
Conditions Supporting Strong Practice

Lessons for YCPRT

February 2026



Executive Summary

Strong YCPRT implementation appears to be supported by a set of underlying conditions that shape how the work is experienced and sustained. In one implementing county, staff described practice as most effective when it is grounded in a shared sense of purpose, expressed through consistent and thoughtful relational engagement, and structured to give youth meaningful influence over decisions. This work is reinforced by a team culture that shares ownership, encourages open input across roles, operates with limited hierarchy, and reflects openly while making adjustments over time. Consistent routines and strong partnerships provide the stability needed for follow-through. Together, these conditions help build trust, support authentic youth participation, and allow the model to remain both consistent and responsive. Counties seeking to implement or strengthen YCPRT practice may find it helpful to attend not only to the mechanics of the process, but also to the relational, cultural, and structural conditions that allow the model to function as intended.



Key Insight

Strong YCPRT practice takes hold when a team shares ownership and purpose, shows up consistently for youth, and uses clear structure to create the trust that allows young people to truly shape decisions.

Condition 1: Belief and Purpose

YCPRT is experienced as mission work, not a meeting requirement.



In one participating county, staff consistently described YCPRT as fundamentally different from routine child welfare meetings because it is grounded in belief, meaning, and purpose rather than compliance. Staff spoke about YCPRT as something they believe in and feel connected to, not something they do because it is required. This distinction shows up in the tone and experience of the meeting itself. Youth were described as able to sense when adults are genuinely invested. Even elements that might feel awkward in other settings, such as strengths bombardment, were described as landing differently when the comments are rooted in real knowledge of the young person and authentic care. When staff know the youth and mean what they say, the interaction feels personal rather than procedural.

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“I think everyone on the implementation team truly believes in YCPRTs... Just knowing what they can do and can be for kids makes us want to work towards it.”

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“I think the youth can tell that we're not just sitting through another meeting; we really are listening to them. Someone said one time, the strengths bombardment, that sometimes they can feel artificial, but ours don't, because we really get to know the youth, genuinely want to say good things about them. Even if it's a little cheesy, the kids know we mean what we say.”

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This shared belief also appears to function as a stabilizing force for the team during difficult periods. Staff described times when a series of challenging meetings left them discouraged or questioning the impact of the work. In those moments, the collective commitment to the purpose of YCPRT helped sustain momentum. Team members described reminding one another of meaningful outcomes, past successes, and the reasons the work matters so that discouragement did not turn into disengagement. Purpose, in this sense, operates as a shared resource that the team draws on when individual motivation fluctuates.

At the same time, YCPRT was described as a space that reconnects staff to the reasons they entered the field. In contrast to the pace of documentation, deadlines, and administrative demands, these meetings were experienced as moments that bring the work back to people and relationships. Staff spoke about focusing on what will endure for a young person and what it means to have made a meaningful difference in their life.

This orientation appears to shape how the work is prioritized. When YCPRT is experienced as core to the mission rather than an added task, staff described being more willing to invest the time, flexibility, and emotional energy the process requires.

The emphasis on belief also shows up in team composition and culture. Staff described the importance of having people involved who genuinely want to do the work and who see its value. When individuals did not share that level of commitment, the fit often proved difficult to sustain. Over time, the team appears to have become more intentional about aligning participation with passion and buy in, reinforcing the idea that mindset and purpose are central implementation conditions.

