Key Ingredients For Successful Youth Engagement
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Lack of Engagement

"Young people will not choose to ignore a problem if they think they have the power to fix it – which is exactly the message they should be hearing today."
Before knowing how to engage youth, it's important to point out the real need for it. It's true that if you are or have been involved with a program that emphasizes youth it seems like they're everywhere, but the truth is that most youth today don't feel like they're being reached out to. Governments, non-profits, and grass roots organizations are only just starting to spend more time targeting youth (1) , and research has found the desire for change but lack of an outlet is an area of frustration among young people (2) . Despite the existence of countless outlets for youth to get involved, it's hard to know where to start. These doubts about where to begin lead youth to a limited confidence in their ability to make a difference (3) . It's most important, then, to start reaching out to young people who may not know what opportunities are available to them. A report about the influences on youth civic engagement points out that "a simple but direct invitation to participate can make a critical difference for those ages 15 to 25 years", and additional studies have shown that for behavior change to happen, the willingness to address environmental problems must be complimented by both the availability of means and the access to means.

Again, it's important to emphasize how little youth feel engaged: at a gathering for the Public Achievement program, an initiative of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship aimed at empowering youth through public action in high school and below, out of numerous groups of students not one young person said they had been asked what they could do about the issues around them (4) . According to a 2003 study almost double the amount of Gen Xers received requests to participate with civic-oriented organizations than Millennnials according to a 2003 study (1) . Why wouldn't organizations want to engage youth? A big reason why youth aren't targeted is because there is a fear they won't respond and it wouldn't be worth the time. However, studies have shown that individuals who think they can make a difference do (1) . That may sound obvious, but it proves that *young people will not choose to ignore a problem if they think they have the power to fix it – which is exactly the message they should be hearing today.*

Relationships

"In order to reach a kid, you've got the meet them where they are. And if you can meet them where they are, then you can take them somewhere else."
All members of the Public Achievement program emphasized that the most important ingredient for a successful youth engagement program is to create good relationships with youth (4,7,12) . In addition to the Public Achievement program, other programs

have found that "having staff stay informed about youth's lives" and paying attention to "personal characteristics, the conditions in which they live their lives, and the situational circumstances that shape their daily experiences" are essential to creating lasting connections with youth; even if they prove to be time consuming (5,6) . As the director of an after school program in Washington D.C. states during a interview for a study with the Harvard Family Research Project, "In order to reach a kid, you've got the meet them where they are. And if you can meet them where they are, then you can take them somewhere else."

Peers

It has been found to be very important in various types of programs that young people have others their own age involved as well. Not only are they more likely too participate (3) , but it is also very beneficial to the program and participants. In fact, a study by the United Nations Children's Fund cited in the United Nations World Youth Report, found that at times peer educators were more effective than adults in "establishing norms and changing attitudes," and in after school programs it was shown that having older students helping younger students helped bond students to the program long-term. Not just young people of the same age but also having siblings involved (5) and adult mentors (8) were potential key factors in participation.

Age

It's easy to generalize "young people" as one similar group (usually referred to as being 13-25), but there are many differences within this group that are important to take into consideration. Adolescence is a time when a lot of development happens - both physically and mentally (5) . Originally, tests about engagement were focused on elementary school aged children, but since then scholars believe that adolescence is the most critical time to engage (1) . The time from late adolescence to early adulthood is sometimes referred to as the "impressionable years" because it is when a large number of people's critical habits are being developed (1) . While what is learned earlier in life is potentially very impacting, what recent studies are suggesting is that during adolescence values are most easily learned or those learned at a younger age are most easily changed. If "young people" are to be split into distinct developmental groups, it makes sense to differentiate between middle school and high school youth for the purposes of effective engagement.

Middle school is sometimes described as a tipping point when students are still willing to try new things. They are at a stage when they're first trying to figure who they are and what they believe and can therefore be relatively inconsistent with behaviors. It is therefore important to be adaptive, but also maintain stability and structure to make them feel supported (5) . It is also a time when they are learning autonomy and independence, which makes it particularly important to give them peer mentoring and relationship opportunities. The fact that younger youth are less likely than their older

peers to think they consume to much (3) is a good example of where older youth mentoring younger youth could have great benefits.

