

# Terms of Engagement: Aligning Youth, Adults, and Organizations Toward Social Change

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Youth engagement is widely accepted as an essential element of successful youth development activities at an organizational level. However, because the practical issue of *how* to engage youth in the work of organizations remains unsettled, this qualitative research study was conducted as an outgrowth of consultation by *Youth Infusion* (a youth organization that works to support youth as decision makers, advocates, and community change agents) requested by two youth-serving governmental agencies. Organizational structures, processes, and cultures that might support youth engagement were the focus of two research questions: (1) What accounts for differences in an organization's youth-adult engagement outcomes; and (2) What strategies can organizations adopt to maximize the likelihood of successful outcomes? Participatory action research drove the design and implementation of data collection and analysis. Five elements were related to successful youth engagement: (1) strong external advocacy coalitions; (2) alignment of management and staff; (3) clear, consensus-driven visions; (4) an openness to change; and (5) unified values. Organizations interested in advancing youth engagement in their daily operations should consider attending to these elements in their strategic planning.

**KEY WORDS:** participatory action research, youth-adult partnerships, youth development, youth engagement, youth voice

As children mature into adults, age—not experience—dictates legal rights and responsibilities. Sixteenth, 18th, and 21st birthdays assign their owners newfound status; other days may be associated with various cultural or religious “rites of passage.” This viewpoint tends to dichotomize development

into *childhood*, romanticized as a passive playground in which a person grows, becomes acculturated, and learns the rules of society, followed by *adulthood*, when it is assumed that person has all the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be an active and productive member of a community. Yet, age typologies break down when the rules that adults have set for youth do not lead to their health and productivity. For example, the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that 37 percent of sexually active students had not used a condom at last sexual intercourse; 21.9 percent of high school students had smoked cigarettes during the 30 days preceding the survey; 17.1 percent had carried a weapon; and 44.9 percent had consumed alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Because a prescriptive, rules-based approach does not necessarily prevent youth from adopting unhealthy behaviors, nor prepare them for adult decision making when they are “of age,” positive youth development approaches seek to actively engage youth in their transition from childhood to adulthood.

Engaging young people in the process of their own development and the development of organizations that serve young people lessens the generational divide and creates a shared reality of health and well-being.<sup>2</sup> Several other articles in this journal supplement provide background regarding the importance of youth participation in organizational youth development processes. Although youth participation is not a new concept, the ways in which intergenerational engagement are cultivated and implemented at the organizational level remain open to discussion and are the focus of this article from the perspective of work done by *Youth Infusion*.

*Youth Infusion* (<http://www.youthinfusion.com>) is an organization created and run by young people

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that works to support youth as decision makers, advocates, and community change agents by embedding youth within the organizations and institutions that influence their lives. Founded in 2000 by the then 15-year-old author, *Youth Infusion* provides technical assistance and capacity building to organizations that target, but are not yet involving, youth in decision-making processes. Rather than simply adding on youth to existing decision-making bodies, *Youth Infusion* takes an organizational development approach: embedding youth within organizational structures, processes, and culture. As an organization made up solely of young people, *Youth Infusion* sees itself as an active learner, evolving alongside its clients (nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies). This article describes *Youth Infusion's* ongoing learning process by critically examining two consulting projects in which organizations attempted to give youth a greater decision-making role. Five factors were found to be associated with successful youth-adult engagement. Implications of these findings for other organizations are discussed.

## ● Participants

Two governmental agencies (one local and one state level) that were interested in enhancing the engagement of youth in organizational decision making hired *Youth Infusion* to provide consultation in this process. The Parks and Recreation Department (organization A) of an urban city on the periphery of San Francisco, California, with a diverse population of 75,000 and growing Hispanic and Asian communities, wanted to assess its child and teen advisory boards and to strengthen its capacity to affect local change. Organization A provides services to a broad population, of which children and teenagers are only one segment. Two full-time staff members are charged with overseeing facilities and after-school programs for children and teenagers. Embedded within each of the staff's job descriptions is the role of child or teen advisory board facilitator. Both boards have functioned as social planning boards, responsible for putting on dances and participating in city-wide volunteer service days.

The Adolescent Health Division (organization B) of a state health department in the Pacific Northwest wanted to include youth in the department's sexual health programs and planning processes, but had no preexisting youth participation structures. One supervisor identified the need to "walk the youth development talk," and hired *Youth Infusion* to integrate youth voice into his staff's work. Using the methods described below, *Youth Infusion* sought evidence that youth-adult engagement had increased over the duration of each

project, and that sustainable structures were in place to support consistent engagement practice.

