

Teens and Adults Discuss Leadership in their Community
Family Matters
Chicago, IL
2006-2007

Introduction

Family Matters is a neighborhood organization in Rogers Park, with a largely community-based board, that focuses on the leadership development of all its constituents. After having some experience with Civic Reflection at one board meeting, the Executive Director became convinced that it would be a valuable tool for engaging people in examining the idea of leadership.

Family Matters received two seed grants from the Project on Civic Reflection to support three discussion series. The first was a series of three discussions held during regular staff meetings, and facilitated by the Executive Director. The hope for these discussions was to stimulate conversation among the staff on what leadership means and how that played out through the organization’s programming.

The second was a series of four discussions held with a select group of board and staff: three adult members of the board, four teen members, and two staff people who oversee teen programs. The hope of this series was to explore the notion of leadership—board and otherwise—with the teen participants, in order to support their participation on the board. These discussions were specially scheduled events held at the homes of the adult board members. The third series of four discussions broadened participation from selected members of the board to the entire board.

Participants

Staff series: Staff of Family Matters.

Board series: Board of Family Matters, plus two staff members.

Readings

Sessions	Readings
Staff Sessions	<i>The Eleventh</i> , Henri Barbusse <i>Town Office</i> , Edward Holmes
Board Sessions	<i>They’ll Say: ‘She Must be from Another Country’</i> , Imtiaz Dharker <i>Recitatif</i> , Toni Morrison <i>The Giving Tree</i> , Shel Silverstein <i>Theme for English B</i> , Langston Hughes <i>Fellowship</i> , Franz Kafka <i>The Lamb and the Pinecone</i> , Pablo Neruda

Comments

By the lead facilitator:

The staff discussions soared. Individual staff members reported going home and continuing the conversations with the spouses and families. Others noted that CR staff meetings were their favorite meetings of the year. Staff also reported coming to new understandings of one another's roles and visions of leadership.

The board discussions were more difficult. Especially at first, the teens often seemed to feel uncomfortable and out of their element, and the adults brought adult-level, and therefore unrealistic, expectations of commitment and enthusiasm to the table. One challenge may have been that in the initial stages we did not sufficiently highlight our common concern, namely, Family Matters. But at the final conversation in the first year, the teens and adults laughed and (gasp!) played together. And to our surprise, the teens expressed a desire to continue the conversations. The following year, two board members, including one teen, attended a Project on Civic Reflection facilitation training and co-facilitated a successful discussion of a Langston Hughes poem.

This experience highlighted for me that civic reflection with an extremely diverse board can require patience on everyone's part. But in the end we came away feeling that the adult and teen members of the board had been able to correct some misperceptions about one another.

By the executive director:

Family Matters has a racially diverse board. The Hughes poem provided a safe, yet provocative, vehicle for us to discuss our different experiences with race and racial issues. It was during this discussion that one individual from the community talked about how she had been afraid to join the board and how, after getting to know the individuals on it, she laughed to think that she had ever been afraid. She went on to talk about how much she enjoys being on the board. She is learning so much, believes she is valued, and appreciates being able to contribute to the organization on the board level. This was an important and affirming revelation—one that significantly strengthened the sense of community among board members. Over the past two years, civic reflection has become part of the culture of Family Matters.