

BUILDING, DEVELOPING, AND GOING TO SCALE:  
GRANT FUNDED PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH IN TRANSITION

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TOOL FOR NAVIGATING THE ROAD TO WORK

# MODULE 3

## LEADERSHIP, COMMUNICATIONS, AND OUTREACH

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National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth

“The significant problems that we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when they were created.”

— Albert Einstein

## **MODULE 3:**

### **Leadership, Communications and Outreach**

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies.

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Information on the Collaborative can be found at

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>.

Information about the Office of Disability Employment Policy can be found at

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>.

# INTRODUCTION

The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (DOL/ODEP) has embarked on an ambitious youth-focused research initiative. Its primary purpose is to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities who are transitioning into workplace settings. Currently, the outcomes are poor, and have been so for some time.

The ODEP youth initiative presents states and local communities with an opportunity to reverse this trend for youth with disabilities. These grants, combined with ODEP’s funded technical assistance, can help non-profit public and private entities build a system of care for transitioning youth.

The rationale for this initiative is well justified. The outcomes for youth with disabilities continue to be unsatisfactory, in almost all areas. There is little likelihood that they will find meaningful employment as they begin the transition process. More disturbing, the lack of an organized system of support continues to hamper their chances of success. Numerous studies report problems addressing the transition needs of youth with disabilities through interagency collaboration and cooperation. Indeed, all ODEP grantees are no doubt aware that the following problems exist in many state and local systems:

- Lack of shared student information across agencies
- Lack of follow-up data on program recipients that could be used to improve efficiency and effectiveness
- Deficient interagency agreements
- Difficulty in predicting needed post-secondary services
- Minimized role for parents and student in decision-making
- Inefficient and ineffective management practices

Grantees should also understand that their participation in these initiatives are coming at a time when both government and philanthropic organizations are focusing their attention on the broader arena of “transition.” Although each of the

## ODEP’s Mission

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership by developing and influencing disability-related employment policy as well as practice affecting the employment of people with disabilities.

Its vision is a world in which people with disabilities have unlimited employment opportunities.

ODEP serves as a catalyst for change through:

- Developing evidence-based employment solutions
- Delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities
- Guiding economic and social policy
- Building collaborative networks

ODEP youth projects have different emphases, they all share one thing in common: the charge to organize their work around evidence-based system neutral guiding principles and guideposts that help youth-serving institutions improve the transition process. For many youth at risk, entry into the new economy is nearly impossible. This includes young people leaving foster care, youth who are returning from juvenile justice facilities, and those who have chronic mental health concerns. There is an acknowledgement, based on credible evidence, that the discreet systems for these populations working in isolation are simply not effective. Further, the overlap between these high risk populations and youth with disabilities is considerable. In that sense, the grantees who are participating in the ODEP initiative are part of a much larger national process examining how the challenges for youth in transition can become opportunities. That implies that as a field of practice, the grantees, in collaboration with their state partners, can move towards a more comprehensive understanding of service delivery approaches, policy changes, funding strategies and desired outcomes.

The reality is that no one organization ever “owns” the transition responsibility. Multiple agencies are responsible for parts of the transition process. Success requires building cross-agency partnerships – based upon the guideposts – to affect multiple delivery systems.

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Like most well-intended reform initiatives, ODEP's youth initiative has created a high level of excitement, especially among veteran service providers. The initial reports from the grantees regarding their progress are very positive. Though it is still too early to identify any specific effective practices, there are undoubtedly several promising approaches. Although one common element of these approaches is that they are mostly centered on direct services, the key point is that agencies, intermediaries, and workforce development systems will need to craft new collaborative arrangements that include representation by human services, employers, business, education, vocational rehabilitation and young people. Again, this becomes especially relevant in light of a broader, national level of attention.

Grantees, currently or in the near future, will be approaching the critical stage of determining how to take their work to scale, how to build strategic collaborative relationships, how to blend and braid resources, and how to sustain their work past the grant

period. This document is being prepared as a technical assistance tool for grantees and their sub-grantees. It is part of an overall strategy to support the work of grantees entering these critical stages.