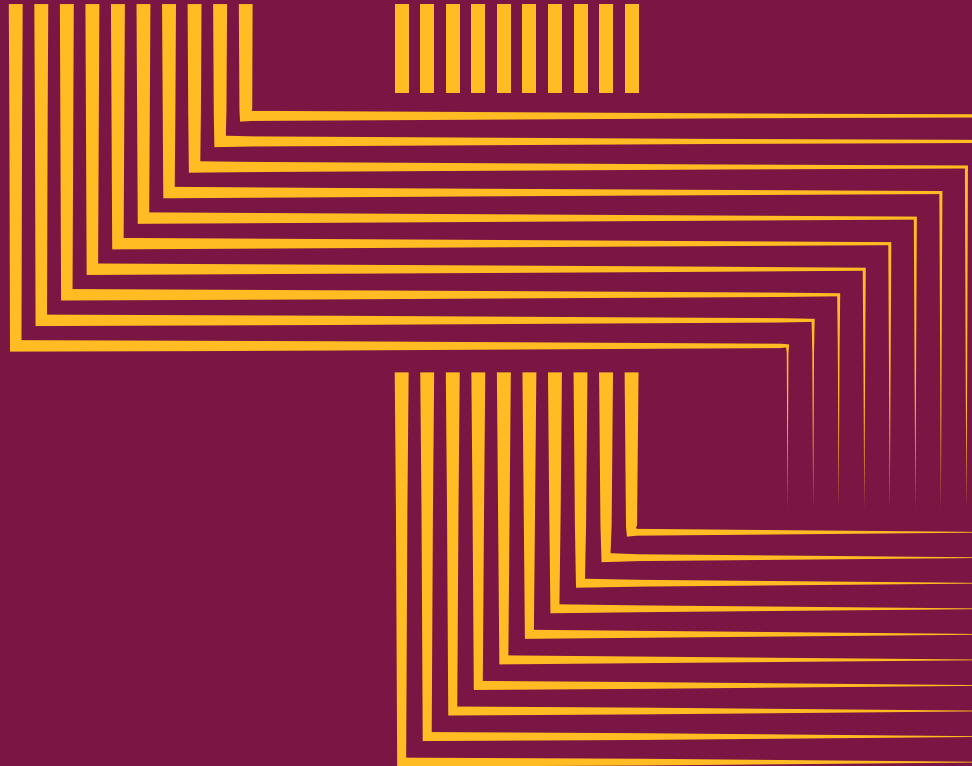


Transferable Takeaway

Counties may not be able to directly train purpose or passion, but they can create conditions that support it. This may include selecting team members who express genuine interest in the work, creating regular opportunities to reconnect to the “why,” sharing stories of impact, and protecting space for staff to experience YCPRT as meaningful relational work rather than an additional procedural requirement.

Condition 2: Relational Depth with Boundaries

Staff show up as real, consistent people while remaining reflective about fairness and role boundaries.



County staff described a level of relational commitment that often extends beyond the formal YCPRT meeting. This commitment showed up in small but meaningful ways such as remembering details youth had shared, celebrating milestones, writing letters, sending care packages, bringing favorite snacks, or simply spending time with a young person who had few or no consistent adults in their life. These actions were not described as extras or gestures of kindness alone. They were framed as intentional responses to relational gaps. When youth lacked reliable connections, the team described stepping in to provide stability and consistency until more permanent relationships could take hold.

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“I think we’re really good at looking at that relational permanency, and we do have some kids that just have no one... I like to think that we weigh the needs of the child with where we plug in our supports.”

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At the same time, staff spoke openly about the tension this level of investment creates. They did not describe relational depth in idealized terms. Instead, they acknowledged questions about equity and boundaries, including concerns about whether investing deeply with some youth might unintentionally create uneven levels of attention. Rather than resolving this tension by pulling back, staff described the importance of ongoing reflection. Decisions about how much to step in were described as thoughtful and situational, weighing the specific needs of each youth and the presence or absence of other supports. In this way, relational depth is not treated as a fixed standard but as a continuous balancing process that requires awareness, discussion, and adjustment over time.

Staff also described the emotional dimension of this work. When a youth develops lasting connections and no longer needs the team in the same way, stepping back can be both rewarding and difficult. The work of the team is not to become the permanent support system but to help build one. Relational investment, in this sense, includes the ability to withdraw appropriately as natural supports strengthen, allowing the young person’s network to take the lead.

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“Then when J found his person and didn’t need us anymore, it was this beautiful thing, but it was also like we were letting our baby bird leave the nest. We still talk about him fondly, and hopefully he doesn’t ever think about us.”

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Underlying this approach is a longer-term perspective on impact. Staff described the importance of showing up consistently even when the effects are not immediately visible. Expressions of encouragement, attention, or belief may not produce immediate change, but the team operates with the understanding that these experiences may matter later. Consistency is shaped by the assumption that small moments of reliability and care can accumulate over time, even if the outcome is not always observable.