## ● Methods

Participatory Action Research (PAR) forms the foundation of this work. Unlike traditional empirically driven research, PAR is a collective means to a collective end. Researchers and subjects are one, working to disrupt the status quo and spark social change, as described by Powers and Tiffany<sup>3</sup> elsewhere in this journal supplement.

Using discussion groups, structured interviews, photography, organizational mapping, journal writing, and document reviews, each organization worked with *Youth Infusion* to answer the following questions: (1) what does youth engagement look like now and how does this compare with what youth engagement would ideally look like? (2) what in the organization, as it is now configured, works best to support youth as partners and decision-makers? (3) how could youth-adult engagement help your organization better fulfill its function? This strength-based approach for organizational development, known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI), is designed to move away from a problem-solving mentality and toward an opportunity-creating mindset. Because organization B had no existing mechanisms for youth involvement, AI was replaced by rationale inquiry and the consultative process involved one-on-one sessions with the lead staff member.

Engagement opportunities are the product of matching unmet needs with available resources, identified in the post-AI readiness assessment phase. Individuals placed their organization on a series of continua, rating how each aspect of the organization—philosophy, strategy, organizational skills, human resources, systems and infrastructure, organizational structure, and culture—facilitates youth-adult engagement. Participants also shared their perceptions of change, and discussed how their willingness to change—to challenge power hierarchies and implement new staff roles—might affect the way in which they rated their organization.

Guided by these continua, the organization's managers and front-line staff took part in creative brainstorming. Aspects of the organization that were *not* oriented toward youth-adult engagement became the primary focus. *Youth Infusion* supplied examples of existing youth-engagement models in other organizations for comparison with their own organization's previously defined vision of youth-adult engagement. *Youth Infusion* then prepared an "action proposal," outlining the implementation steps to result in each brainstormed model.

Action proposals were returned to the organization for revisions and adoption. Organizations could then decide to engage Youth Infusion as a trainer and curriculum developer. Youth Infusion received direction from the organization, rather than independently driving forward the agenda. Organizations were also encouraged to set up an advocacy coalition made up of interested outsiders (stakeholders); these advocacy coalitions could then provide ongoing support and accountability, as well as cultivate an environment of reflection, learning, and action (Table 1).

### ● Research Questions

Research questions were developed at the beginning and at the end of each consultation project. When the outcome of the two consultation projects were examined together, two research questions emerged as particularly salient and are the focus of this report: (1) What accounts for differences in organizations’ youth-adult engagement outcomes; and (2) What strategies can organizations adopt to maximize the likelihood of successful outcomes?

### ● Analysis

Data, in the form of notes, the consultant’s journal entries, interviews, group brainstorming documents, and

meeting agendas, were compiled during each phase and analyzed using a grounded-theory approach, in which theories emerge over the course of the study, rather than being rigidly applied from beginning to end. Data were sorted into thematic categories (eg, organizational power, identity, leadership) and relationships between categories were explored using a variety of tools, including graphical maps, card sorts, and discussion groups. Data analysis often occurred in the context of a consultation and not as a separate, formalized process. As a result, progress is measured relative to an organization’s starting point and not on an absolute youth-adult engagement scale. Agencies that make little or no movement toward engagement warrant comprehensive comparative study (Table 1).

### ● Results

#### Organization A

Although staff members in organization A were content with how their two boards operated, their manager believed that the boards could assume a higher decision-making role within the department. As part of the appreciative inquiry stage, staff, youth board members, and parks and recreation commissioners (who oversee the manager and receive descriptive reports from the advisory boards) participated in structured

**TABLE 1 ● Features of organizational consultation related to youth engagement**

	Organization A	Organization B
Consultative phases	<i>Goal:</i> To strengthen the youth and teen advisory boards’ capacity to affect local change.	<i>Goal:</i> To infuse youth into the department’s sexual health programs and planning processes.
<b>Outputs and outcomes</b>		
1. Rationale inquiry	Not conducted.	Lead staff member recognized need for engagement. Brought departmental staff and external stakeholders together around common idea.
2. Appreciative inquiry	Staff, commissioner, youth achieve consensus on need for change.	Part of rationale inquiry process.
3. Readiness assessment	Philosophy and structure levels identified as focal points of consultative efforts.	Strategy, skills, and systems levels identified as focal points of consultative efforts.
4. Model brainstorming	Multiple governance models developed.	Four youth-adult engagement models developed.
5. Action proposal	Final report with short- and long-term benchmarks produced. <i>Outcome:</i> Youth continue to be engaged as social planners.	Youth Action Research (AR) Team model adopted. Concrete implementation benchmarks set.
6. Proposal ownership	Process ended after action proposal.	Staff, with external advocacy coalition, took over planning and implementation. Partnered with <i>AmeriCorps</i> to staff local teams.
7. Coordinated implementation	Process ended after action proposal.	Developing action research curriculum. Recruiting team leaders. Creating youth recruitment processes. <i>Outcome:</i> Piloting of AR teams, where youth are engaged as full-action researchers.

