

Relationships
Are
Everything

What Youth Workers Teach
Us About Leadership

Paul Meunier
With Barbara Van Deirse

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*This book is dedicated to
youth workers everywhere.*

Guardian of Hope

You made a choice, a powerful stand,
To be the youth worker who offers a guiding hand,
To see the potential, the strength, the light,
In every young person, when hope is out of sight.

You're an unsung hero, a warrior unseen,
Not with capes or shields, but with an open heart and mind that
gleans,
From every young voice that cries in silence,
You see the pain, the fear disguised as defiance.

Keep learning, keep growing, and keep going strong,
You're making a difference, right where you belong.
And when the road gets tough, and you feel like giving in,
Remember why you started and find your strength within.

For the world needs your courage, your passion, your care,
To stand by our young people, to always be there.
May you never forget the youth worker you are,
For you're a guiding light, a true north star.

With deepest gratitude for all you have taught me,
Paul Meunier

Preface

This book is a call for you to lead with purpose, drawing from your life's lessons, to create a work culture where everyone on your team is a leader. It will challenge you to work toward a world where every young person has the support and love they deserve to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Leadership, in its truest form, is about the courage to create change where it's needed most. It has little to do with titles, power, or recognition. True leadership means recognizing the barriers in front of you and choosing to find ways around them.

Leadership is a responsibility that is lived out every day, shaped in large part by the people who choose to work alongside you. I've spent most of my life in youth work. Over the years, I've witnessed the incredible dedication and resilience of youth workers. These are the people who show up every day, often against all odds, to support, empower, and guide young people through some of life's toughest challenges. Yet despite all this effort and passion, our young people are struggling more now than ever before.

The problem isn't a lack of commitment or ideas; I see it as a systemic issue rooted in how the field of youth work functions. One of the most glaring challenges is a leadership development gap. Most youth work leaders are promoted directly from youth worker roles, dedicated individuals thrust into leadership without the training, support, or guidance they need to succeed. While there are many leadership books and courses available, they don't speak to the unique challenges of leading in a youth-serving agency. More often than not, they follow the status quo, thinking about leadership through the lens of management. That formula needs to be flipped. Managing is a task; leading is the true role. Let's start there, developing a leadership mindset and building the proven traits and behaviors of effective leaders.

This book comes from that angle. It's written by someone who's been where you are, who has learned firsthand the lessons this work teaches. This is a leadership book rooted in the realities of youth work, inspired by the life stories and experiences that make us who we are. It takes the lessons we've learned as youth workers and shows how to apply them as leaders. This book offers practical strategies and real-world insights specifically designed for those leading teams in youth-serving agencies.

So, why did I choose to write this book? Simply put, I believe it's the leadership book that all youth work leaders deserve. It's the book I wish I had during my leadership journey. I wrote it because I've seen how difficult it is to transition into leadership without the right coaching. I know how isolating leadership can feel, and I know how much courage it takes to disrupt the status quo in pursuit of meaningful change.

I also wrote this book because I believe so much of what's wrong with our world today could be improved if we just helped our young people develop into who they were meant to be. Young people are at the heart of everything we do. Bold and courageous leadership is essential if we're going to create environments where they can thrive. As youth work leaders, we have the power to influence our teams and the trajectory of countless lives. It's a responsibility that matters more than words can express.

I have shared my story—my life, my journey, my mistakes, and the difference-making lessons I've learned from them throughout this book. I do this with the hope that it will inspire you to reflect on your own story. By revealing the path I've traveled, I invite you to gain deeper insight into your own. Because your leadership is deeply intertwined with your life experiences, who you are, where you've been, and what you've learned along the way—shape the leader you are becoming. Embracing your story is the first step toward leading with authenticity, purpose, and impact.

More than anything, I hope that this book inspires you to inspire others. I hope it helps you see the potential within yourself, your team members, and the young people you serve. Leadership is never just about the leader. Although it must start there, the real impact comes from the ripple effects that follow. It means empowering others to believe in themselves, to grow, and to lead in their own ways.