These modules reflect a combination of established practices from human systems and educational reform, successful business models, and responses to insightful questions raised by ODEP's grantees. Even though their original purpose was to support the efforts of the ODEP's grantees, the information contained in the modules have utility for anyone involved in workforce development system, state agencies working with youth in transition, policy makers and any public or private funders interested in innovative, collaborative youth development efforts. The modules are not meant to provide a step-by-step approach, nor should they imply any linear process. Instead they offer a straightforward overview of the complex and deliberate interactions and coordination needed to effectively fulfill our collective responsibility to improve the well-being of youth with disabilities.

# LEADERSHIP

## LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE TWO TEAMS

No discussion of system building can take place unless there is an individual or an entity that provides leadership on the issues. Often, leadership for youth-oriented initiatives emerges from state or local government, especially if there is sufficient data to support a politically safe approach. Data can tell a story, and in turn, provide a success or a cover story for a leader. A leader can use this story, supported by the data, to attract partners within and outside of government and to help create resources. The opportunity to improve the outcomes for transitioning youth can become a rallying point for other providers of services.

While effective leadership is crucial to the success of any initiative, so too is the functioning of the two teams

found in every local, state and federal administration. The one team represents the short-term stakeholders who frequently transition with the arrival of each new administration, while the other team represents careerists who will generally outlast each administration. Understanding what these teams need to do independently and what they need to do together is a critical component of the building, developing and going to scale cycle. For grantees, the task is to build a broad constituency for the initiative with both teams, encompassing all of the critical long and short-term partners.

The one team's elected and appointed officials typically look to leave a legacy whereas the other team's career staff tend to be more concerned with managing the

### LEADERSHIP: Understanding the Potential of Both Teams

In his book, *On Leadership*, the late John Gardner noted that leaders are inevitably faced with the same decisions that every manager faces: when to take a short-term loss to achieve a long-term gain and how to allocate resources, as well as whom to trust with a delicate assignment. His conclusion? It's not necessarily accurate to distinguish between leaders and managers regarding their respective roles. Rather effective leaders and managers distinguish themselves from ineffective ones in at least six respects. Each of these has relevance for grantees' tasks of building, developing and going to scale and most importantly, sustaining the initiatives past the grant cycle:

#### Effective Leadership (and Management)

- Thinks longer term – beyond the day's crises, beyond the quarterly report, beyond the horizon.
- Grasps the initiatives' and organizations' relationship to larger realities – the larger organization, of which they are a part, conditions external to the organization, global trends.
- Reaches and influences constituents beyond their jurisdictions, beyond boundaries. In an organization, effective leaders extend their reach across bureaucratic boundaries – often a distinct advantage in a world too complex and tumultuous to be handled “through channels.” Leaders' capacity to rise above jurisdictions may enable them to bind together the fragmented constituencies that must work together to solve a problem.
- Emphasizes the intangibles of vision, values and motivation and understands intuitively the non-rational and unconscious elements in leader-constituent interactions.
- Has the political skill to cope with the conflicting requirements of multiple constituencies.
- Thinks in terms of renewal. The routine manager tends to accept organizational structure and process as it exists. The effective leader/manager seeks the revisions of process and structure required by ever-changing reality.

daily operations of that legacy and assuring an appropriate distribution of resources and quality control. As the one team's elected officials change, or leave office, the other team's career staff often are in the position of maintaining the work in a holding pattern. As a result of this common dynamic, grantees need to make sure that a cushion exists for the changes that will inevitably occur. For example, an otherwise healthy organization can adapt to the loss of (or lack of effective) elected or appointed individuals while still maintaining *business as usual* for some time since the common dynamic is for the career staff to assume and/or accept responsibility and make the necessary decisions to keep things going (e.g. contracts for services). This extends to accepting informal leadership roles—all in the pursuit of serving the populations they work with. While this interim structure can continue for a short period of time, without proper management and mandates, a vitally important result will be forfeited: the organization and its services will fail to develop. Grantees may have the greatest impact on sustaining an organization if they work to assure a shared process of management, which allows for a respect of and by both teams.

