



Creating Vibrant Groups

What Does a "Vibrant" Group Look Like?

- Such groups pulsate with energy.
- They help youth thrive, not just survive.
- They nurture a drive toward the future and an inner sense of confidence within each young person.
- They are clear about what they're doing and why they're doing it--they are intentional in their design and outcomes.
- They have a focused and articulated vision about what they are trying to accomplish.
- They provide equal access (getting in the door), treatment (once they're in the door) and outcome (going out the door).

Vibrant youth groups are vibrant precisely because of a positive group climate. The environment within a youth group often reflects the leadership style and approach of the key adults and thus the climate is absolutely key to youth development outcomes.

What does such a climate look like? Let's review some of the most common elements of vibrant youth groups.

1. Vibrant youth groups are more concerned with weaning, not winning.

The development of young people is the focus of vibrant groups. There are high expectations that challenge them to live up to, rather than communicating low expectations and then being surprised when youth rise above them.

Young people, particularly older members, want to feel that the group is theirs and want adults to reduce their part in decision-making. Training youth to become independent, thinking people are the goals of vibrant groups. In truly vibrant youth groups, the youth have access to the opportunities, encouragement, and rewards necessary to excel.

Less effective groups, by contrast, are much more focused on winning and "beating" others in competition. Winning awards, competitions, contests, numbers of ribbons or trophies and "beating the rest" as opposed to "being our best" are the greatest concerns in less effective youth groups. Winning sometimes clouds individual learning and mastery.

2. Vibrant Youth Groups are Firm, Yet Flexible

They are not afraid to change how they do things but less apt to change their core mission. As a result, truly vibrant youth groups communicate clear standards about group norms,

boundaries, and what is acceptable. They also let youth know how to be involved in discussing and modifying the boundaries if necessary.

Vibrant youth groups experiment with seating arrangements, try new activities, and experiment within limits.

At the same time, vibrant groups provide a consistency and reliability on which members can always count.

Healthy groups thrive on moderate levels of structure. Not surprisingly, then, vibrant groups meet regularly and consistently. Traditions, rituals, and ceremonies are used to foster a sense of connection with people, with the past and with an organization larger than the local group.

3. Vibrant Youth Groups Work Hard and Play Hard

A common theme in vibrant youth groups is that groups are not meeting just to meet or just to conduct business.

Fun, learning, growth - these are the important concerns in vibrant groups. Vibrant youth groups provide a way for members to do things together in fun ways --from ski trips, to weekend outings to roller skating parties.

But vibrant youth groups also work hard. They are involved in community service activities and fund-raisers that span a wide variety of efforts - from cleaning up a section of highway to providing programs at a local nursing home. Effective clubs get involved and help youth develop a positive work ethic and an ethic of service to their community. As a result, youth in these kinds of groups have a chance to experience having a positive effect on others through active participation in community and family-based activities.

4. Vibrant Youth Groups Empower Rather Than Embalm

Empowerment means to "authorize, delegate, give authority, enable or permit a person to do something."

In short, vibrant youth groups enable youth to do what they are qualified to do. Rather than try and preserve young people in some permanent child-like state, vibrant youth groups empower members to develop personal responsibility, skill building and reflection.

Vibrant groups provide young people with the chance to actively learn and build skills as well as to critically test, explore and discuss ideas and choices in a safe environment.

Less effective groups treat youth as perpetual children where they are unable to experience independence or growth.

5. Vibrant Youth Groups Communicate and Listen

Members in vibrant youth groups frequently mention that they feel listened to, respected, and that their input is genuinely valued. They feel they are valued and involved in caring relationships with other adults and peers alike.

Vibrant youth groups make a conscious effort to involve members in discussions and deliberations.

Effective youth groups communicate well and listen to one another.

Communication and leadership are viewed as two-way processes in which adults and youth share responsibilities. In one such group, a member commented: "If I wanted to recruit somebody who is older into our group, I would tell them how they get to voice their opinions in a meeting without being ridiculed or being told, "That's dumb!" by other people."

In vibrant youth groups, young people are involved in relationships characterized by coaching, feedback and open, yet respectful, discussion. They communicate and listen to one another.

6. Vibrant Youth Groups Balance Between Chaos and Rigidity

Effective youth groups are able to achieve a certain harmony between too much chaos and too much rigidity - "ordered chaos."

Moreover, authority is not designed from the top-down, but rather from the membership into the center of the group.

Ineffective groups are devastated by change and are unable to fit in to new circumstances. Authority reigns from the adult leaders on down, and little individual initiative is encouraged or permitted.

7. Vibrant Youth Groups Affirm and Support One Another

From research on effective 4-H clubs, a sense of group membership and belonging was most evident.

Vibrant youth groups have a clearly defined sense of "self" and encourage all members to become valuable to the group. This sense of "group-ness" is so strong that they celebrate the successes of all members. They take pride in and celebrate the collective efforts of all members.

Adult leaders in such groups encouraged youth with specific, positive feedback.

Discouraging comments are rare in vibrant youth groups, whereas discounting and demeaning comments are more common in control-oriented, authoritarian groups.

8. Vibrant Youth Groups Mentor

Helping new members feel welcomed into the group is a hallmark of vibrant youth groups. Through such overt actions, all members are encouraged to take on the full responsibilities of membership. Such efforts help new members learn the language and traditions of the program or organization.

"Buddy systems" are common and intentional in vibrant groups where older, more experienced members partner with younger members and serve as practical role models for them. In some clubs, there are junior officers who shadow the older officers, occasionally taking on specific leadership tasks in group meetings or activities.

9. Vibrant Youth Groups Value and Practice Service to Others

Although community service is a key value for many youth groups, vibrant groups actively practice and treasure community service as a core ethic.

Such groups do not view community service as just another requirement for a charter or as annual program expectation, but rather community service was valued as important and a part of the group's fundamental experiences.

The benefits of this service ethic are two-fold.

- First, through service activities, group members have a real-world experience in exerting a positive influence on others.
- Second, group members develop a sense of inter-connectedness and learn the basics of being part of a work force in a safe and comfortable setting.

10. Vibrant Youth Groups Take Time for Training

Effective youth groups set aside time to train youth for the roles they will assume in adulthood.

Adults in these kinds of groups see as one of their primary responsibilities the training and development of young people to become involved as equal partners in the process of planning, implementation, and evaluation. This is a key characteristic of vibrancy.

Research shows that well functioning groups do not just happen. They result from consistent, intentional efforts to create, maintain, and (occasionally) restore conditions that foster effective learning. **In such groups, the process is often more important than the outcome.**

Adult leaders understand that there is a fundamental difference between simply achieving a goal and engaging youth all along the way in reaching the goal, even if there are many detours and false starts.

11. Vibrant Youth Groups have Synergy

In essence, it's not enough to possess just some of these characteristics to be truly vibrant.

Instead, all these elements must be present and work together to create a synergy that would be absent otherwise. There is a synergy in vibrant groups that creates energy far in excess of the contributions of individual practices.

Effective youth programs that help youth develop life skills focus on developing these skills in an educational context.

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