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# The Happiness Factor

## Environmental Factors & Personal Qualities of Mentoring Staff that Stay

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*High turn-over of staff is endemic in non-profit organizations across the country, threatening the stability of models and service outcomes in even the best programs. The cost of such turn-over is staggering, and includes the investment in recruiting and training new staff as well as the lost value of the departing staff member's experience, skill, and knowledge. For mentoring program staff, turn-over is especially problematic as it undermines the very philosophy of trust-building that is at the heart of mentoring. But as discovered through a recent survey conducted by the YouthBuild USA National Mentoring Alliance, the most integrated and big-thinking programs create the most stable environments in which staff is more likely to stay. This white paper provides a summary of promising practices, attitudes, environmental factors, and personal qualities that correlate with a programmatic environment that is favorable for staff retention, as identified by the longest serving mentoring coordinators and their directors.*

Through innovative real-time and web-based technical assistance, just in time training, and a holistic approach which makes use of group mentoring and community service activities to support one-to-one matches, the NMA has been able to scale beyond the minimum forty required to fifty-eight funded mentoring programs. These fifty-eight programs have committed to supporting over 3500 successful mentoring relationships that last fifteen months. In June 2012, YouthBuild USA conducted a survey of the longest serving YouthBuild mentoring coordinators and their directors, specifically focusing on programs that have retained the same mentoring coordinator for a minimum of twenty months. While the NMA has exceeded grant objectives across all measurable categories, the high turn-over of staff endemic in the nonprofit field nationwide was beginning to threaten the sustainability of mentoring within a relatively high number of YouthBuild programs. The cost of such turn-over is staggering, estimated at anywhere from 30% to 176% of a vacant position's annual salary, and includes the investment in recruiting and training new staff as well as the lost value of the departing mentoring coordinator's experience, skill, and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For mentoring staff, turn-over is especially problematic as it undermines the very philosophy of trust-building that is at the heart of YouthBuild mentoring.

The survey was just one element of YouthBuild USA's strategic response to retain staff in this key position across NMA programs. In addition to new coordinator training, targeted outreach to directors, the development of a "[Quick-Start Mentoring Guide](#)" for new mentoring coordinators, and onsite technical assistance addressing critical needs, YouthBuild USA launched this survey to identify what is working in mentoring staff retention.

Twelve mentoring coordinators and eight directors responded, representing the combined wisdom of thirteen of the highest performing NMA programs. In order to create a profile of an "ideal person" for the type of work, information about background and experience was collected. Questions were also asked to gather how respondents feel, think, and engage with their work. The assumption was that patterns in the demographics and attitudinal responses would provide useful patterns in support of staff retention.

From their responses, promising practices, attitudes, environmental factors, and personal qualities have been identified that correlate with a programmatic environment that is favorable for staff retention. While the YouthBuild retention survey was not the same instrument used by the Gallup, Inc.'s ground-breaking study on employee engagement, the alignment between Gallup's "12 Elements of Great Managing" and the YouthBuild findings related to staff retention is remarkable. The following 12 statements were identified by Gallup as predictors of employee engagement and performance:

### 5 WAYS TO RETAIN STRONG & INTEGRATED MENTORING STAFF

1. COMMIT DEDICATED AND TALENTED STAFF TO MENTORING.
2. EMBED MENTORING WITHIN TRANSITION PLANNING, PLACEMENT, & GOAL SETTING DEPARTMENTS.
3. PROVIDE MENTORING SERVICES FOR ALL STUDENTS.
4. PUT MENTORING ON THE PROGRAMMATIC MAP.
5. INCLUDE ALL STAFF & STAKEHOLDERS IN MENTORING.

<sup>1</sup><http://businessjournal.gallup.com/content/23206/great-profit-drain.aspx>

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these statements can be heard echoed in the insights provided by survey respondents.

