

Kari Robideau:

Hello, and thank you for tuning in to the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development podcast series. My name is Kari Robideau, and I'm an extension educator. In this podcast, I'm joined by Amber Shanahan. She's also an extension educator for the Center for Youth Development. Amber, thank you for joining me today.

Amber Shanahan:

Thank you for having me Kari.

Kari Robideau:

Let's jump right into our topic. As volunteers or paid staff working with youth, we have a lot of titles and a lot of roles. In this podcast, you're suggesting to us that we should be adding host to that list of roles that we have as youth workers. Tell us more about yourself, Amber, and then lead us into this topic of why we should be thinking about ourselves as hosts in addition to all of the other roles we have as youth workers.

Amber Shanahan:

That's right. Thank you Kari for hosting this podcast for me to share these ideas. I am an extension educator and I work with the Center for Youth Development with the University of Minnesota, and a lot of my roles tend to be around adult education and staff development. So I have just been thinking a lot about the ways that we are preparing staff and volunteers to lead programming, and what it means to wear the hat of a leader, a facilitator, a teacher, and then to really intertwine the idea of hosting an experience for young people where they feel the sense of belonging and welcoming.

Amber Shanahan:

The reason why I've felt like this is important to start to dig into a little bit is we've been using Art of Hosting best practices for a number of years in some of the staff development opportunities that we offer. We are seeing results from data that shows they feel as if they are more engaged in their role when they are entering a space that is being thoughtful about the way that they are welcomed, and how they feel like they belong as a group together. So we're sensing that if this is working for staff development with our adult leaders and volunteers, that it is something that we should be much more thoughtful about and really explicit about when we are offering programs to youth.

Kari Robideau:

You talk about the Art of Hosting as a program development model. Dig a little deeper into that for us. Will you describe it with more detail, what does this mean to engage in the Art of Hosting in terms of how we're looking at our program development?

Amber Shanahan:

The Art of Hosting is a facilitation practice where the individuals who are leading the training or the event are fully immersing themselves in becoming co-learners with individuals that are participating. Rather than considering themselves to be the "expert" and leading a topic just based solely on their expertise, they are opening the floor for participant involvement, for the ability for participants to lead aspects of the agenda, for participants to actually create the agenda. Then the host is taking a role of cultivating dialogue and pushing learners to think beyond some of the topics that maybe they are

bringing to the table, and really pushing people to be present and to practice having really strong conversation around whatever the topic is.

Amber Shanahan:

So yes, there's an element of learning and expertise that is that a shared in a learning environment, but it's also owned by the participants and it modifies throughout the experience based on participant need. One of the reasons why this is important to me is I think about one of my very first jobs that I had as a family educator. I was young and in college still, and I was expected to teach family and child ... early childhood education to parents who were limited in English. A lot of them were Somali, Ethiopian and central American backgrounds and were parents and I was not, and I had very limited understanding about how to parent and also how to communicate with my audience, and how to best connect with them.

Amber Shanahan:

As I was considered to be the teacher, I also recognized that there's no way that I will be able to teach this group of participants without really understanding how parenting varies across cultures. It was really important that I built strong relationships with them, that there was an ability for them to tell me what they needed and to really own the learning experience. That was a kind of a trial and error opportunity to practice Art of Hosting back in the day, and I've seen how it can evolve into other learning and experiences now as I've grown and progressed in my career.

Kari Robideau:

As we began thinking about working with our youth programs and utilizing this model, so often our kids think about older adults who are leading a program as teachers. That's what they're used to during the day, that formal education. How do you help kids move into this model of understanding that you are hosting them? That they have power and they have choice within what is happening within the program?

Amber Shanahan:

The Art of Hosting is really simply an observation that really great conversations and great dialog can happen when people are present and they are co-creating something together. So for young people to understand that their input matters and that their insight and ideas can really shape how we move forward with programming, that an expert is still able to share some of the expert topic related information, but a young person can take it and run with it and let us know how we can shift and modify as we move along to ensure that their needs are being met. For the facilitator, the host, facilitator, teacher, whatever the title is that you're using is willing and able to be flexible to shift their agenda and shift the trajectory of the training or event to ensure that those needs are being met.

Amber Shanahan:

I think often we come to a space as professionals where we have a curriculum or a lesson plan written out. We have the times associated with all of the activities that we want to do. We want to make sure we get through it all. Maybe we've even shared objectives with families and parents that say this is what your child will get out of this program at the end of the day. While that is still critical and important, I think from an out of school time perspective, we have an obligation to ensure that when somebody is walking in the room, that they feel like they belong. They feel like this ... especially if it's something that they don't have to be at, that they are welcomed, and that we take their input and shape the experience

to ensure that they're getting what they want out of it. That might mean that all of the work that you've put in to developing a plan leading into the event might not be what it looks like towards the end.

Amber Shanahan:

We have to be okay with that. That's part of the role of a host, and it is a significant learning curve sometimes to be that flexible, and it can be make or break for some of the young people who may question whether or not they want to continue participating in your program.

Kari Robideau:

That's a really interesting explanation of that, because I think it could be challenging to put yourself as host, not just as teacher. As you said, we plan out the learning objectives. We plan out the 3:00 to 3:30, we're doing this and 3:30 to 3:45, we're doing that. But if we're truly using this model of the Art of Hosting, we're allowing those participants to help guide where that goes. So is it true that we're providing still a framework on which the young people are learning and experiencing, but allowing more fluidity within that framework, within that time frame?