### Delegation of Team Responsibilities

The elected or appointed team is essentially responsible for creating or refining the initiative's vision, clarifying the mandate to proceed, authorizing the expenditure of resources and maintaining public support for the work. On a practical level, they will also be responsible for providing the authority for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). In a state such as Iowa, and in a number of other locations, the MOU has exemplified the shaping of a vision, the development of collaborative partnerships, an agreement on shared outcomes, and the ability to commit dollars and staff to the implementation of transition outcomes.

For the career staff, on the other hand, tasks tend to be considerably more operational. When an organization's upper management rotates in and out periodically, it is the career managers and supervisors who are left to actually plan, organize, lead and coordinate the initiative's activities. Thus, pro-active management from within the career team can make a difference. By working in a process-oriented way, the organization's mid-level career supervisors and managers can help

open the door to participation and involvement of both teams in developing ongoing organizational culture and outcomes. Such management styles have proven to increase involvement, motivation, creativity and power in organizations and create the vehicles for lasting change. In addition to this proactive style of management, career staff need to be able to consistently apply the most basic of management skills and be given the opportunity to fully do so—most likely by with the consent of the current elected or appointed officials.

Grantees cannot afford to ignore the critical functions of career staff. The tasks of the career staff are at the heart of what happens on a daily basis within the organization and include:

1. What needs to be done to support building the *state* infrastructure, i.e. effective meeting management, hiring and training new employees, and effective employee performance management.

## What Successful Career Managers Should Be Doing In This Initiative

- **Monitor** the progress towards the transition goals for youth and monitor whether practice/policy is being implemented properly
- **Ensure** that data is analyzed with specific attention to aberrations in quantitative information
- **Communicate** information to the appointed or elected decision makers enabling them to make sound policy, funding, planning, operational and resource decisions for the youth served
- **Identify and clarify problems** within the system and provide solutions, as well as determine the usefulness of specific service strategies
- **Suggest** necessary changes in procedure, policy and practice, as well as resource allocations, based on the desired outcomes of the local initiative

## QUICK TIP

**In your initiative, who is generally responsible for the tasks listed in the chart?  
Where and when are these responsibilities shared?**

Question or Task	Career Staff	Elected or Appointed Staff	BOTH
• Who sets the transition goals for all youth?			
• Who establishes and obtains buy-in of the vision?			
• Who collects the information?			
• What are the privacy rules?			
• Who receives the information of progress?			
• Who interacts with the legislature?			
• Who gets the “public report card?”			
• Who decides what works?			
• Who is responsible for the initiative’s overall success?			
• Who is responsible for how the initiative is accomplished?			

## QUICK TIP

**The Success of an initiative is dependent upon its leadership at a variety of levels**

***Leadership within the context of a successful initiative has several well recognized dimensions:***

- It should have a mantle of sponsorship or endorsement of the work. For purposes of sustainability, leadership will eventually need to come from within the government and the legislature.
- It should include an inspiring vision, which can translate into a framework and a strategic plan

that supports change in a realistic time frame.

- It should have a future orientation with an eye towards developing effective practices for transitioning youth.
- It will have to make the difficult decisions regarding what services or supports for youth should be discontinued or re-directed.
- It will have to enlist others in the common goal of improving outcomes for transitioning youth.

More specifically, a leader should eventually designate another level of authority that will support the operational tasks of the grant.

- Finally, leadership should have the ability to work effectively with the broad and diverse set of stakeholders and partners who support youth with disabilities. Often, the critical component of the work is bridge-building and bringing disparate stakeholders to a common ground.

2. What needs to be done to help *local* initiative sites, i.e. identifying new job roles within the organizations which enable the work to get done, communicating the critical priorities of the organization and effective fiscal management.
3. What needs to be done to enhance *collaborative and joint task functions* – including organizing departments and teams, delineating fiscal accountability, and keeping communication lines open to effectively communicate the priorities of the organizations involved.