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS

1. CCEO YouthBuild (CA)
2. LA Conservation Corps
3. Pathways YouthBuild ()
4. Prevention PLUS, Inc. (GA)
5. Sumter County YouthBuild (SC)
6. Metro Atlanta YouthBuild (GA)
7. YouthBuild Brockton (MA)
8. YouthBuild Just-A-Start (MA)
9. YouthBuild of Jefferson and Marion Counties (IL)
10. YouthBuild of Northern Kentucky (KY)
11. YouthBuild Providence (RI)
12. YouthBuilding Alternatives (ME)
13. YouthRebuild LA (LA)

## Promising Practices for Retaining a Strong & Integrated Mentoring Staff

The responses from the long-staying mentoring coordinators and their directors indicate a correlation between the integration of mentoring into the full YouthBuild program and the likelihood of staying longer. These programs have taken an intentional, practical, and committed approach to making mentoring a core element of the YouthBuild experience.

Their comments provide tremendous insight into how to embed mentoring into the DNA of local YouthBuild programs. Their advice and ideas span the very practical to the ambitiously visionary. Here are their “best practices” for mentoring integration:

### **Promising Practice 1 – Commit dedicated and talented staff to the mentoring initiative.**

Program directors who have integrated mentoring into the core workings of their program have a belief in the efficacy of mentoring and a commitment to making it a reality for all of their students. As such, they ensure that mentoring is staffed with a dedicated and talented mentoring coordinator and other staff who are equipped with proper and timely training, supported by peers, and able to advocate for mentoring at the highest levels of the organization. Mentoring staff in such a well-supported program clearly have great incentives to want to stay.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/press/25393/gallup-publishes-longawaited-followup-best-selling-management-book.aspx>

**Promising Practice 2 – Embed mentoring within transition planning, placement, and life/educational plan goal setting.**

Staff that feel they are isolated and disconnected from the rest of the program are going to be at higher risk of leaving when “something better” comes along. There are no personal loyalties or ties that bind them with the program. They also may feel too alone to bring up work challenges with their supervisor, if they are the only one dedicated to a discrete set of responsibilities. Mentoring staff that stay are frequently embedded within other departments that have similar goals, such as transition planning, placement, and life/educational planning. Mentors often support graduates with job and school placement, or serve as “workforce mentors.” As an outgrowth of transition planning, it makes sense that the Mentor Coordinator meets weekly with mentored students to talk about life and educational plan goals; involves mentors in transition planning discussions; encourages mentors to do a job shadow with their mentee; and takes on other placement-related initiatives. Similarly, at some programs, when individuals or companies (businesses and post-secondary educators) are asked to speak to youth, the participants are prepared to look at the opportunity as a mentoring activity.

**Promising Practice 3 – Provide mentoring for all students.**

Each YouthBuild program is a community working together to build a better future for all the participants of the program and for the wider community in which they live. Mentoring coordinators that stay feel connected to this wider vision and believe strongly in the value of mentoring for all the youth in this community. Programs that keep mentoring staff, and who succeed in integrating it within their whole program, believe in the value of mentoring – for all students. They do not limit their vision to a particular funding stream, but articulate a strategy that ensures all students who wish to be mentored have that opportunity. This includes finding additional sources of funding to cover mentoring activities for older students, opening up group mentoring to all, and hosting activities that are open to all students and all mentors.

In the case of one program, the mentoring staff hosts a biweekly “YouthBuild After Hours” for any participant who wishes to attend. “We play games, watch movies, and talk about life, problems, and/or praises. It is an opportunity for participants to interact outside of normal YouthBuild events in an informal setting. I am planning on using the After Hours as a method of recruitment and group activities.”

**Promising Practice 4 – Put mentoring on the programmatic map.**

Directors that are able to keep quality mentoring coordinators also keep mentoring close to the heartbeat of their program. They do not cordon it off as “special” but make sure that mentoring is part of the everyday happenings of all core components within their programs. Mentoring is a budget line item – they write it into all of their grants. They equip, then free, the mentoring coordinator to make mentoring an integral part of every aspect of the program.