High school students, though much more independent than middle schoolers, are still in the "figuring things out" stage. They are really developing their own passions and interests and thinking about the future. At this point, it's important to give youth more responsibility and leadership, and they respond well to high expectations and seriousness from adults (5) . Strong content is more important to high school students, who can handle more complicated information. In general, despite the fact that as they are getting older they have a lot more commitments, high school students are thought to be easier to engage (5) .

Education

Education and engagement go hand in hand, and for successful engagement you need to both start and end with it. Although any education is inherent to most programs, those which are most successful emphasize it's great importance. According to the United Nations World Youth Report, "environmental education is a pre-requisite for effective youth engagement and participation in efforts to address climate change."

Make It Theirs

It may have been implied by the previous topics, but another key to successful engagement is to "make it theirs". Anyone, but especially youth, will be more committed to a cause if they know why it should be so important to them. Researchers have found that the key to adolescent growth is their "capacity to extract meaningful interpretation of experience from culture and to enlist this meaning in the pursuit of voluntary chose goals (9) ." It's important to not just simply tell young people why they should care, but instead to guide them to figure it out on their own (4) . There are an infinite number of reasons why young people should care about climate change and other environmental issues; we just need to help youth realize what they are.

Ladder of Participation

"Engagement" (just like "young people") can mean a number of different things. It occurs in any situation on a number of different levels. The International Association for Public Participation developed a useful scale for figuring out the level of engagement you're aiming for, called the Ladder of Participation. The ladder is as follows:

1. **Informing and educating young people** Creates a connection between the issues and the youths lives, but doesn't ask for any input with meaningful decisions. It's not always a top down structure and includes things like peer-to-peer mentorship.
2. **Gathering information from young people** Number two enables young people to share their opinions, but adults may still choose whether or not to act on any suggestion or use their insights.

3. **Consulting with young people** Consultation implies a more shared exchange of ideas and greater value on youth's opinions.
4. **Involving young people** The ideas and opinions of youth are deliberately sought and affect important decisions.
5. **Establishing collaborative partnerships with young people** There is a full-on collaboration between adults and youth. Young people's ideas and opinions carry equal weight to that of the adults.

For any situation, the level you wish to reach may be different. There's also no strict distinction between them, and combing different levels may be a good option. Additionally, the International Association for Public Participation suggests that although the fifth rung is the ultimate goal for true and effective engagement, each step is important and necessary to get there (3) .

Staff Practices

There are a number of different ways that you can set up a program that is more appealing to younger generations. A big one is to avoid hierarchical structures. Young people are drawn less to hierarchical structures because they make it harder for youth input to be valued and can inhibit important relationships (6) . Along those same lines, it has been shown that too much of a "professionalism" approach can create distance between adults and youth. Successful evaluation routines, regular staff meetings, and strategic planning were all identified as elements of successful programs (10,5,11) , however taking it to next level and involving youth with those practices can be particularly powerful.

Connecting to the Future

While engagement for any period of time is valuable, to create long lasting change it's important to look for ways to engage youth long-term. When making any improvements or changes to a program/organization keep this in mind with all of the suggestions I've provided. Why is it so important? Multiple studies have found that effective engagement can have a big influence on positive adult behavior (1,11,8) . In fact, students who participate in service activities report "more willingness to listen to others' point of view, value racial diversity, believe helping other less fortunate is important, and believe working together is more important than working alone," according to a study in 2000 (13) . The best way to ensure long-term engagement is to connect youth with the issues they're working on, making their passion for it stretch beyond the program or current time in their life. As previously stated, instilling a sense of responsibility is a great way to do this. Making long-term engagement a goal can also have benefits to your program/organization — many organizations have reported support from youth later in life.

My search ranged from talking to different organizations or their participants to reading through scholarly journals - and I found both sources provided valuable information.

Every program and organization is going to operate differently and need different methods to engage youth. The next step is to find out which methods fit your goals. During a time when so many issues are of critical importance, youth engagement has never been so important. We know that youth are capable of creating great change and it's time to start effectively harnessing that power.

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