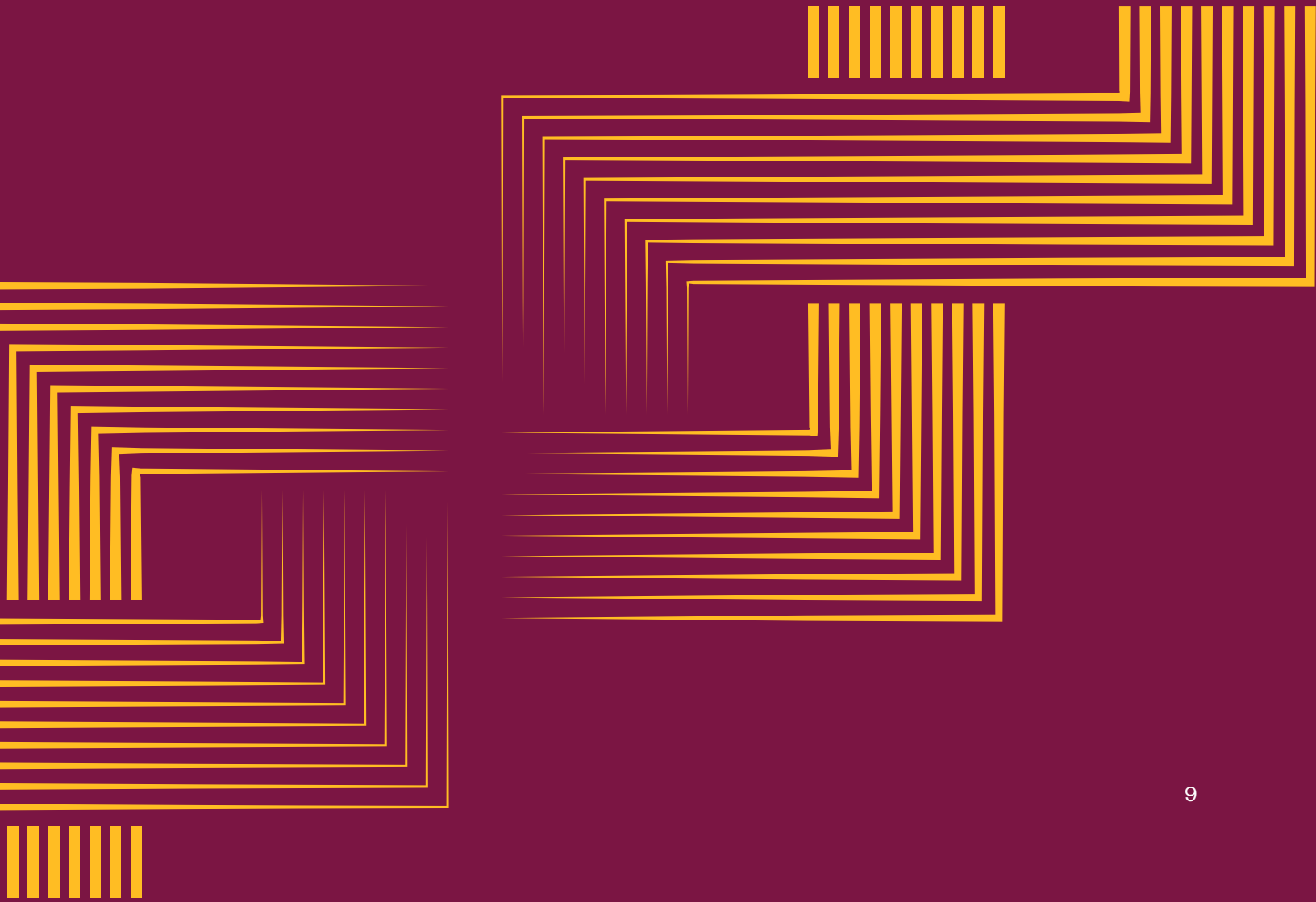


Transferable Takeaway

What matters most may not be specific activities such as gift giving or celebrations, but the combination of reliability, human attention, and reflective discipline. Counties may consider how teams can communicate to youth, in concrete and consistent ways, that they matter, while also creating space for ongoing reflection about fairness, appropriate boundaries, and where the team is stepping in to fill relational gaps that the broader system or environment has left unaddressed.

Condition 3: Youth Power in Practice

Youth are positioned as active decision makers, and the meeting adapts to them rather than expecting them to adapt to the meeting.



Staff described youth participation as extending well beyond being present or invited to share their perspective. Youth are intentionally positioned as the central decision makers within the meeting. This shows up in both visible and substantive ways. Youth may shape the structure and flow by choosing where people sit, deciding the order of conversation, or determining how the group moves through different parts of the discussion. These practices communicate that the space belongs to them and that adults are there in support of their process.