For example, on a very practical level, every program has methods for communicating important information to staff, students, and other stakeholders on a regular basis. Ensuring that important mentoring milestones and activities are included in these communication vehicles is a critical integration strategy. This includes mentoring updates and information sharing at weekly staff meetings and mental toughness; addition of mentoring related events on the program-wide calendar; and mentor recruitment opportunities on the program website and in program newsletters.

Programs that integrate mentoring and keep mentoring coordinators also make it a point to thread mentors into the life of the program. They invite mentors to other (non-mentoring) program events (service, social events). They leverage group mentoring times to feature mentors speaking about their areas of expertise or

to lead issues-based discussions. They also invite all staff and students to participate. Such activities are a win-win for all involved, and make the benefits of mentoring very real for the mentors.

Mentoring is also a great way to give youth ways to act out the leadership and life skills they have learned in the program. Some programs do this by having mentees organize events for the whole program that feature mentoring. Others conduct weekly “check-in / check-out” with all mentored youth as a group, making it a special thing to be mentored.

**Promising Practice 5 – Include all staff, board members, and program champions in mentoring.**

There are two sides of the retention question – having the funding to pay for a position and having the staff member that wants to stay in that position. Creating a sense of ownership for mentoring among all staff and stakeholders supports sustainability efforts. It also provides a strong support network for mentoring coordinators to lean on when times get tough – as they inevitably will on occasion.

Programs do this in a number of ways. They invite staff and board members to be mentors and to participate in all mentoring related activities. They also include other staff who are familiar with the students to provide input into the match process. With volunteers who are unable to commit to the mentoring program match, they recruit them to assist in other areas, i.e., recruiting mentors, volunteering at program events, joining the advisory board, soliciting donations and/or marketing the program. They also do things like conducting mentor and mentee training during program hours, so other staff can be involved.

**Promising Practices**

- 1 Commit dedicated and talented staff to the mentoring initiative.
- 2 Embed mentoring within transition planning, placement, and life/educational plan goal setting.
- 3 Provide mentoring for all students.
- 4 Put mentoring on the programmatic map.
- 5 Include all staff, board members, and program champions in mentoring.

## The Mentoring Coordinator's Perspective

**Personal and environmental attributes.** Mentoring coordinators that stay with programs have opportunities for personal and professional development, freedom to try out creative ideas, support from talented colleagues and supervisors, and a reasonable level of authority and responsibility for their job description; believe whole-heartedly and passionately in the importance and effectiveness of mentoring and service and in the young people as agents of change in their own lives and within their communities; are patient, creative, empathetic, skilled, humble (open to life-long learning), and experienced/trained/educated in working with youth; and have a certain stubborn positivity, tenaciously taking on challenges head on and bringing others into the problem-solving process for support and insight.



Mentoring coordinators that stay credit the transformation they see in the youth as the primary thing that keeps them engaged in the program, as well as a strong belief in the societal transformation that happens at the community level as a result of this program. Support from leadership at both the local and national level, as well as positive stories and input from mentors and mentees are very important to long-serving staff. While it is hard work, the challenge itself is part of what keeps them engaged in their work. They believe in mentoring not only because of the positive effect they see in youth, but for the impact it has had in their own lives.

*"I love watching the relationships form. I am humbled and privileged to be a part of that relationship. I love speaking to the community on behalf of mentoring and love igniting the spark in people who want to give back but don't know how."*

*"I believe that every student who enters my program will be successful. If they don't believe it, it doesn't affect my belief that they have the ability to succeed. It may just not be through YB. That keeps me from OVER-investing in the student's success through the program and instead makes me invest in the student themselves."*

## The Job

Mentoring coordinators across the NMA have been vocal about the number of "other duties" that are assigned to them outside of the mentoring initiative. It was therefore assumed that those mentoring coordinators that stayed longer did not have this complaint; i.e. their responsibilities were solely related to the mentoring initiative, with little distraction from "other duties." To test this hypothesis, the question was asked, "Do you wear 'multiple hats' within your program?" All mentoring coordinators that responded to the survey, except one, indicated that they do in fact have other responsibilities outside mentoring. Many of these responsibilities were related to leadership development, life skills, case management, etc. Apparently,

this set of mixed responsibilities allows for greater integration within the program, sustainability of staff, and longevity of mentoring as a core value within the program. From a practical level, this appears to work better than a silo approach where mentoring is off in a virtual corner by itself. The challenge of wearing “multiple hats” remains, which elevates the need for strong time management skills in mentoring coordinators.