discussions. Youth consistently said that they “had fun” participating on the boards, but expressed disappointment that their voice was limited to a social domain. Rather than advise the city, as the name of the board suggests, youth were event planners, isolated from the city’s real decision makers. In the manager’s presence, staff noted, “Youth are really a trophy at the commission level. They don’t have a lot of purpose now.”<sup>4</sup> Commissioners agreed with this assessment.

Despite seemingly wide stakeholder consensus on the need to enhance the child and teen advisory boards structure, both the readiness assessment and brainstorming process revealed wide disparity on the scope and method of change. Youth favored altering the commission’s governance structure so that they could have a vote; commissioners were divided on the notion; and staff believed that the breadth of topic matters could be expanded without altering the youth board’s reporting hierarchy. Recognizing that a cultural shift needed to take place *prior* to the adoption of a new advisory board structure, *Youth Infusion’s* action proposal laid out a series of short- and long-term steps for invigorating the purpose and mission of the boards, and revising decision-making procedures to accommodate greater youth input. Although *Youth Infusion*, with the help of youth board members, worked to “sell” the action proposal to all members of the organization, staff expressed concern that *Youth Infusion* was pushing a singular vision onto a system that did not require significant improvement. New departmental stakeholders, who had not participated in the research and design stages, emerged with another layer of opinions and ideas. No one constituency took ownership of the youth-adult engagement process. With waning internal support for the proposal, *Youth Infusion* conducted a reflections debriefing and turned over its data, recommendations, and internal assessment to the staff. Organization A continues to involve young people in social planning through its preexisting advisory boards structure.

## Organization B

Because the health department had no extant youth-engagement structures, stakeholders who were external to the health department were convened to determine why to engage youth (rationale inquiry). Participants described their concept of youth-adult engagement, and discussed the trade-offs between targeting youth and working with youth. Time, logistics, expertise, bureaucracy, entrenched power hierarchies, and new staff roles were articulated as possible barriers, whereas effectiveness, personal development, rejuvenated organizational cultures, and flattened organizational structures were mentioned as potential benefits. Together, stakeholders and the consultant

brainstormed multiple models for youth-adult engagement, explicitly addressing each model’s risks and trade-offs. Models included (1) an integrated youth-adult sexual health advisory and implementation board; (2) community-led youth action research teams; (3) a youth health promotions team; and (4) a youth organizing workgroup. Participants determined that research was the ideal catalyst both for increasing youth voice and for bringing that voice into the policy-making arena.

The readiness assessment and brainstorming phase, held concurrently, led stakeholders to design a concrete action research program and structure. Youth and adults, grouped together in community action research teams, write and respond to health-related research questions. As the process unfolds, team members receive training on action research, and are given the tools and creative latitude to see their communities from new vantage points. Results from the action research projects are then to be fed back to the local community and to a state youth-adult research board. In the process, youth gain the advocacy skills needed to communicate their findings and execute their recommendations.

With a comprehensive model in place, departmental staff and external stakeholders assumed control of the implementation phase. *Youth Infusion* developed an action research curriculum for youth and adults and oriented the newly recruited stakeholders to the action research process. These stakeholders, from local communities, research institutes, and adult volunteer networks, have enabled the action research teams to gain a broad support base. Pilot action research teams are currently in operation, and revisions to the program are ongoing.

## Synthesis of results

Applying PAR methods and qualitative research analysis described previously, five thematic strands emerged that were related to the relative success or failure of an organization to fully engage youth. They were (1) organizational identity, (2) power hierarchies within organizations, (3) perceptions of change, (4) participant values, and (5) vision consensus. These elements and their implications are discussed as follows.

