Developing Effective Teen – Adult Partnerships Through Volunteerism: Strengthening Empathy, Engagement, Empowerment, and Enrichment

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INTRODUCTION

America's youth, and especially those in their teens, need to be engaged in their communities through volunteerism and service that allows them to actively participate in decisions affecting themselves and their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Brendtro and Bacon (1995) suggested that such active involvement in decision making assists teens in developing both responsibility and commitment. Swinehart (1992) defined youth engagement as having four components: (1) including youth in significant decision making; (2) youth participating in activities that satisfy a genuine need in their community; (3) youth developing collegial relationships with adult partners and mentors; and (4) youth reflecting on their work and learning skills related to it.

Engaging teens in meaningful leadership roles has become a major focus of many contemporary not-for-profit organizations. Today's cultural and political climates demand that community-based organizations approach youth not as mere recipients of programs, nor even as mere resources in program development, but rather as valued and equal partners in the holistic program development, implementation, and evaluation process. As Long et al. (n.d.) noted:

> [There is ample] evidence that weaving the work of youth development, civic development, and community development makes sense for three important reasons: First, young peo-
> ple, who make up 26 percent of the population, possess vision, creativity and energy that is largely untapped. They have much to contribute to organizations and communities. Second, young people, when called to action, contribute to their own development, as well as to the development of the common good. And third, constructive action and involvement are always and everywhere the best defense against school failure, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, crime, and violence – pathologies society cannot afford to remediate, even if it knew how to.
> (p. 3)

However, many not-for-profit administrators and program leaders often experience frustration and encounter unforeseen obstacles as they seek to design, implement and manage community-based programs involving teens as partners. First, as adults, it is often challenging for us to even approach teens; we have developed a societal stereotype that teens are, by definition, rebellious and nonconforming and have little sincere interest in anything but themselves and their immediate needs. Secondly, even if the initial invitation is extended and accepted, we often subconsciously expect teens to fail in following-through on their responsibilities and commitments, again assuming that they will redirect their energies and attentions to

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anything that is more immediate and more exciting for them personally. Finally, even if we have successfully invited teens to join our programs and they have followed through on their commitments, we subconsciously resist delegating to them true power and authority to perform, instead constantly shadowing their efforts and suggesting alternative methods and options based upon the clichéd, "our experience as adults."

Teens seek active, meaningful engagement in their communities. Numerous studies have highlighted teens' desires and initiatives to work together with peers and adults as leaders in addressing the serious issues facing us as a society (Auck, 1999; Independent Sector, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001; Safrit & King, 1999; Youth Service America, 1994). In return, they both experience intrinsic satisfaction and expect extrinsic rewards that enable them to be successful both today and into the future. Safrit, Scheer, and King (2001) provided an excellent discussion of how to develop meaningful service opportunities for engaging teens in their communities, taking into account teens' unique developmental characteristics. According to the authors, "teens are more willing to actively engage in mixed gender groups and seek greater responsibility/decision making in what volunteer projects to conduct" (p. 19) as active partners in community-based programs.

Community-based organizations (including volunteer and service based programs) are excellent learning laboratories for teen citizens of our state to become engaged in volunteerism and service. Chambers and Phelps (1994) argued that community-based organizations have contributed a great deal to the development of youth actively engaged in their communities. The authors stated that the organizations provided opportunities for youth to "test their judgement under pressure in the face of opposition" and " to exercise responsibilities and perhaps to try out one or another of the skills required for leadership"

(p. 53). Youth engaged in social activism through volunteerism and service also increase cultural and social awareness and personal and social skills.

A Conceptual Foundation

There is an abundance of literature that, both pragmatically and conceptually, addresses the topics of positive teen development and leadership within community-based organizations and not-for-profit settings. Lofquist (1989) first brought our attention to the fact that teens should be approached as valuable resources (and not mere recipients of programmatic action) in addressing issues facing them and their communities. Bronfenbrenner (1989) approached adolescent development within the context of the individual teen's larger real-world settings and environments. His bioecological theory identified four distinct systems encompassing the individual teen's critical interactions with others and the environment: the microsystem (the setting in which the teen lives and where most direct interaction occurs, such as the family, peer groups, school groups, etc.); the mesosystem (entailing the teen's direct interactions as a member of respective interacting microsystems); the exosystem (the overall social setting and culture in which the individual teen lives; while the teen may not have an active role in this system, it still affects the individual teen); and the chronosystem (the sociohistorical patterns of environmental events and transitions over the life of the teen that may affect her/him, such as divorce, working mothers, etc.)

The Iowa Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998) allows individuals developing programs addressing or involving teens to incorporate the development of targeted life skills into the program, skills that will prove beneficial to teen participants. A life skill is defined as any ability "individuals can learn that will help them to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life (p. 4). The model identifies four categories of critical life skills: think-

ing/managing (including ten individual skills); relating/caring (encompassing nine skills); working/giving (including seven life skills); and, being/living (addressing nine separate life skills).

Finally, the Search Institute's (2001) assets-based approach to teen development provides a strength-based approach to developing programs that effectively engage teens, rather than focusing on adolescent problems, deficits, and dysfunctions. The model identifies 40 critical factors for a young person's positive growth and development, organized into 20 external assets (that teens receive from people and institutions in their lives) and 20 internal assets (internal qualities to teens that guide the choices they make and create a sense of centeredness, purpose, and focus). The external assets include the four categories of support, empowerment, boundaries, and expectations; the internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

Unfortunately, space does not allow for a more in-depth or detailed discussion of these three theoretical approaches to adolescent development. However, I encourage any volunteer or not-for-profit administrator or program manager seeking to engage teens as partners in community-based programs to seek out the original, complete references and become well versed in each approach. While neither approach is "better" than the other, they each offer critical insights and considerations regarding adolescent development within the context of program development and implementation. Further, they each provide a valid conceptual framework around which one may plan for the effective engagement of teens in community-based programs.

