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Youth in the Community: A Partnership Approach

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Youth in the Community:
A Partnership Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Leaders often overlook a valuable community asset: their youth population. Many communities prioritize local resources to provide opportunities for youth, yet the community often asks little in return. Young people have significant contributions to make in the present, and their involvement today gives them ownership in the community's future. If we are truly concerned about youth leaving our communities and not returning as adults, we must be willing to work with them today to figure out methods to provide for a positive future.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN COMMUNITIES

Providing positive experiences that involve youth in your community has a dual purpose. First, it creates opportunities for young people to build skills and form positive relationships that promote future success. Second, it prevents involvement in problem behavior and enhances a young person's ability to deal with life challenges and stresses. Youth development is not about insulating, but about strengthening young people (Perkins). Table 1 identifies four primary building blocks of youth development (Kress, 2004).

Table 1. Four Building Blocks of Youth Development

Belonging	Mastery
- positive relationships w/ caring adults - an inclusive environment - a safe environment	- engagement in learning - opportunity for mastering skills
Independence	**Generosity**
- opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future - opportunity for self-determination	- opportunity to value and practice service for others

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Is your group ready to welcome youth as full partners? This question must be carefully thought through before bringing youth on board. If the goal is truly that youth and adults share in the decision making process, then the group must be so comfortable with the competence and ideas of the youth representatives that the entire group works together, equally implementing adult and youth ideas (State of Alaska, 2001).

Your group should discuss some important considerations in preparing to work with young people. Youth need more time to make decisions and to learn the process because of their lack of experience and lower comfort level with the adult group culture. Your group may need to give up some efficiency in exchange for the youth representation.

Young people approach problem solving and decision making in very creative ways. Your group will likely get more diverse points of view and some very direct questioning that could be a bit uncomfortable at first. Willingness to be flexible and veer away from standard protocol at times will help move in the direction of stronger youth involvement. Young people are not afraid to try new things. They think more "outside the box" than adults, and may not have the "personal agendas" adults have.

RECRUITING YOUTH MEMBERS

Getting youth to commit to a group or project can be tricky; they often balance full schedules like many adults. Recruiting youth with the right message can be key in finding their passions and commitment.

• Sell the benefits to them. Identify what they will be contributing to the community, the real

world experiences they will receive, and how their voice will allow their age group to be represented in the community by their participation.

• Make sure the process is open enough to attract a diverse group of youth. Instead of pre-selecting the "perfect match," search for the "willing and ready to be active" youth participant. This may mean youth who are not involved in traditional activities.

• One is a lonely number. Always invite youth to participate in pairs, or better yet, in equal numbers as adults. Consider several age ranges and how that will impact sustainability of youth involvement.

IMPORTANT LOGISTICS WHEN INVOLVING YOUTH

• **Transportation** – Young people may be able to drive, but the offer of a ride could be a valuable way to build that relationship with a caring adult.

• **Meeting Reminders** – Youth (and adults!) like to be prepared for upcoming events. A call or email just prior to the meeting can mean much better attendance. Sending a brief agenda can also build interest. Assigning the task of reminding others may be a good way to give leadership opportunities to a youth/adult pair.

• **Recognition** – Encouragement and praise for a job well done is appreciated by everyone. When recognizing youth, it is important to let parents and their peers know about their accomplishments. Calling their home and including their school in an announcement makes the recognition more meaningful.

• **Time/Location** – Finding the "perfect" meeting time and location is impossible. However, consider school hours and activities. Having a substitute representative policy may help, as will having policies in place for members who regularly miss meetings. Youth and adult policies should be the same. Meet in places where youth can feel comfortable.

• **Orientation** – Youth may need more get-acquainted opportunities before feeling comfortable participating. Expectations should be spelled out as much as possible, and forms of communication other than speaking in front of the large group should be options. A comment box or Web discussion group may be used.

REWARDS OF YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

Hands-on vocational and leadership opportunities give youth a chance to focus on their own culture and develop a sense of ownership in their community. Youth make connections between their day-to-day lives and larger social issues that prepare them for lifelong community engagement. Young people who have presented at meetings, spoken in front of city councils, and conversed with community leaders often speak of their experiences as chances to come into their "power" and exercise a sense of voice. These efforts not only build young people's knowledge, they contribute to real community change (Wheeler, 2003).

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