

# Cultivating Meaningful Youth Leadership and Engagement within the IL Network

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# Meaningful Youth Leadership...

When youth have the knowledge, skills, structure, support, and opportunity to thrive in roles which include them having true:

- Respect
- Influence
- Ownership
- Responsibility
- Peers/Touchstone People
- Impact
- Authority
- Accountability
- Stewardship
- Value

# Meaningful Youth Engagement...

May or may not include leadership components and is most successful when youth feel confident in lending their energy and experience to opportunities that offer:

- Variety, creativity, problem-solving
- Clarity, flexibility, progression
- Tangible results, products, outcomes
- Strategy, planning, review, reflection, feedback
- Continuous growth, enhancement, improvement
- Structure, specificity, integrity, transparency, purpose

# **Proven Practices and Successful Strategies**

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# Foundations First

- At the core, having youth engaged in leadership roles within an organization requires the organization to value that in everything, everyone has something to teach, to learn, and to contribute.
- The purpose and structure of each initiative may be different, and there are many ways to incorporate an effective youth leadership and engagement component into the heart of an organization. Mapping out and documenting a strategic pathway forward is always a useful endeavor.
- Once your organization is committed to creating a meaningful youth leadership and engagement opportunity, it is important to also commit to engaging in a process that will allow it to thrive.

# Foundations First

- Strive for consensus and buy-in before getting started as you may have skeptics and less-than-enthusiastic members of the team in this regard.
- Plan by creating parameters around how all of this will work and building in the flexibility to pivot and make changes when beneficial or necessary.
- Consistently evaluate and enhance your process to ensure that everyone knows their roles, the expectations, and the boundaries.
- Building a framework that maximizes the strengths of individuals within the collective helps to ensure success.
- New projects, especially ones that are built to last, take time, energy, and a concerted effort. Remember to support one another, to enjoy the process, and to celebrate your progress.

# Nothing About Us, Without Us!

- Ensure that youth are active participants in every aspect in which they are engaged.
- Whenever possible, have youth involved in the planning, development, and decision-making in your organization, especially where youth leadership and engagement initiatives are concerned.
- If you don't have a network of youth to tap into within your own organization, consider partners and collaborators who may have youth available for you to connect with.
- Leverage the vast expertise within the Independent Living community, after all Peer Support is foundational to our work.
- Pay youth for their expertise whenever possible.

# Be Purposeful on Purpose

Youth don't want to be there just for the sake of being there or to fill a seat or spot for which an entity has decided they need a young person.

- They want to contribute.
- They want to be of real service.
- They want to feel valued and valuable.

Nothing threatens the success of a youth engagement effort faster than not giving youth a real reason to commit, to make a difference, to flourish in their roles, and to strive for more opportunities in the future.

# Multigenerational Dynamics

- Realize that when working through a process that includes people whose life experience spans generations, there will be a learning curve to some degree for everyone.
- Choose how you will approach bumps in the road and recognize the potential for those bumps to exist before your journey even starts.
- Sometimes the greatest successes happen when gaps are bridged between people who on the surface appear to share little.
- Recognize the potential in leveraging the collective expertise, energy, and passion of diverse team members.

# Multigenerational Dynamics

- All people involved in youth engagement need to approach the process with authenticity, integrity, and optimism. Without that, your road to success will be paved with frustration, and maybe even failure.
- It's more than just having buy-in, it's about having the right people in key roles, who usher in a culture of reciprocal appreciation, acceptance, and admiration.
- Build youth initiatives with the people in your organization that youth gravitate toward because they make them feel like they belong.
- Identify team members who truly enjoy young people and create the space for them to be involved. Organizational structure and job descriptions can be modified to support growth and change. The right fit is vital and can't be manufactured.

# Multigenerational Dynamics

- Touchstone people for youth, regardless of age or time with the organization are those who have influence, experience, and wisdom which they share openly with no strings attached.
- Invest in team members whose focus is on showing youth that their contributions are being recognized, considered, and honored, rather than those who wish to impress youth with a list of their accomplishments.
- Folks who really want youth to succeed will model those values for others which creates positive energy and spurs success.
- Seasoned team members might have rank, and they might have to pull it at times, but successful relationships are forged when clear boundaries and expectations are understood, and trust is built over time.

# **Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Successes**

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# Build with Intention

- Spend time conceptualizing as a team and ensuring that all relevant players are committed to the strategic direction in which you are heading.
- Document how you will know that your youth leadership and engagement opportunity is on target, effective, and thriving. You can then work backward to ensure that all the steps are in place, to get you to where you want to go.
- Unpack what you have done that is similar, what you've started from the ground up, and what you've made come to fruition even if it isn't similar.
- Reflect on historical challenges, recent solutions, organizational victories, and consider what it took to get there. Nothing worth having comes easy, and meaningful youth engagement is no exception.

# Build with Intention

- Reach out to others who have implemented similar opportunities and ask them to share their tips and tools or lessons learned. Compensate them somehow for their time and expertise or hire them to consult, if you can.
- It is amazing how quickly planning teams identify the probabilities and start to imagine the possibilities when they are introduced to a model of success that is honest about the time, energy, resources, and ongoing process of discovery that is involved. Often, this gives your team the sense that this will work for you, and the drive to make it happen.
- Recognize that you have many examples of maximized opportunities. Plan to add successful youth leadership and engagement to your list of accomplishments.

# Just Stop Now If...

- You are implementing a youth leadership and engagement opportunity to check a box, or to comply with a requirement.
- You don't firmly believe that what you're building has the potential to enhance the culture of your organization.
- You are not both willing and prepared to give as much to this initiative as you would to any other foundational value or principle.
- You don't expect youth to rise to the occasion, succeed in their roles, or excel at their duties.
- You don't understand that just like any home improvement project, incorporating and infusing youth within your organization will require more time, energy, and funding than you anticipate.
- You don't have a sustainable budget that provides for the planning and implementation of this new opportunity and its growth trajectory.

**Thoughts?**

**Questions?**

**Takeaways?**

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