

# **So You Want To Involve Young People! How Do You Go About It?**

While there is increased interest in having young people involved in many different planning and decision-making opportunities, there still remains little experience and knowledge about how to do this. What are the steps to recruiting, engaging, and maintaining youth “at the table”? What needs to be done so that both the youth and adults forming the partnership feel comfortable with their roles and know what to expect from each other?

The following suggestions describe several practices that need to be considered and planned for before any effort is put into inviting young people to be a part of your group. Much of this information is based on the resource *14 Points: Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making* by Youth On Board a project of YouthBuild USA.

## **1. Why do you want youth involvement?**

There are a variety of reasons for involving youth; from getting the youths’ perspective to helping them develop the skills needed to function in a leadership role in our society. Each of these reasons may result in a different forum and structure for involving youth. The group wanting youth involvement should be very clear as to their motivation. Once that motivation is known, the group can then begin to plan for the involvement. A variety of tools can be used to help the individuals and group determine this motivation. Examples might include the “Inventory of Adult Attitudes and Behavior”, the “Youth Participation Spectrum”, and the “Program and Activity Assessment Tool”.

## **2. Are you ready to involve youth?**

Now that you know why you want youth involvement, you need to assess if you are ready to move ahead or if you need to do more work. This assessment needs to determine if you have the knowledge and skills needed to recruit and retain the youth. You need to decide how much financial support will be needed. You need to determine what expectations you have of the adults with whom the youth will interact and the expectations of the youth with whom they will be interacting. And finally you will need to assess how much adults know about youth growth and development. This assessment might include what training will be needed for the adults and what support/training will be provided for the youth. Outcomes of this assessment might be a mentoring process for the youth, adult training on how to work with youth, youth training and orientation on how the group functions, and consideration of changes in meeting time and location.

## **3. Are you clear about the role youth will play in the group?**

Probably the most frustrating aspect of being a part of any group is being uncertain as to why you are there and what you can and cannot do. This is especially frustrating to young people who may not feel comfortable even being in an adult type setting. Therefore, the group needs to be very clear about the model of youth involvement desired and the expected behaviors of the youth determined by that model. For example, it is one thing to ask a youth to participate in an advisory capacity hoping the youth will share their ideas and quite another to ask a youth to be a part of a policy making body with full voting rights and decision making.

4. **How supportive will you be of your decision?**

Once the group has decided to invite and involve youth at the table, how flexible will the group be in supporting that youth involvement? There are many barriers to youth involvement and the group needs to have a plan for how to address those barriers. Examples of the barriers include time and place of meeting, transportation to and from meetings, and how youth and adults are prepared to work in a partnership relationship.

5. **How interesting and effective are your meetings?**

Many adults are fearful of youth involvement because they believe the youth will find their meetings boring or uninteresting. The fact is that if young people find the meeting boring or uninteresting, then there are probably several adults who also are bored. The group needs to review their meeting procedures and methods and be certain that the meetings are carefully planned and managed. Use of an agenda and a time manager can keep the meeting moving and keep the interest focused.

6. **How are you preparing youth and adults for the role of working in a partnership?**

It has been suggested several times in this document that both youth and adults need training to prepare them for this unique partnership experience. The group should create an orientation and training plan for the youth and a training plan for the adults. If youth can be involved in helping with the training for adults, the adults will have a positive experience to build on. If the group can identify and train adults in how to mentor youth, then the youth will have a positive experience to keep them engaged.

7. **Do you provide food?**

Everyone involved loves food at meetings and social gatherings. It helps create a comfortable environment. And many times the meetings are held during meal times. Providing food at your meetings will go a long way in setting the climate you desire and having the youth feel welcomed and comfortable being at the table.