The authority youth hold is not limited to meeting logistics. Staff described youth using the space to ask questions about decisions, revisit options that had previously been ruled out, and seek explanation or reconsideration when something did not make sense to them. The presence of multiple professionals in the room creates an environment where those questions can be explored collectively rather than framed as a challenge to a single worker. In this way, the meeting becomes a setting where difficult questions feel safer to raise and where youth concerns are more likely to be examined rather than dismissed.

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“When I’ve said, ‘No, we’re not gonna look at Aunt Susie anymore.’ They get in their YCPRT, they wanna know why.”

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Preparation before the meeting was described as an important part of creating the conditions for youth voice. Youth are oriented to what the meeting is, what to expect, who will be there, and what kinds of things they may want to talk about. In some instances, staff complete Circles of Support and spend time getting to know the youth beforehand so the meeting reflects their relationships, preferences, and priorities. These preparation efforts can help reduce anxiety, clarify expectations, and position youth to enter the meeting with a sense of ownership over uncertainty.

Staff also emphasized that youth’s level of participation often develops over time. Many youth initially enter the process guarded, quiet, or uncertain about speaking openly. With repeated experiences of being listened to, taken seriously, and seeing their input influence decisions, youth were described as becoming more comfortable naming their needs, raising concerns, and planning for future meetings. Rather than a single moment of empowerment, youth voice appears to grow gradually within a consistent environment that reinforces the message that their perspective matters.



“I’ve seen my young lady blossom. ‘Cause she used to go into those meetings and just literally hide behind a hoodie, and not speak, and just glare at people. We were talking at her and not necessarily with her. She’s come to the point where she knows that meeting... she has gained a lot of confidence in that meeting, and she takes control of her meeting.”



At the same time, staff were clear that youth-centered practice does not mean the absence of structure or accountability. Expectations remain, but the focus shifts toward goals that youth identify and toward the supports needed to reach those goals. Conversations are oriented toward what youth want for their future and what adults will do to follow through, rather than centering the meeting on past behavior or deficits. When challenges are addressed, staff described an effort to separate behavior from identity and to frame accountability as part of forward planning rather than criticism.

Staff also described adapting the meeting experience based on each youth’s developmental, emotional, and social needs. Rather than expecting youth to fit a standard agenda or timeframe, the team adjusts the structure, pace, and tone to match the young person’s capacity in the moment. This may include shortening meetings for youth with limited attention, simplifying language, incorporating drawing or other activities, or focusing the conversation on topics the youth is ready to engage with.

Flexibility also extends to how the team responds in real time. When a youth becomes overwhelmed, disengaged, or emotionally activated, staff described pausing the agenda, checking in, or changing the structure of the meeting to support the youth. In some cases, youth may step out early, take a break, or ask that certain conversations happen privately. Staff emphasized a willingness to *“pause... ask the youth what they need in that moment and follow that need,”* even when it disrupts the planned flow. This responsiveness communicates that the meeting exists for the youth, not the other way around.

This individualized approach reflects a broader shift in expectations about timing and progress. Staff described letting go of the pressure to move quickly or cover everything on the agenda, recognizing that engagement develops at different speeds. By aligning the process with the youth’s readiness rather than professional timelines, the team creates conditions where participation feels manageable and safe.

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“If the kid doesn’t come in ready to hit the ground running, we’ve got to be prepared not to hit the ground running... kids are gonna need us for as long as they need us.”

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Across these practices, youth authority is reinforced not only through language but through repeated experiences. Preparation helps reduce uncertainty, flexibility communicates respect for individual needs, and consistent follow-through demonstrates that youth input matters. When youth see that their input shapes decisions, that adults follow through on commitments, and that honesty does not result in punishment, their willingness to engage more fully appears to increase over time.