The scope of work for the career staff is tremendous and in many cases, the success of the initiative depends upon their full engagement. Everyone who is going to be a part of the initiative should be invited to be a part of the effort and should be invited to find and formulate their role in accomplishing the tasks at hand. Grantees should try to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to shape and suggest how the initiative can be improved, taken to scale and sustained. Grantees can also make sure all of the partners have an understanding of the nature and scope of the initiative since a critical element of going to scale and sustaining an initiative is making it *everyone's* legacy.

## COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

**S**trategic and clear communication about any initiative and the population served is a necessity because it helps to “prime the pump.” Communicating the message about an initiative and its goals is both a challenge and an opportunity. Thus, careful, well-conceived and constituency-specific communication strategies are in order. Sites are cautioned not to get too far in front with a communications component before they have developed the more fundamental approach to the changes that are taking place. Too often, by moving too quickly, initiative sites run the risk of calling the public’s limited attention span to something that has little to support its claims of an improvement for young people – making an otherwise promising initiative look like a “flash in the pan.”

### Communications Strategy

Within each site, grantees should begin their communications strategy by asking, who is the point person for communicating the message about the initiative? Initiatives need to delegate at least the initial responsibility for shaping and delivering their message to one key person who can then tie it to the broader communications strategy, which in turn can be tied to a *system-building* strategy.

Most ODEP grantees probably have little time to develop a communications campaign – let alone one that has the potential for such broad implications – therefore, it is advisable that grantees seek adequate

technical assistance around this task, ideally from local or regional experts who have an interest in the particular population of youth being served. Grantees should seek out partners within their own collaboratives who have had experience with political or issue-oriented communications campaigns since the initiative’s primary message will be intended to change the way other professionals and the public think about the issue. Indeed, the main message should become one of the keys to creating the public buy-in that is so necessary for long-term sustainability. Technical assistance could be offered around this task, perhaps from local or regional experts who have an interest in this population of youth. Grantees should seek out someone who has had experience with political or an issue oriented campaign.

The initiative message is one that is intended to change the way other professionals and the public think about the issue. In some cases, it might be the first time people outside of the field have given it any thought at all. The message is not intended as a public relations campaign, but as part of the buy-in necessary for creating long-term sustainability. The power of the message can create not only a change in perception, but a change in behavior as well. The task is to communicate to the public that there is a problem: poor outcomes for youth with disabilities. Fortunately, there are ways to address the problem with support for new approaches. The communications strategy must

articulate the specific problem-solving approaches.

An excellent example of an effective communications strategy and campaign that helped achieve sustainability – is the classic political communications campaign developed many years ago by Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (M.A.D.D.). Both the political/legal strategy and the communications strategy lasted consistently for several years. However, the coordinated strategies of M.A.D.D. ultimately were revolutionary in how the general public, law enforcement and the courts treated both drunk drivers and their victims. M.A.D.D.’s communication strategy was so effective because the public responded to its reasonable approach and because the success stories were so straightforward and compelling. M.A.D.D. showed that good communications campaigns result in changes in public perception and, eventually, in the law.

Both of these examples have in common changes in perception and in the law. Changes that were so dramatic they warranted the legal and financial support necessary for sustainability.

Several remaining elements are worth noting about coordinated communication strategies like M.A.D.D.

- The messengers clearly communicated the bad news
- The messengers immediately followed up by clearly communicating the possibilities of improving the situation and of making a positive difference – the “good news”
- The solutions were embedded in a neutral message that appealed to everyone of any political persuasion
- The solutions were reasonable and achievable because the challenges were put into manageable terms
- Non-traditional voices helped to deliver the message, exerting a greater influence on the general public. Non-traditional voices tend to get people’s immediate attention. And, in the long-term help to build a constituency in the event that elected officials, administrators or funders decide to reduce the available resources or regress to a previous way of doing business. Grassroots constituencies, in particular, parents who are known to vote, can help to keep the message simple, focused and straightforward.