The "Four - E's": Empathy, Engagement, Empowerment, and Enrichment

In addressing the challenges to meaningful teen involvement highlighted earlier, and by carefully gleaming insights and confidence from theories of adolescent development, I suggest an approach to engaging teens as community leaders with and through community-based not-for-profit organizations that involves what I call "the four E's" of working successfully with teens as community volunteers: empathy, engagement, enrichment, and empowerment.

As adults, we must challenge ourselves to empathize with both the real and perceived challenges a young person faces during her/his adolescent years. We have all experienced the rapid physiological, psychological, and societal changes that occur during the teen years. Such changes result in real and perceived concerns and issues which an individual teen must successfully address and overcome. Bronfenbrenner (1989) encouraged (and reminded!) us to consider the individual teen not merely in the context of their focused, episodic and (often) isolated role in a specific not-for-profit context, but rather as a young yet developing adult who must interact with numerous individuals representing differing (and sometimes conflicting) social units. He also forced us to consider the effects that larger social and world events may have upon teens in our organizations; the aftermaths of September 11, 2001 are poignant testimony to this reality.

Empathy is a critical quality for any adult who works with teens as parent, teacher, mentor, adviser, and (yes) colleague and partner in a not-for-profit setting. We must remind ourselves to actively listen to and truly value the ideas and concerns of teens, even if the ideas do not immediately resonate within our own adult realisms. Teens seek openness and understanding in a safe, positive environment; it is our responsibility as not-for-profit leaders to nurture such an environment in our organizations, our programs, and our day-to-day operations.

Teens also seek active, meaningful engagement in their communities. Numerous studies have highlighted teens' desires and initiatives to work together with peers and adults as leaders in addressing the serious issues fac-

ing us as a society (Auck, 1999; Independent Sector, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001; Safrit & King, 1999; Youth Service America, 1994). In return, they both experience intrinsic satisfaction and expect extrinsic rewards that enable them to be successful both today and into the future. The Search Institute's (2001) assets approach provides a conceptual framework that links these two outcomes of positive teen involvement by focusing on the positive assets that teens need in order to be successful, and the role of community-based programs in providing them.

I believe that positive engagement is the most fundamental aspect of effectively working with teens as partners and volunteers in not-for-profit organizations. Safrit, Scheer, and King (2001) provided an excellent discussion of how to develop meaningful service opportunities for engaging teens in their communities, taking into account teens' unique developmental characteristics. According to the authors, "teens are more willing to actively engage in mixed gender groups and seek greater responsibility/decision making in what volunteer projects to conduct" (p. 19) as active partners in community-based programs.

Enrichment challenges us to focus not only on what teens may contribute to not-for-profit programs and organizations, but also what the programs and organizations can contribute to teen partners in return. Through its focus upon teens developing critical life skills through their active involvement in community-based programs, the Iowa Life Skills Model (1998) allows a program developer to deliver information and skill practice at an appropriate developmental level for teen participants, thus assisting teens in reaching their full potential as young adults.

Teens have dreams, goals, and plans for the future. Their involvement in not-for-profit programs and organizations should provide meaningful, enriching experiences that contribute to that future. While altruistic motivations are just as fundamentally important to

teens as volunteers as they are adults as volunteers, other motivations focused upon self-esteem and personal development may be even more critical to teens than adults. Teens are at a critical stage in their lives, developing the knowledge and skills base that will serve them in their future roles as partner, parent, worker, and citizen. Their participation in not-for-profit programs and organizations should serve to enrich and expand their knowledge and skills. Safrit, Scheer, and King (2001) concluded, "volunteer opportunities can enhance teens' career exploration, provide an opportunity to learn about themselves, and be included as a part of building a strong college application or job resume" (p. 19).

Finally, in order to effectively engage teens, we must empower them; we must challenge ourselves to delegate not only responsibility to our teen partners, but real power and authority as well. Of course as with any human being, teens will make some mistakes and poor decisions along the way. But this is when the aspect of empathy again comes into play, for who among us has not also made a mistake or rendered poor judgment in our organizational endeavors. Even when a teen fails in her/his responsibilities, the failure itself offers a valuable teachable moment for teen and adult partners alike. We must talk and work through and beyond any failures, again building new bridges of dialogue and understanding between teen and adult partners.

Focusing Upon the Big Picture

Teen empowerment is a challenging concept to many adults. Yet, contemporary research suggests strongly that actively engaging youth in decision-making roles can provide positive outcomes for not only the youth themselves, but also the sponsoring organizations and encompassing communities as well. In fact, "The Power of Youth" is one of five major programmatic initiatives recently developed by 4-H Youth Development as an outcome of its three-year national strategic planning process (National 4-H Council, 2002).

Zeldin et al. (2000) stated that "Effective decision-making in organizations, the research discovered, requires the complementary skills, experiences, and contributions of both youth and adults" (p. 3). However, effectively empowering teens requires a not-for-profit organizational culture that values the contributions of teens, and our own personal commitment to bringing that culture to life.

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