



# 14 POINTS: SUCCESSFULLY INVOLVING YOUTH IN DECISION MAKING A General Overview

## Point 1: Know Why You Want to Involve Young People

- **It's a civil rights issue:** Nowhere in the U. S. Declaration of Independence is there a stipulation concerning age. "All men are created equal," all are entitled to "certain unalienable rights." So why is it that in this country, decisions that affect a significant segment of the populations are made by others? In far too many situations, young people are not being heard. Their rights are being disregarded or violated, and adults do not seem to hear or care about it. This needs to change. A shift is needed in our communities to allow young people's concerns to be heard and taken seriously. They have the same right as adults to voice their hopes, ideas, and fears.
- **It's a long-term growth issue:** Educating youth about the ideals of the nonprofit sector and community service can plant the seeds of social responsibility in their heads. Similarly, youth can provide a new generation of leadership. Some organizations have looked around and noticed that everyone on staff and in decision-making positions is getting older. Adding young people to the governance of an aging organization can usher in a new generation of leadership.
- **Develop clear goals and objectives:** It is important for everyone in your organization to determine the exact reasons why you want to involve young people in decision-making roles. Defining objectives is a way to create a benchmark for your group. While larger goals will keep you focused in the right direction, your objectives will lead the way. Objectives should be specific, tangible, and attainable.

## Point 2: Assess Your Readiness

- **Conduct an organizational assessment:** The purpose of conducting an organizational assessment is to determine what is needed in order for youth to be successfully integrated into your governance structure. Are you already strong in most areas related to supporting youth involvement, or do you have specific areas for major growth?
- **Investing your Board and Staff:** Assembling a board committee to research and help

prepare for youth involvement can be an excellent way to invest your board in this idea. You can also include individual conversations with all board members to make sure they understand and support youth involvement. Your staff can be the cornerstone that makes this project stand. In many organizations, staff members support new young members by helping them prepare for meetings or by providing transportation. This kind of undertaking can be a great way to foster a deeper relationship amongst your staff, board, and young people.

- **Investing young people:** Recruiting for new youth members is a great chance to educate the youth in your program about the role of your governing body. It is important that the young people with whom you work understand what the group does and know that young people play an integral role.

### Point 3: Determine Your Model for Youth Involvement

- **Two general approaches:** All of the approaches to youth involvement fall into two general categories: 1) Involve young people directly in an existing adult governing body. For example, adding several youth positions to an existing board, church council, community task force, city commission, or advisory board; or 2) create an all-youth or youth-run adjunct body.

### Point 4: Identify Organizational Barriers

- **Institutionalize youth in governance:** Organizations need to move past youth in governance as just a good idea, and instead build it into their structure. Most governance bodies involving youth have written into their bylaws that a certain number of members must be young people. If you are creating a youth advisory group, ensure that it is a permanent structure, not one that will disappear with a change in administration.
- **Conflict of interest:** Many organizations recruit among youth currently involved with their programs. It can be a real asset to both the governing body and a youth member if she or he is already familiar with the program. You may, however, encounter concerns about conflict of interest. Your group should establish clear conflict of interest guidelines and apply these to any potential new youth or adult members.
- **Budget and staff considerations:** The idea of involving youth may appeal to your organization, but there are budget concerns to address. Do you have the staff time, transportation funds, and the petty cash for such things as reimbursements and refreshments at evening meetings?

### Point 5: Overcome Attitudinal Barriers

- **Adults must overcome their own stereotypes:** We all have stereotypes about young people. To work well with young people, we must recognize these negative assumptions and learn to share real authority.

- **Youth need to know that they deserve to have a say:** Young people deserve to have their voices heard. It is important to recognize that this isn't always easy because we are so often told that young people have nothing to say. Youth need to realize, gain awareness of their own value.

- **Speak a common language:** Most professional settings speak a very "adult" language, using jargon, abbreviations, and references to organizations only commonly known to adults. When young people are involved ideas must be presented in a way that allows everyone to understand.

## Point 6: Address Legal Issues

- **Obligations of board members:** Above all, the directors of a nonprofit corporation are bound by two general types of legal duties: A **duty of care** and a **duty of loyalty**. **Duty of care** requires an individual to perform their responsibilities in good faith and in a manner that they reasonably believe to be in the best interests of the corporation. All of these actions should be undertaken with such care as an ordinary person in a similar position, and corporation would use in comparable circumstances. The **duty of loyalty** entails keeping the interest of the corporation paramount to personal interests when acting for, or on behalf of the corporation.

- **Legality of young people serving on boards:** Because laws vary from state to state, you should check to see what the laws are concerning youth governance in your state. For the most part, you will find three different kinds of state rulings: 1) A law that says it is legal for youth to serve as directors with age constraints; 2) A law stating that it is not legal for young people to vote on boards if they are under a certain age; and 3) No law on the issue at all.

- **Contract considerations:** Though many boards do not often enter into legal contracts, it is important to note age-specific contract laws exist. Your board should research the contract laws in your state.

## Point 7: Recruit Young People

- **Be clear about what you want:** As with any strong team, a governing body should reflect an even balance of interest, skills, and diversity among its members. There are some characteristics that are important for every member of your governing body to possess and some skills that only a few members need to have. Before selecting new members, consider creating a governing body profile—a simple list of characteristics already found in the group, as well as those skills you hope new members will possess.

- **Choose motivated and committed youth:** You will want to choose a youth member just as you would any other governance body member. Consider individual strengths. Be sure the person you select has the commitment, motivation, and time to make his or her involvement work. Never select a young person just because you think it would be a good experience for her or him.