Directors, on the other hand, appear to be more focused on their leadership responsibilities as the primary and only task. Of the eight directors responding from seven programs (one program had both an executive director and program director respond to the survey), only one indicated multiple responsibilities outside of program management, oversight, or other administrative duties.

**Supervisory Meetings.** Most mentoring coordinators that stay meet with their supervisors at least once a week, with regular contact throughout the week. The minimum reported meeting frequency was once a month. How often directors meet with their supervisors or key stakeholders about mentoring varies from once a week to quarterly, with the average being multiple times a month. In the words of one mentoring coordinator describing the importance of meetings with her supervisor, “we would meet regularly to discuss students and issues and I constantly felt supported.” At any level, ***regular communication on the subject of mentoring is an indicator of the seriousness with which program leadership holds mentoring.***

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## The Director’s Perspective

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Directors who create program cultures in which mentoring coordinators stay are motivated by the opportunity to lead transformational efforts. They are visionary, empathetic, wise, experienced and skilled in organizational management, and passionate about creating a positive future for the youth they serve. They are not “lone wolf” leaders, but count on a strong network of advisors and delegate real responsibility to a talented team of dedicated staff who they trust and who trust them.

“ I care deeply, I am willing to risk and give others the freedom to risk, I have a deep faith, I have a broad range of skills, I know my community, I am passionate, I have endless vision, and I have a crazy ability to get others to do things they have never done and never thought of doing.”

These findings reinforce the evidence gathered during a needs assessment conducted in 2011 in which directors and program staff pointed to mentoring as a key element in improved outcomes for their students:

*“The impact on the youth is amazing! I can honestly say that each and every one of the youth with a mentor seem to be more comfortable with themselves. More able to take risks, challenge themselves, ask questions, venture out into the world looking for jobs or heading to our local community college”.*

*“The youth in my program who are matched seem more engaged in the Program. They are definitely more invested.”*

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**Figure 1: Average Amount of Time at YouthBuild program**

	Mentoring Coordinators	Directors
<i>With YouthBuild</i>	3 years, 7 months	9 years, 6 months
<i>In current position</i>	2 years, 8 months	6 years, 5 months

Long-serving directors are able to lay a foundation that supports the retention of long-serving and capable employees.

## Conclusion

Mentoring staff have a profound impact within YouthBuild programs across the country. As indicated in the table below, as of December 31, 2012, mentoring coordinators and their supporting staff have been at the center of gravity for thousands of hours of activity. The results are remarkable, with most programs overshooting their proposed recruitment, training, match, and service requirements by an order of magnitude well beyond expectation.

Proposed	Actual (as of December 2012)
200 YB staff trained in mentoring best practices	<b>215</b>
1500 mentors trained	<b>4,330</b> (5,852 recruited)
2000 mentees trained	<b>3,442</b>
1500 successful matches lasting 15 months	<b>3,741</b> matches made
250 community service projects	<b>1,116</b>

When program leaders invest in mentoring coordinator retention, they are investing in the future of the youth and communities they service. In the words of Marvin Davis, program director at YouthBuild Gary (Indiana):

"I've been with the YouthBuild movement for over 20 years. Mentoring is the strongest tool I've seen introduced to our movement in a long time. It's valuable to our program because it ties our youth to the community and our community to our youth. Let's come together to make mentoring part of the fabric of YouthBuild."

The degree to which mentoring can be tied to – or integrated into – a YouthBuild program, will be a key indicator of the program’s ability to make those ties with youth and the community. Use this white paper to support your efforts to embed mentoring into your program’s DNA, retain dedicated and talented staff, and provide mentoring for all students.

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