



BLOG POSTS

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YOUTH CAN CHANGE THE WORLD - BUT THEY CAN'T DO IT ALONE

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Aleks is one of the founding members of CYBN where her passion was to protect and enhance Canada's natural biodiversity through advocacy work and action. She is a graduate student at the University of Waterloo where she is examining how to improve intergenerational relationships within youth service programs to enhance social and environmental impact on communities.

Abstract: Organizational leaders and decision-makers who wish to enhance social and environmental impact should look to support youth by creating space for meaningful passion, participation, youth voice, collective action. Additionally, leaders and decision-makers must develop relationships with young people to further the reach of their goals and projects.

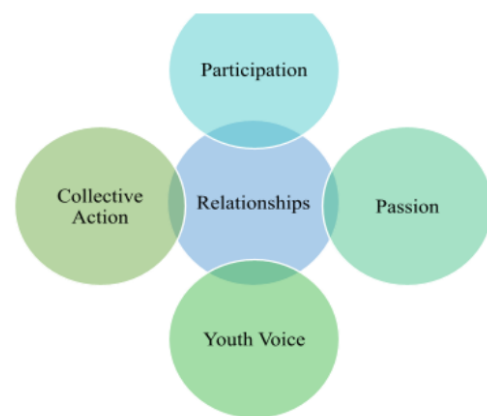
For the past two years, I have worked tirelessly to learn how organizations can support young people in order to advance social and environmental change. Young people across Canada are incredibly educated and looking for meaningful and valuable experiences. However, young people face barriers like financial challenges and mental health that prevent them from taking opportunities. As a result, youth have leaned away from volunteer opportunities as they typically don't provide the support young people need in order to be successful. Within my thesis I focused on youth service programs as they provide compensation for young people's times and effort.

Youth service programs look to achieve social and environmental change by partnering with local communities and young people. Both young people and organizations benefit from working together (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Young people benefit from engaging in these types of opportunities as it can enhance development, skills, and knowledge. Whereas organizations will focus on engaging young people as youth provide a unique view-point on complex community dynamics. This unique relationship is more formally known as intergenerational collaboration. Intergenerational collaboration focuses on enhancing relationships between adults and young people. Past researchers and scientists have emphasized the important role adults play within these relationships. This is because these relationships are often difficult to cultivate as they take time and effort. However, if done successfully, organizations, communities and individuals can benefit (Raposa et al., 2019).

An additional component to making these youth service programs successful is the focus on youth engagement. Youth engagement is not as simple as including young people in projects. It is a dynamic idea that involves a combination of ideas and

approaches. Researchers within the field of community development and youth development have described extensively the importance of participation, passion, youth voice and collective action. (Witt & Caldwell, 2018). Each strategy plays a vital role in how adults from any organization can successfully engage with youth to support youth development and the social impact they hope to achieve. With these tips, high levels of youth engagement successfully engages youth within all four essential characteristics of youth engagement (Saito & Sullivan, 2011).

The first tip encourages youth to become passionate about what projects is the second tip recommended to decision makers. Often times, youth who are working on projects and activities that are passionate to them have a higher likelihood to successfully influence both youth development and social welfare (Saito & Sullivan, 2011; Weinreich, 2004). Passion also helps motivate youth to



Youth engagement strategies (Adapted from Witt & Caldwell, 2018, p. 432).

achieve their goals, gain power, and enhance overall personal well-being (Witt & Caldwell, 2018). Decision makers are recommended to support young people through passion by creating opportunities for youth to create **meaningful projects**, develop **meaningful relationships** with youth to encourage **shared decision making** through **youth empowerment** and communication and support youth in becoming leaders.

The second tip outlines the importance of supporting youth to build meaningful connections with community members and places and actively participating in projects. Creating opportunities for youth to participate in meaningful

engagements supports successful civic engagement, enables skill-building and enhances academic achievements (Gazley, Littlepage, & Bennett, 2012; Saito & Sullivan, 2011). Decision makers are recommended to support young people through participation by encouraging youth to be apart of planning processes, support youth in building **meaningful community relationships**, and supporting youth in becoming project and community leaders.

In addition, encouraging youth to speak out and take leadership opportunities is another important component to youth engagement. However, decision-makers and leaders must know that it is not enough for youth to just speak out decision-makers. It is incredibly important that organisations listen to youth and take their opinions seriously. Giving opportunities to youth to speak freely is beneficial because it can enhance efficiency in the organisation and skill-building in youth (Anyon et al., 2019; Maki & Snyder, 2017; Saito & Sullivan, 2011). Decision makers are recommended to support young people through youth voice by encouraging youth to be apart of project decision-making, support youth in **autonomous decision making** and **critical thinking** and actively listen to youth employees and volunteers.

The last tip recommended to decision makers is collective action. This refers to the shared decision-making power that adults and youth can share. The goal of collective action is to work together while achieving the goals of the project and to successfully improve social change (Franzen et al., 2009; Schulman, 2006).

Decision makers are recommended to support young people through collective action by supporting **skill building**, creating autonomy promoted environments and build meaningful relationships with youth through **mentorship**.

Within my thesis, I focused on skill building, meaningful projects, youth empowerment, critical thinking, autonomy, and mentorship as tools to enhance youth engagement within these programs. As a result, I highly recommend any organizational decision-maker or leader to involve youth in project planning and development. I understand it takes trust and understanding to build relationships, however there are many benefits from including young people including increasing organizational capacity and impact on communities. We can change the world. But we need to do it together.

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