



## Archived YDEKC Blog Post: Remote Work and the Mycelium Network

By Jessica Werner, 11/9/2021

In October, I celebrated ten years as the Executive Director of YDEKC and now have spent over twenty years in youth development in the nonprofit sector here in King County, Washington. I have built so many relationships over these past decades, building my sense of community, my feeling of belonging, and my ability to spread connections and build bridges. Knowing who is connected to who and where to find information undergirds so much of our collective work as a field.

Building your sense of belonging within this complicated network requires finding a sense of place and how you fit into the ecosystem. Knowing what supports are offered by various organizations, what's happening in your local school district, who the formal and informal leaders are that really make things happen in a community, and building your network of trusted partners and contacts makes the day-to-day work more fun and more effective.

In many ways, this informal network of colleagues, partners, and friends acts like a mycelium network – the underground threads that connect mushrooms in the forest and across the earth. This network is used to communicate what's healthy, what's decomposing, where to move or where to “plant your seeds,” and what ground is not fertile or toxic. Trees around the world and other forest life are dependent on this network to grow, reproduce and strengthen their piece of the ecosystem.

***“Mycelium mushrooms have been one of my greatest teachers of trust. The word mycelium means ‘more than one.’ The mycelium organism is a dynamic root system of mushrooms that utilizes trust as a mechanism to build and sustain a vast, reciprocal, underground network that connects the roots of trees and plants and skillfully shares nutrients and resources to***

***support the health of the entire ecosystem with which it moves. This mycelial network cannot exist without trust. The mycelium communication highway recognizes and believes in the collective ability to channel and receive nutrients where needed, protect against parasites, and expand roots into necessary growth sites. These mushrooms affirm a commitment to building relationships of trust that encourage all life to bloom. One that I aspire to embody more and more in my organizing practice.” —Adaku Utah***

I see our work as a sector – our Mycelium Network – growing on the way into meetings and walking back to the parking lot, it grows and expands as synapses fire in each of us as we have time to process what we’re learning from each other through meetings and events, and it happens at happy hour after a long day, when we can really build our relationships, understanding one another as whole people, not just a title or role on an email signature.

To me – aside from all of the very real health and financial and overwhelming challenges we have all faced in navigating the pandemic – one of the greatest challenges in remote work is losing our own Mycelium Network. Both within my own organization and with the hundreds of member organizations and leaders in the youth development sector and across partner school districts, other intermediaries, and beyond, I used to see regularly at a fundraising event, at a training or conference – locally or across the country. In remote work, on Zoom or on Teams, it’s as if we just pop up as fully formed mushrooms, then go back into the ground (into our own homes or the co-working space one is in) to process and do work in isolation rather than having that time before and after and in between to process together and pass on information.

A lot of YDEKC’s work is about building this network of committed leaders and creating pathways for partnership and connection, learning from one another, exploring ways to do work differently, spreading good ideas, and navigating challenges. Throughout the pandemic, it was hard sometimes to hold onto these connections, but other connections also were built and strengthened in pockets as people began organizing and seeing each other not as competitors

but as partners in ensuring that they were able to lean into missions to ensure young people could be well-served and supported, just as they were navigating their businesses and work.

Beginning with our member summit in November, we hope to continue to offer ways to connect with one another and build back our network even stronger. Join us at a Member Connect event or join the newly forming Leadership Discussion Groups that will launch again in January 2022. Check our events page for what's upcoming. Together, with a strong network of committed and supported leaders, we can continue to build solidarity and strength as a field that exists to support young people to thrive.