- **Add two or more young people:** Adding more than one young person to an adult governing body offers more support to youth in governance positions. It is important that young people not feel alone or isolated in your group.

### Point 8: Create a Strong Orientation Process

- **New member orientation:** Your orientation program for new members should clearly outline the basics of your organization's mission, programs, structure, and history. It should include a description of the relationships between your staff, board, and funders. You should also review the roles and responsibilities of your governing body.
- **Letter of agreement:** All members should receive a detailed letter of agreement that describes their term and responsibilities. This agreement clarifies expectations for all parties and solidifies commitment.
- **Parental orientation:** In addition to conducting an in-depth orientation with young people, it is important to help their parents or guardians feel comfortable with your organization as well. Parents play a very important role in the success of your young board members. Parents or guardians should know at least one individual from your group.

### Point 9: Train Young People for Their Roles

- **Training for young people:** Young people will need skills training that covers reading budgets, working on committees, and other bits of governance related knowledge. Many groups go as far as setting up a buddy system, pairing a seasoned member with each new member for questions, advice, and general support.
- **Training for adults:** Most adults have never carefully considered the assumptions they hold about young people. Before bringing youth into the governance of your organization, your governance environment should be inviting to them. For your adult members, this means exploring their own stereotypes about youth and learning to be good allies for young people.
- **Be innovative:** Unfortunately, when most of us think about training, we get stuck in the classroom mentality—endless lectures and textbooks. Learning can be interactive and experimental. There are scores of people, places, activities, books, and films from which we can learn. Which ones are right for your group?

### Point 10: Conduct Intergenerational Training

- **Intergenerational training:** Once young people are in decision making positions, you will need to continue training the whole group. This is a wonderful way to foster interpersonal relationships among your members and further diminish any tensions that may exist because of age. The focus of intergenerational training is to bridge the gap between adults and young people so they can work more effectively together.

- **Keep it fun:** Don't underestimate how important it can be for people to laugh together. Adults can be a bit tight-lipped when discussing some of the topics that should be included in intergenerational training (such as how youth *really* view adults, and vice versa). Laughing allows everyone the freedom to let go of his or her inhibitions for a little while.
- **Listening is key:** The most important thing that can happen during this training is for people to really listen to each other. Don't worry as much about getting through an agenda as creating space for participants to open up and hear what each other is saying.

## Point 11: Make Meetings Work

- **Meeting times:** Your meeting times may conflict with young people's schedules. While young people may not have teleconferences to keep them from meetings, they do have basketball games, school play rehearsals, and family engagements. They, in fact, have less control over their time than most adults do.
- **Interactive agendas:** Everyone appreciates an engaging meeting. A few small changes to your meeting structure can help everyone be involved, especially young people. Include small group time where everyone has a chance to speak. Go around the group and ask each person to give feedback. When reviewing a budget, do it in pairs, and always make sure there is plenty of opportunity to ask questions.
- **Use appreciations:** How often does it happen that you are plugging away at work, not getting much done, and maybe even feeling a little hopeless about how much more you have to do? Then someone walks by and says, "Hey! You're doing a really good job. Thanks!" You return to your work, but the load feels a little lighter. This is the power of appreciation. We suggest that you create a regular structured time for appreciations during meetings, because many work settings are just not in the habit of doing this kind of thing.

## Point 12: Develop a Mentoring Plan

- **Recommended for new members:** When joining a group, new members of all ages can use the advice of a buddy who already knows the ropes. Young people are unique because they seldom have prior professional experience. Mentors, whether they be experienced adult or young group members, provide critical support to young people by helping them learn new terms, understand organizational culture, and build confidence to act as full partners in the group.
- **Know your responsibilities:** In order for mentoring to work, mentors should know what's expected of them. There are a range of responsibilities that a good mentor should have, but most importantly, mentors should make sure that new members attend meetings, have the support they need, and are well-oriented to the organization they have joined.

- **Tips for new young members:** Young people should remember that their mentors are there to help them. In order for this relationship to run smoothly, young people should, among other things: trust their mentor; ask lots of questions; and speak up when they have an opinion.

### Point 13: Build Youth/Adult Relationships

- **Relationships are of primary importance:** Strong relationships are key to all successful programs and social change movements. From local community efforts to international movements, it is a solid network of committed people that create social change. An Atmosphere of caring allows deep, permanent transformation to take place.
- **Adults, go easy on yourselves:** Adults tend to have a bad habit of being hard on themselves. They often feel like they don't do enough, or that they should have it all figured out by now. Blaming yourself, or other adults, is never an effective path to change. We need to recognize that our efforts to work with young people are wonderful.
- **Remember the importance of involving parents:** It is vital to include parents right from the start. Get to know them, share information with them, and answer their questions. Show appreciation for them and the work that their child is doing for your group. Invite them to events and share your enthusiasm for the work you're doing. At the same time, let young people know that you are going to be talking to their parents. Let them know that you are not checking up on them or breaking any confidentiality, but that talking with their parents will insure that they know how important young people are to your organization.

### Point 14: Create Support Networks

- **Network young leaders:** As adults work to forge strong relationships with young people, they must be mindful of the relationships that youth build with each other. Young people on boards of directors, city councils, or in other leadership positions, can be excellent support for one another. By networking with other youth leaders, young people see that they are not alone in their work and that other youth care about the same issues.
- **Adults, support each other:** Don't forget that you need support too. As adults working with youth, we tend to put ourselves, and our own personal growth, on the back burner. Just as youth need the support of other youth, allies to young people need opportunities to talk with one another about their experiences.