### **Outreach Strategy**

In addition to the need for strategic and clear communication, the successful initiative must pay attention to *effective outreach* – it can help organizations with their long-term planning for youth with disabilities. American businesses seldom individualize their products and services; they use outreach tools to help figure out what groups of people want on a broader scale. Outreach is the art and science of understanding and responding to the needs and wants of groups of people, sometimes called “segments” or “niches.” By focusing on the needs of specific segments of a population, the influences of a “shotgun” approach can be overcome and the right support can be made available to the right young person at the right time. Knowing the potential customers or consumers, and how they will be reached, is one way to assure funders that their resources will be used in a strategic way.

Outreach is also hard work. Business organizations put much effort into sharpening their focus and understanding of what people need. This focus is updated on a regular basis, based on changes in the environment and changes in the behavior of the

### **COMMUNICATIONS TIP:**

***“...Viewing parents as one of their customers, schools should ask three questions:***

- 1. What information and skills will parents need to be our fully informed partner during transition?***
- 2. How can these activities build trust, communication, mutual understanding, and partnership?***
- 3. What will it take to promote parental certainty that we (the school) are working in partnership with them to meet the needs of their children?”***

Adapted from Amy Peet, Maryland Department of Education  
The NTA Resource Bulletin- August, 2000  
From the National Transition Alliance for Youth with  
Disabilities website

populations of interest. A market focus can never be set in stone.

As a beginning point for discussion, there are a variety of segments of youth with disabilities that can be identified. None of these segments of youth can be precisely delineated- young people are too varied for that- and some youth may show characteristics of more than one segment at any point in time. Not surprisingly, these characteristics rarely fit one category of government service. Nonetheless, understanding some of the differences among the highly individual people who make up the population of youth with disabilities is not an impossible task.

A segmentation exercise might reveal youth who require varying degrees of support. Young people, who are able to transition to higher education, work productively and move towards self-sufficiency will require a marginal degree of support. Other youth with more significant disabilities may have a full range of challenges which will undoubtedly require the help of their families and professional educators and counselors. They may or may not be identified in school. They may also be at greater risk of failure if the outreach and services are not easily available and accompanied by a number of individualized supports. Finally, there is a segment of youth who will leave school needing lifelong coordinated community supports. Traditionally, the services for these young people require more highly skilled staff and they are more vulnerable than others to the changes in government policies and funding cycles.

These descriptions of segmentations are broad and not inclusive of all youth. Still, the obvious point is that supports and strategies that seem well placed and informed for some youth, are essentially useless for others. The grantees, through their outreach strategies, can begin to understand what works well for certain youth and should be designing their activities accordingly.

Correspondingly, there is a need to create an organized communications strategy geared to employers. As they are the “other” customer in this transaction, the need to develop a strategic outreach to employers is essential. Nonetheless, it continues to be an intimidating and

mysterious task for many of the youth employment organizations. The emerging evidence indicates that the outreach to employers is successful when it is aligned with their need for competent employees and the knowledge that the youth service providers will serve as consultants. Although a random solicitation of employers by ODEP grantees is likely to be blended into the many unsolicited appeals they receive from a number of organizations, there are steps intermediary organizations can take to facilitate and coordinate their efforts so that this will not occur. For instance an intermediary organization can develop a structured relationship that supports both of their customers – employers and youth.

Employers, like all other members of a community, may need to develop a better understanding of youth with disabilities. One way to assist in changing the perception of youth with disabilities would be to use a media story or a professionally prepared presentation which focuses on success stories. Human interest stories, ideally told from the perspective of the young people or an employer, should include the specifics of what an employer needed to do to reasonably “accommodate” the employee. In addition, the story should illustrate how hiring the youth contributes to the employer meeting its business needs. Many studies have shown that employers do not know what support is available for people with disabilities in the workplace setting. The strategic approach implies going beyond the traditional appeal based on the assumption that employers want to do a good deed. It requires the development of a network of complete and clear data about the population of youth and the employers. Concurrently, as consultants, the grantees should ensure that the intermediary organizations that they are working with are cognizant of the interests of employers, viewing them as distinct customers, and ensuring that they have the information and support that they need to effectively employ youth with disabilities. Meeting regularly with both employers and youth with a customer service approach- what was at one time called “servicing the account”- will help keep the information about both customers up to date and accurate.

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