Amber Shanahan:

Absolutely. So imagine that you're hosting a dinner at your home, and of course, there will be opportunities to network, to have hors d'oeuvres, you transition into dinner. Those are things that you expect will happen during the course of the evening, but when you're hosting, people walk in. You might connect them with other individuals. You may take their coat and direct them to where the bathrooms are, and that's where the food is, and you're making those really important connections. Then the conversation of the evening, though there might be something ... Maybe there is a framework of something that you're all coming together for. Maybe it's a book club, but there's still opportunities for people to have dialog and to change the trajectory of the things that they're talking about, and as a host, you don't dictate that. You let it happen and flow and be organic, and that is a really cool way of appeasing the needs of the people in your home.

Amber Shanahan:

I think I'm simply just helping. I'm pushing all of the people that work with young people to think about learning environments in the same way, especially out of school time learning environments. We have the ability to still have a framework of the things that we want to teach and the objectives that we want young people to get out of our programs, but to really think about how are you just connecting with the people who are walking into the space, being present, asking them for their input, connecting them to people who might make a difference for them throughout the time that they're in the space? There's still an expectation that learning is occurring and that you have a focus on a topic that's of importance. But there is an underlying opportunity to build strong relationships both with the young person and help them build relationships with other youth that might be there, that sometimes we don't always put as a primary focus. I think that it can really make a difference in the programs that we offer.

Kari Robideau:

What are the implications then, now that I understand what this Art of Hosting is and how I might think about implementing that into my program? Move us into the implications of using the Art of Hosting.

Amber Shanahan:

While we're still doing research to understand exactly how hosting transfers in a youth development context, from a youth development staff and volunteer perspective, I can tell you that some of our own research that we've done with learning environments that we've created, and we've been really intentional about cultivating a space where staff feel welcome. Little things like having music playing when people walk into the room so that it seems warm and it's not such a cold concrete space. Making sure the room is set up for participatory ... coffee, snacks, whatever it might be. Those are things that have a huge impact on people feeling like they are welcomed. I know that we ensured that with some of the cohort spaces that we've developed, that we've been thoughtful about those things, and that we have really tried to tie them together to understand how it's increased or supported employee engagement within the center for youth development.

Amber Shanahan:

What we've learned is that over the course of a couple of our learning environments, that we have really high data that shows that people felt like they had the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions. That they felt more prepared to execute their role. Because of their participation in this very welcoming environment, they've increased their sense of belonging. Overall, we saw that 100% of the staff that were evaluated believe that these learning experiences that were really focused with Art of Hosting opportunities positively influenced their overall engagement in their role. So we know that then if they are recognizing the importance of those pieces in their staff and volunteer development, that they can also shape learning environments for young people that will have maybe similar results. The caveat is that of course we still need to do more research to see how that transfers and what it will look like for young people.

Kari Robideau:

Building team, feeling like what I say matters, that creating that sense of that I'm here matters, I belong here, all of those aspects that we know make a very high quality learning environment, also then impacts what they leave with.

Amber Shanahan:

So then just a couple of ideas about some activities that people might be familiar with that are actually derived from Art of Hosting practices would be like world cafe and open space technology options where people are choosing topics they want to focus on and leading conversations in different areas of a room. There's also a focus on using circles as a welcoming and closing opportunity for people to share and to feel like they belong in a space where everyone can see each other's face, and there is a space for everyone to share their voice. So those are activities that are probably pretty well known in a professional development realm.

Amber Shanahan:

So then I think about how are we using those same activities with our young people and learning environments? How are we ensuring that we're welcoming and closing every event or activity that we do, where people feel like they have a chance to share their voice? Or modifying an open space technology activity to save a little space for the young people in a program to ask questions and connect with their peers around topics that matter to them? There are just prime opportunities to take some of the work that we're already doing and integrating Art of Hosting practices into it.

Kari Robideau:

I really appreciate that about what you've shared today. We don't have to start a new program to start the Art of Hosting with our youth development programs that we're working with now.

Amber Shanahan:

No, absolutely not. We have really strong programs, at least within the center for youth development, and of course across all youth development organizations. I know that people spend a lot of time developing curriculum and experiences that they know will have an impact on young people. So these are just simply some tools and just a shift in thinking to ensure that hosting is part of the hat that you're wearing when you are leading youth programming. That's why this can be a little tricky when we talk about all of the different hats that people wear, because there is the teacher and the facilitator and the expert. There's all these roles, but hosting can play a really significant role in the learning experience, and I think can make a really huge impact and ensuring that people feel like they belong.

Kari Robideau:

Amber, thank you for sharing the Art of Hosting in youth development programs with us in this podcast. You've really encouraged us as youth workers to include hosting as another one of those roles that we fill when we're working with young people. That is going to conclude our podcast today. I would like to encourage all of you to go to our website at www.extension.umn.edu/youth. There, you will be able to access Amber's blog post, which is called Youth Work and The Art of Hosting. It is in the youth development insight blog, and we invite you to comment and share your ideas of how you play the role of host in your programs. Thank you again for joining me today, Amber.

Amber Shanahan:

Thank you so much, Kari.

Kari Robideau:

That will conclude this podcast. My name is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.