## ● Discussion

Terminology associated with youth involvement in organizations deserves mention prior to discussing the findings of this study. The words “engagement,” “partnership,” and “participation” are often used interchangeably, but the underlying concepts are hierarchical, not synonymous. Youth involvement begins at



the level of *participation*, in which young people allocate a variable amount of time and energy to community, school, and family activities. The phrase “youth voice” is sometimes used at this level of activity to indicate that the opinions of youth are sought and that there is a certain amount of reciprocity insofar as programming is provided “with,” rather than “to,” youth. As reciprocity deepens, participation transforms into *partnerships* when consistent, mutual relationships between youth and adults are formed and when values and power are shared.<sup>2</sup> *Engagement* occurs when youth-adult partnerships possess a feeling of passion, excitement, and intense focus emanating from a belief in, and commitment to, collective action. Participation, partnership, and engagement are all organizational assets, but engagement is the ultimate aim of youth involvement because it requires both meaningful participation and highly mutual partnerships.

Organization B’s success and A’s relative inability to fully engage youth cannot be attributed to any one variable. The five themes mentioned above are hierarchical in their relative importance, as each successive element builds on the one before it. This is not to say that these issues must be worked on sequentially, but that coming to a vision consensus is difficult without having an organizational identity and power structures that will value youth engagement and are open to change.

### Organizational identity

Youth-adult engagement is not a “one-size fits-all” concept. Organizations, and the departments within them, assume different functions and roles, and youth interact with each structure and system differently. Local parks and recreation departments are visible to youth within their communities, and offer tangible benefits such as access to soccer fields, playgrounds, and after-school sports activities. State health departments, on the other hand, have a much more indirect connection to youth. Because changing an organizational identity is very difficult, mechanisms for youth involvement must complement, not supplant or alter, an organization’s fundamental identity.

### Power hierarchies

Most organizations, in particular governmental agencies, operate using a vertical ladder of command. Complex relationships exist between each rung of the ladder, making it difficult for an outside organization to initiate change. Since *Youth Infusion* was requested by leaders of the two organizations’ understudy to work with staff, gaining the trust of both parties was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of success. Part of building trust required openly addressing the fears of

staff whose hierarchical placement might change. Yet, mid- and upper-level managers must understand that for youth-adult engagement to occur, they must also cede some control and allow for staff role flexibility. Pointed group discussions, roleplay, and journal writing proved to be the best methods for dealing with these issues. External advocacy coalitions, composed of individuals and organizations with a vested interest in youth engagement, can also help to apply pressure and challenge the power status quo.

### Perceptions of change

Assuming that the organizational identity can incorporate youth involvement, and the power structures can be altered to actively include youth in meaningful roles, successful youth-adult engagement requires continual organizational and personal change. Yet, bureaucratic environments do not always cultivate risk taking and idea sharing. While *Youth Infusion* assesses the existence of structures and procedures to facilitate change, the individuals within organizations who will need to affect the required changes must also be prepared to facilitate such change. Ideally, they will embrace the changes necessary to foster youth engagement. Identifying proactive change makers inside and outside of the organization and promoting incrementalism helped to facilitate intentional change.

### Participant values

Organizational development literature emphasizes the alignment of missions, visions, and value statements. Although organizational coherence is important to establish *before* intergenerational integration takes place, bringing organizational values in line with staff values is perhaps even more important. Adults, especially those trained in separate professional cultures, carry different perceptions and biases about youth. Validating each person’s experiences with youth—experiences that likely shaped their perceptions—is the first step toward modifying negative impressions and building a set of cohesive and coherent values around youth and youth-adult engagement.

### Vision consensus

Even if an organization has an identity, power structures, positive perceptions of change, and coherent values, for an organization to move along a youth-adult engagement continuum, members of the organization must collectively articulate where they are going and where they should be going when it comes to youth-adult engagement. Until a vision has been developed

upon which every staffer can confidently accept, no organizational remodeling can take place.

## ● Conclusion and Implications

Organizational remodeling is both difficult and time-consuming. Integrating youth participation and voice, meaningful and committed youth-adult partnership, and eventually full youth engagement into existing structures requires transforming the way in which work is done. This study identified five key elements that emerged from two consultations by *Youth Infusion* to help governmental agencies enhance youth involvement. Attention to these elements, including an organization's identity and power structure, as well as the values and perceptions of individuals at all levels within the organization regarding change is required for a consensus vision to guide future youth engagement. More participatory action research is needed to understand

other elements that may be operating in other organizations, and which consultative approaches work best with each organization's capacities and needs. However, this study suggests that youth-adult engagement is an evolving means to a crucial end: a healthier, more inclusive today *and* tomorrow.

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