This book is your call to action. If we're going to reverse the troubling trends regarding the well-being of our employees and our young people, we need courageous leaders. Leaders willing to disrupt the status quo. Leaders who understand that the field doesn't just need another set of policies or programs or another person to manage those processes and tasks, what it needs is true transformation. It needs leaders with a people-centered mindset, who will prioritize developing their people as a proven way to inspire and empower them to create lasting change.

Leadership in youth work isn't easy; it will test your endurance and resilience. But it's also a tremendous opportunity to make a difference, for the young people we serve in our agencies, and for the teams we lead and the future we want to build. You can lead with purpose and vision to create a world where every young person has the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life.

If you're still reading, I believe you're ready to answer that call! It tells me you're searching for a better way—a more purposeful, more productive path to improve the lives of those who have chosen to follow you as their leader. This moment is the beginning of an exciting opportunity. It's an opportunity to reimagine what leadership in youth work can be, to step into your role with new or renewed clarity and confidence, and to inspire meaningful change in ways you may not have thought possible.

As you read through the book, I encourage you to approach the ideas presented here with an open mind. The concept of leadership has been shaped by long-held beliefs and traditions, but some of those may no longer serve us or the people we aim to lead. This book will challenge

some of the common wisdom about leadership, inviting you to consider new perspectives and embrace bold, innovative approaches. Growth as a leader requires courage, humility, and a willingness to question what you think you know.

Your leadership journey won't always be easy, but it will be worth it. Together, let's explore what it means to lead with purpose, heart, and vision. What a difference it makes when you put your people first, when you prioritize their development over managing tasks to achieve more remarkable results than you may have imagined before. You'll find being a people-centered leader to be a much more fulfilling way of bringing your purpose and your passion to life. Let's create the change our young people deserve and leave a legacy of leadership that transforms not just the field of youth work, but the lives of everyone it touches.

How This Book is Structured

As you work your way through this book, I want you to know exactly what to expect. So, I'll give you a big picture lay of the land here.

To tell a meaningful story, I've chosen a framework with three main sections: **Cultivate Your Leadership from Within, Create Cohesive Connections, and Leave a Legacy**. This structure provides a natural progression, guiding you from self-discovery to relational leadership, and ultimately, to bold, lasting, transformative action.

We start with **Cultivate Your Leadership from Within** because leadership begins with you. This section is all about self-awareness and personal growth. It's an invitation to reflect on your story, your experiences, challenges, and values to uncover how they shape the way you lead. By grounding your leadership journey in authenticity, this section helps you develop a leadership mindset rooted in purpose and clarity. You'll explore the foundational traits and qualities that set great leaders apart, starting from within.

From there, we transition to **Create Cohesive Connections**, which focuses on building relationships and creating a culture where people

choose to trust you because they know you genuinely care. Leadership isn't limited to managing tasks. It involves inspiring people and fostering meaningful connections. This section highlights the importance of empathy, trust, and collaboration in building strong, united teams. It's a guide to creating the kind of environment and culture where people feel valued, empowered, and ready to do their best work alongside you.

Finally, we arrive at **Leave a Legacy**, where the focus shifts outward. This section encourages you to think big and embrace bold visions. Leadership means challenging the status quo, envisioning the kind of impact you want to make, and having the courage to pursue meaningful change. Whether it's inspiring others to lead, driving innovation, or advocating for equity, this section is about transforming your team, your agency's programs, and the entire field of youth work. It's your opportunity to create lasting change, for today and for generations to come.

This framework will guide you step by step, providing clarity and focus as you move through the book. Each section builds on the one before, offering insights and strategies that grow in depth and scope. Together, they create a cohesive flow that's designed to resonate with youth work leaders like you, leaders ready to embrace a people-centered approach and lead with purpose and vision.

I believe this structure will inspire you to see leadership from a fresh perspective. By the end, you'll have explored what it means to lead authentically, build meaningful connections, and create a legacy of transformative impact. I'm glad you're reading—let's begin our journey together.

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