

5 Things to Know About the Y-USA's Peer-Supported Technical Assistance Model

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Introduction

Implementing a new program or set of practices can be challenging. When the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) decided to roll out its Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI), the organization offered its support to local YMCAs (or Ys) in planning, implementing, and monitoring the quality of adult practices in five key areas (see the box below for a detailed description). One strategy that Y-USA used to help scale the CDLI across more than 200 local YMCAs was to match Ys that were new to the initiative with those that had already experienced CDLI implementation—i.e., the “hub-and-hive model.” Y-USA identified a small set of experienced Ys (or “hubs”) and provided them with training and technical assistance to equip them to support a handful of new Ys (or the “hive”). The national organization believed this peer-supported TA model would allow Ys to benefit from their peers’ practical experiences and lessons learned. They also hoped the hubs would be familiar with many of the challenges local Ys could potentially face, and with resources they could leverage to overcome those challenges.

This brief describes five important lessons learned from Y-USA’s “hub and hive” model. The CDLI was designed to be program-agnostic and serve children and youth ages 5 to 18. As a result, **the elements that made peer support useful in this initiative may be applicable in a wide variety of other youth development programmatic settings.** As other programs seek to develop a peer support model for program leaders—even for projects planned on a different topic—we expect they may benefit from some of the lessons learned from the CDLI. Hubs played an important role in translating information into practical guidance and curating resources tailored to the needs of each CDLI team. Hubs also provided different types of support to facilitate the success of their hives, which included being attentive to their hives’ needs, sharing practical experiences, and helping hives prioritize efforts to ease anxiety.

About the CDLI

In 2016, the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) developed the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI) to enhance youth character development-focused adult practices among youth development workers throughout the YMCA (or Y) movement. Adult practices include staff members’ small, day-to-day interactions with young people, but the CDLI also focused on hiring, training, and pedagogical approaches. Y-USA chose to focus on the professional development of adults working at local Ys because youth character is deeply influenced by interactions with adults. The five domains of focus were emotion management, empathy, personal development, relationship-building, and responsibility. Via its wide reach, the CDLI had the opportunity to change how social and emotional learning was addressed at the Y. Specifically, over four years and through engagement with hundreds of YMCAs across the nation, the CDLI reached thousands of participants, prompting a positive self-assessed change in 96 percent of staff and volunteers in youth development programs.

1. Successful peer learning requires clear roles and expectations.

Given that hub leaders, along with program leaders who comprise the Hive team, often had full-time jobs with roles and responsibilities outside of the CDLI, it was critical that everyone's roles were clear and that expectations were realistic. In particular, both Hubs and Hives had to have a good understanding of the time commitment required to establish and maintain an effective working relationship. Lack of clarity could leave both hub and hive team members feeling uncertain. For hubs, lack of clarity sometimes led to missed opportunities to offer timely guidance, while for hives, it sometimes led to confusion and a lack of confidence in their hub's capacity to provide relevant supports. Hive sites felt more confident about their ability to meet expectations when hubs were attentive and reached out directly to sites.

2. Frequent early communication helps establish trust, but responsiveness ultimately matters more than frequency.

The frequency of communication between hubs and their hive sites varied. Hive sites that established regular, early communication with their hub generally felt well supported in their CDLI work, noting that timely meetings were key to fostering trusting relationships. Hubs used different approaches to communicate with hive sites. Some assigned a single team member to each hive site, while others had each team member focus on a particular aspect of the work, engaging with each hive site related to their specific role. While hive sites with a single point of contact often reported greater satisfaction, most were satisfied if they viewed their hub as available and responsive to their needs. Hives that were able to have their questions answered and garner information about their hub's experiences with the CDLI reported being pleased with their hub interactions.

3. Peer support can lead to a more concrete understanding of the potential benefits of the CDLI.

Hive sites sometimes found it difficult to apply the information they learned through the CDLI to their own programs and across their Y branches and associations. Hubs were often able to help hive sites develop a more concrete understanding of the potential impacts of CDLI participation on programming, organizational practices, and policies by sharing examples from their own implementation efforts. Hive sites appreciated hearing about strategies that had been implemented successfully in another Y, while also learning about the barriers and facilitators that contributed to those successes, in order to refine their own plans.

4. Peers can assuage anxiety by sharing their own experiences.

Hive sites reported being overwhelmed and intimidated by the frontloaded deadlines and a lack of clear guidance about the CDLI. Many reported feeling anxious about meeting grant requirements, but hubs helped hives realize that the grant was flexible and that hive sites could creatively address staff needs. Hubs were able to reassure hives—based on their own experience—that implementing the CDLI is challenging but ultimately rewarding, and emphasizing that there were many right ways to do the work. These assurances gave many hive sites confidence to move forward, removing some initial hesitancy to try new and unfamiliar approaches.

5. Peers can offer practical guidance on prioritizing efforts.

Hive sites were often overwhelmed by the volume of resources and information they received, including orientation materials, training sessions, planning tools, data collection activities, and various administrative tasks. When hive sites received an orientation on various resources from their hub, they better understood when and how to use each resource. Hubs also sent reminder emails to help hive sites keep on top of deadlines. When hubs served as guides, hive sites were better able to prioritize their efforts, especially when juggling CDLI work with multiple other responsibilities.

The CDLI employed two methods to provide TA to local YMCAs. Some YMCAs received support from an experienced peer Y, referred to as a "hub." Other YMCAs received support from a technical advisor employed by Y-USA. Both models provided proactive guidance to help YMCAs leverage CDLI resources as they implemented their CDLI plan. For information on what the TA-led model looked like, see our [5 Things to Know About the Y-USA's TA-led Support](#).