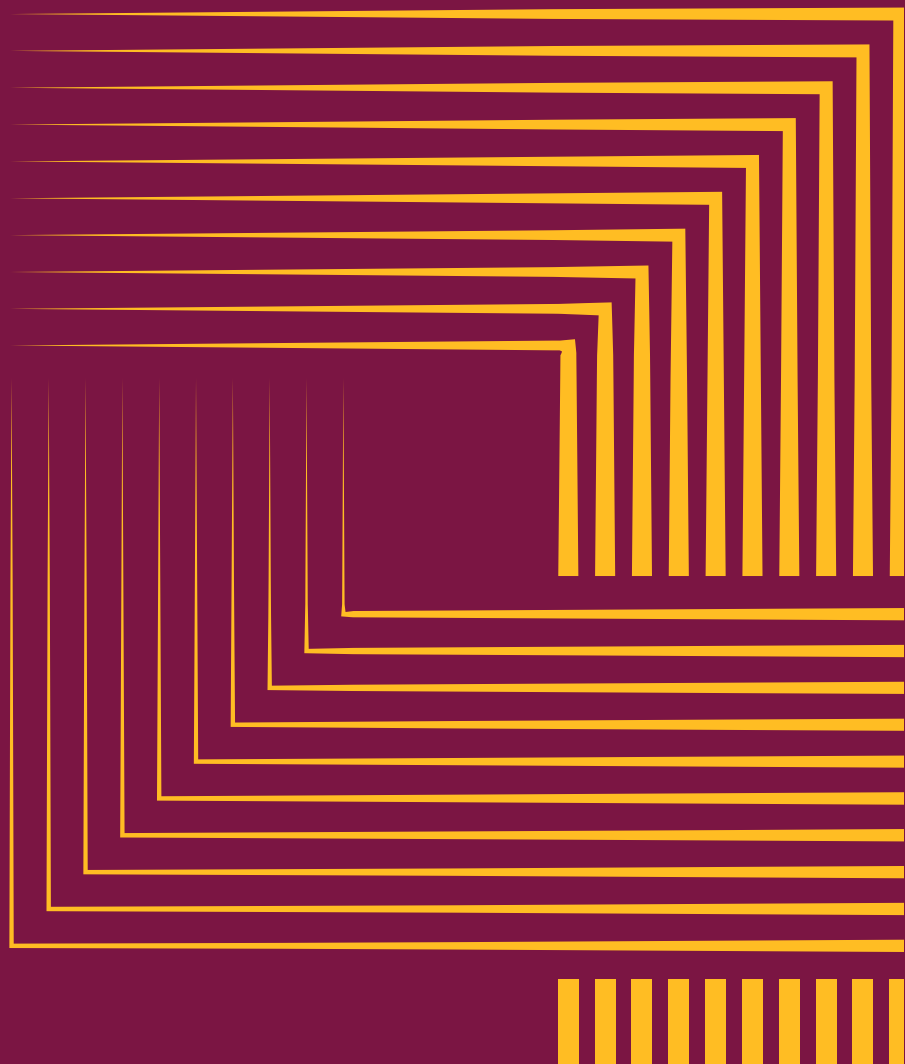


Transferable Takeaway

Youth voice is most likely to deepen when it is built intentionally over time rather than assumed. Counties may consider how their process prepares youth in advance, adapts the meeting experience to individual needs, and reinforces three messages repeatedly: that the meeting belongs to the youth, that adults will follow through on what is discussed, and that honest input can influence plans rather than create negative consequences. When these conditions are present, youth participation may gradually deepen into self-advocacy and shared decision making.

Condition 4: Team Culture That Protects the Model

The work is sustained by a cohesive team that shares ownership, reflects openly, and is willing to adjust practice over time.



County staff consistently described YCPRT as a collective responsibility rather than an individual effort. The work was not framed as belonging to a single coordinator, facilitator, or champion. Instead, team members spoke about shared ownership and the ability to rely on one another as energy, workload, and motivation naturally rise and fall. When one person feels discouraged or stretched thin, others step in to carry the work forward. This shared responsibility appears to reduce dependence on any single individual and helps the practice remain stable over time.

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“This has been a team. This is not any one person's project, because we've all ebbed and flowed with our energy levels with it, or we've—one of us has maybe had three or four really bad meetings in a row and thought, ‘You know what? These are futile. Why do we even bother?’ Then somebody else is able to say, ‘Oh, but don't forget, we had so-and-so in and that meeting was really very powerful.’”

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Another aspect of this shared ownership is the way authority is experienced within the team. Although individuals with different levels of organizational responsibility participate, the work inside the YCPRT space is not experienced as top-down. Staff described an environment where perspectives can be raised, questioned, or challenged regardless of role or position. Leadership participation is described as supportive rather than directive, emphasizing listening, shared problem solving, and collective decision making with the youth at the center. This limited hierarchy creates space for candor and encourages team members to take active responsibility for the quality of the work.

