals who've played influential roles toward leading and encouraging them to participate in self-destructive behavior. Building new social networks is key toward combating this challenge.

2. Leadership: Action Breakthrough Leadership

Building leadership that takes on a more empowering approach rather than a teaching method. Adult allies must be clear to youth that they already possess the leadership within them. This is in contrast to conveying a message that they must first earn and gain leadership skills that they may not possess yet. Mentors and other allies should have the perspective of looking to extract their talents rather than instilling talents in them, all of which can make a big difference in how opportunity youth respond to mentoring.

3. Mentoring: Molding through Mentoring

Encourage vs Discourage. Many mentors can lose sight on just how easy it is to fall into a discouraging rant or approach by neglecting the "Sandwich" approach when giving constructive feedback. We want opportunity youth to reflect on the feedback that they receive, so it's important that we provide them with something positive to "step on" and something constructive to reflect on. Remember, we are their life coaches. They are our talented players. If we forget to inspire and lead, we can become their fans. And what do fans do? They cheer you on when you are winning, but tear you down when you are losing. Eventually, youth stop listening to their fans, which we want as mentors/leaders. But if they categorize us as leaders to be just another fan, then we lose their willingness to play for us.

4. Team Building: Teamwork Puts the Team First

This is a huge factor when it comes to providing opportunity youth with a safe and organic environment to create new social circles and strengthen their interpersonal skills. Group meetings, program/organizational chants (that tie in to mission statement), large group outings (outside of work or program hours), and just doing fun activities help break the monotony that can come with intense self-reflection. Team building provides opportunity youth with a "spiritual break" on their developmental journey. As leaders/mentors, we can forget just how hard it is for our youth to look in the mirror and began deconstructing and reconstructing their self-identity, especially when they've lived in environments where so many negative people have told them they "look" fine. Plus, this "spiritual break" becomes that more recharging when opportunity youth can share this with their peers.

5. Building Capacity by Building Leaders: Your Impact is Your Best Pitching Point

In considering organization capacity standpoint, I pose this question: how can you build capacity to help provide more employment opportunities for opportunity youth? Well, you can always send a senior staff or administrator to speak about your organization at various events related to workforce expansion and your program model. You can hire an external partner to build relationships with companies and businesses. However, I think one of the most effective ways to build workforce capacity for any organization serving opportunity youth is to allow the youth that you are building and working with to be your organization's ambassadors and representatives. This approach has benefits for youth and the organization on so many levels; most importantly it provides an opportunity for your organization's brand to be recognized by seeing youth to be leaders live and in person. Here are a few actions steps to build the brand by building leaders:

- provide opportunities for youth to strengthen their public speaking and networking skills
- have potential employers meet and socialize with potential employees and youth leaders
- support seasoned staff to work with entry level staff and youth leaders to participate in local and national events