

Committing to Youth Engagement: Creating an Environment that Encourages and Respects Youth Voices in Meetings and Decision-Making

Culture Change: Youth as Partners

Making a genuine commitment to youth engagement requires most adult-run programs to make cultural and structural adjustments to calling and running meetings. Too often youth participation is seen as a gesture of good will, an easy way to demonstrate an agency's commitment to youth rather than viewing youth participation as a necessity for sound decision making and a significant asset to the decision-making process.

Youth should be invited to meetings early in the decision-making process and be included in every step. Youth should not be invited to meetings only when their opinions will be “interesting,” or only when it is convenient for staff to host youth. A culture shift toward seeing youth as partners is the first step that needs to be taken as agencies invite youth to their tables.

1. Welcoming Youth to Meetings

Youth participation requires additional attention to scheduling and logistics. Most youth are unable to attend meetings during school hours, and are unable to get to remote locations that are not serviced by public transit. It is important that when preparing agendas for youth-focused discussions, meetings are scheduled at times of day when youth can attend. It is also helpful to group agenda items so that youth do not have to be present for the entire meeting if there are completely unrelated agenda items youth may not need or want to be present for.

When youth arrive at a meeting or event, it is important that they are welcomed in a way that gives them equal footing in the room. Welcome youth as equals, and treat their presence and input as you would any participant. Efforts to welcome youth with fanfare, such as pizza parties or games, can actually prove to tokenize youth and minimize their status in the group. Youth may need a staff member to mentor or provide guidance through meetings. Mentors should engage youth in professional development and avoid approaching the relationship as direct service oriented.

2. Identifying Youth Participants

An ongoing relationship with a youth organization, or individual youth, will help with recruiting appropriate youth to be present at appropriate meetings, events and committees. The main goal should be to connect youth with causes that they are familiar with, have an interest in, and have input on improving. Staff should become familiar with local youth organizations and include their staff on email distributions and mailing lists. Once a partnership has been formed with a group or individual, keep the parties aware of meetings and send minutes afterward.

Ensure that youth with a diversity of experiences and viewpoints are being engaged. If only the highest functioning, formally educated youth on your committee, you're missing out on some very important contributions from other youth consumers. No one individual youth can represent the voice or experience of all youth.

3. Preparing and Supporting Youth in Effective Participation

Ensure youth have the preparation needed to learn your meeting procedures, expectations, and roles. Ensure that a youth is clear on the role they will have as a member of a committee or meeting attendee. It is important to remember when inviting youth to participate in meetings and committees that they are coming to the table with less structural support than other members. Youth often lack support that other participants may take for granted such as: years of experience and growth, supportive relationships and financial security built over time, or readily available physical and mental health care, etc. Therefore, it is important to make space for a learning curve and don't unfairly expect transition aged youth to NOT be transition aged youth.

Make an effort to provide youth with feedback privately so that they can learn and grow from their participation. If work is being assigned, make sure to give youth appropriate work for their unique abilities, the technology they have access to, and the time they have to give. Youth will be able to give specifics on what they can do. It is important that the work given to youth is legitimate, and is not "busy work."

4. Building Youth Participation into Your Meetings

Youth are eager to share their personal and collective experiences, but need the space to do so in a meeting environment. Meetings must be structured thoughtfully for any consumer participation, so make sure to build time for youth input into the meeting, and allow youth to suggest remedies for any issues they bring up. Youth input can guide the process of finding ways to improve the system or policy being discussed.

In order to increase youth's successful participation at meetings, be mindful about clarifying professional language used in meetings, refrain from making inside jokes that are alienating and confusing to youth who are not "in the know," create a handout on commonly used acronyms, and find out if your youth participant has use of email. If they don't have access to e-mail then send communication via snail mail, etc. Most people attending meetings are also aware of and intimidated by power dynamics and chain of command. It's always a good idea to have the person with the most institutional power in the room make a special effort to greet the youth and check in with the youth before she/he leaves the meeting.

5. Compensating Youth For Participation

Youth are often asked to sit in committees or on boards alongside paid professionals. The youth offer unique experiences and give the same time and attention to a committee as others, and yet often they do not receive payment for their time and efforts. This creates an inequality that may communicate that a youth's input is less important. So, whenever possible, youth should be compensated for their participation in a manner that matches the expected time and effort of their commitment level. Just as for other participants, the compensation is also for youth's travel and time spent preparing for participation.

When a youth is paid to serve, it gives youth a sense of ownership of the work and a sense of pride in the accomplishments. It is essential that youth are respected for the unique experiences and position they bring to the meetings and the value they lend to the decision-making process.