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“I think also for us... I think it's not super heavy administratively leadershipy led... We've always had a number of actual staff that are doing the work as a part of that team. I think without that... it would have been easy to have a mutiny of, ‘This is just something else our leadership wants us to do.’”

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This collective orientation also shapes how the team responds to difficult experiences. Staff described moments when the work was emotionally heavy or when outcomes were not what they had hoped. Rather than avoiding these situations or assigning blame, the team emphasized the importance of processing them together. One particularly difficult event led to a structured debrief with external clinical support, creating space to acknowledge fear, guilt, and uncertainty. Team members described this experience as strengthening trust and increasing their willingness to speak openly about concerns or doubts. The culture that emerged places value on learning and adjustment rather than perfection.

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“I think that one of the things that's changed and strengthened is we've kept a really consistent team. I think that our openness with one another, our critiques are well received and I feel like it's a really good solid team...we keep talking, refining, criticizing, critiquing, and I think we are all really open to that.”

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Ongoing reflection appears to be a routine part of the team's functioning. Staff described regularly examining their own practice and making course corrections when they notice drift. Examples included recognizing when meetings were becoming too focused on behavior rather than youth goals, when participants stepped outside their intended roles, or when adult expectations for efficiency conflicted with the flexibility youth sometimes needed. Implementation meetings were described as a space to raise these concerns, revisit expectations, and realign practice. Growth, in this context, is described as emerging through honest conversation and a willingness to sit with discomfort rather than avoid it.

The team also spoke about the importance of alignment and fit. Participation is not treated as automatic or permanent based solely on role or position. Over time, the group has paid attention to whether individuals demonstrate commitment to the purpose of the work, maintain a strengths-based orientation toward youth and families, and prioritize consistent participation. When misalignment becomes clear, transitions have sometimes been supported so that the team remains cohesive. This reflects an understanding that sustaining practice quality depends not only on process but also on the attitudes and engagement of the people involved.

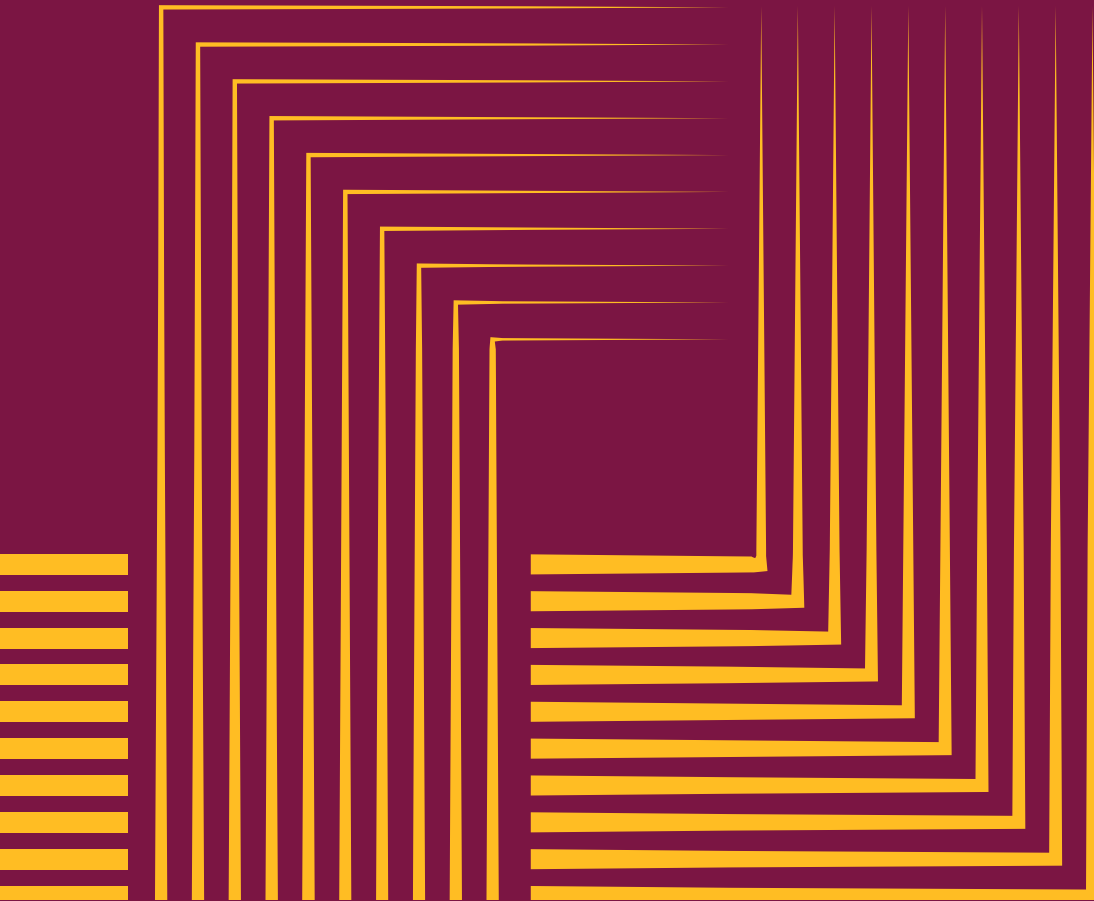
Taken together, team culture functions as a protective layer around the model. Shared ownership, trust, and openness to reflection help prevent gradual drift and support continuous adjustment as conditions change.

