How To Develop A Strong Climate And Culture At Your YouthBuild Program?

What Is It?

The program elements define what you do (leadership development, job training, academics, counseling & case management, graduate follow up) while climate and culture define how you do all of these things.

Why Is It Important?

Everything Speaks: A program’s climate and culture is not about any one person or event. It infuses everything and emanates from everything. Every program already has some climate and culture. The challenge is to make it effective and positive. It is reflected and echoed in every decision made and every interaction and in the approach to all internal and external stakeholders.

Getting Started:

1. **Interpret the depth and complexity of the YouthBuild model as an asset:**

   It is important to remind others and ourselves that this is a core strength of the program because from a student’s perspective it means all of his/her complex needs can be addressed at one strong program.

2. **Follow mission driven decision making:**

   Build time into the program’s schedule to stop and evaluate whether decisions that have been made are really made with the best interest of young people in mind. Retreats and all-staff meeting times can be planned to get this kind of feedback from staff and students.

3. **Own your outcomes:**

   Have a shared agreement at the program among all stakeholders for what success means to you and what it looks like for you by having robust conversations around what you want for your graduates, and what you need to do to get them there.

4. **Define and assess the student experience at your program:**

   How does a student experience all the decisions the program has made? How do they experience staff-driven actions?

5. **Own your data and assessments:**

   Move beyond data being something that funders ask of you. Use your data and assessments to answer questions such as: “How did students respond to the new course on resume writing?” “Which instructor has the highest attendance, and what does he/she do that drives high attendance?”
6. **Have shared definitions so everyone has a common language for success.**

   Have defined values, goals, ideals, and definitions of what “good” looks like, so that these become an easy reference point for all staff. If staff and students know what they are working toward and how you expect them to work, they will reference and refine the concept with each other more easily. This means that the leader of the program does not have to do all the thinking around ideas for improving performance.

7. **Staff are key to your success:**

   Acknowledge that all YouthBuild roles are challenging but rewarding. Build an understanding and respect through retreats, meetings and professional development of all of the roles in the program. Invest in staff development. Respect people’s intention in the work and bring them together around what they really care about: young people.

8. **Remind yourself that resource-raising is not your primary mission:**

   While it is important to raise funds and resources to sustain the program, this is not your primary mission (even though it may take up a lot of the program leader’s time). Let your program and your data drive funding decisions.

9. **Test your climate & culture constantly:**

   Develop self-checks and authentic measures of your program’s climate & culture. At YouthBuild Philly we have staff and students complete anonymous surveys at least twice each year. Questions cover everything from their satisfaction with programming and daily operations to the general direction of the organization and leadership. Respond to what emerges from feedback. Double check to make sure that messages were heard—especially messages around direction and planning, and allow staff and students to respectfully challenge ideas, program elements or direction. Encourage people to understand the “why” of decisions made and courses followed.