Transferable Takeaway

Counties may be able to strengthen this condition by creating regular spaces for reflection, openly naming team norms such as candor, role clarity, and shared responsibility, and recognizing team composition as an important implementation decision rather than a fixed structure. When teams have support to process difficult experiences, examine their own practice, and make adjustments together, the model may be more likely to remain consistent and resilient over time.

Condition 5: Structure That Sustains Quality

Consistency and clear processes create stability so that trust can develop and the work can remain responsive without losing focus.



Staff described structure and fidelity not as constraints but as supports that make the work possible. Running meetings in a consistent way was viewed as essential for maintaining quality over time. Following the same core process, keeping roles consistent, reviewing expectations, ensuring required participants are present, and maintaining regular scheduling were all described as ways to prevent gradual drift and to reinforce the youth-centered purpose of the model. Even when circumstances change, the routine itself helps anchor the work and reduces the likelihood that efficiency pressures or competing demands will shift the focus away from youth needs.

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“Consistency...Sticking to fidelity of it, just knowing the importance of it.”

Consistency was also closely connected to youth experience. Staff spoke about the importance of reliability in a system where many young people have experienced adults who did not follow through. Predictable structure, familiar team members, and consistent meeting routines help create a sense of safety. Follow-through on commitments was described as especially important. When the team promises an action, a celebration, or a future meeting, they work to ensure it happens. If a team member cannot be present, alternative ways of maintaining connection are used so that youth experience continuity rather than absence. In this way, consistency functions not only as a procedural expectation but as a relational intervention.

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“The kids that we have at the table are used to people not showing up for them. They're used to people not doing what they said they were gonna do. I feel like this team very much, if we said, ‘We're gonna have buffalo chicken dip at your next meeting,’ by goodness, we're gonna have buffalo chicken dip at the next meeting come hell or high water.”

Another structural element that supports the work is the role of external partners. Staff described external consultants as fully integrated members of the team rather than peripheral participants. Their involvement brings additional perspectives, helps prevent tunnel vision, and provides continuity when internal staff capacity shifts. At the same time, staff emphasized that this level of engagement is supported by the way consultants are included. When external partners are invited into meaningful problem solving, asked for their expertise, and treated as valued contributors, they are more likely to remain invested and consistent in their participation.

Structure also plays a role in how the team navigates differing perspectives and resistance. Staff described situations where other professionals may be focused primarily on behavior management, safety concerns, or competing responsibilities. Rather than responding with criticism or pressure, the team emphasized careful language, a collaborative tone, and repeated grounding in the purpose of the meeting. By consistently returning to the message that the process is centered on the youth and their goals, the team works to maintain alignment while preserving relationships across systems.

Across these elements, structure serves as a stabilizing framework. Clear routines and expectations create a predictable container that allows the work to remain flexible and responsive without losing its core focus.



Transferable Takeaway

Counties may benefit from thinking about structure as stable scaffolding rather than rigid compliance. Consistent roles, routines, and follow-through can create the predictability that builds trust for both youth and partners. When a strong structure is in place, teams may be better able to adapt to individual youth needs and changing circumstances without drifting away from the core purpose of the model.