

INVOLVE YOUTH 2

A guide to meaningful youth engagement





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Mayor

DAVID MILLER



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In making the transition to adulthood young people need support, guidance and the opportunities to gain new skills and experience. All across our city, community organizations, in addition to the City of Toronto, are providing programs and services that help youth make that transition.

These programs are a cornerstone of the City's Community Safety Plan because they offer positive options and experiences for young people. They provide alternatives to involvement with criminal activity and other anti-social behaviour. They are vital in helping build leadership and citizenship skills.

The most effective of these programs are those that fully engage youth in all aspects of their operation. These are the programs that reach out to our most marginalized young citizens and involve them in designing and running activities and implementing solutions that contribute to building strong neighbourhoods. These are youth engagement programs in the truest sense of the word. The staff who facilitate such programs play a critically important role in shaping the lives of young people.

InvolveYouth2: A guide to meaningful youth engagement was written to provide advice and support for organizations and staff who work with youth. It's a practical manual which draws on the experience of youth workers and others. It provides strategies on how organizations can help young people gain new skills by creating welcoming environments, supporting youth to make decisions and designing program activities and approaches that meaningfully engage youth.

This guide is testament to the value the City of Toronto places on youth programs and the people who provide and participate in them. I hope it is a useful tool in creating more effective programs and enhancing the safety of our communities.

A handwritten signature of David Miller in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Mayor David Miller

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Introduction

Youth can make tremendous contributions to the communities in which they live. They can bring new perspectives to citizenship and service. Their ideas and energy can invigorate projects and organizations. But not all Toronto's youth feel heard or valued. When young people feel neglected, overlooked or discounted by society, they can become susceptible to negative influences and anti-social behaviour. Recent incidents of violence demonstrate the important role that the social and civic inclusion of Toronto's youth plays in enhancing community safety.

Everyday all across Toronto scores of programs in community and recreation centres, libraries, youth employment service agencies, drop-in facilities and health centres are engaging young people, providing them with the services, programs and opportunities to develop the life skills they need to become successful adults.

Like its community partners, the City of Toronto offers many programs for youth. Through initiatives like the InvolveYouth campaign and the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the City has focused on promoting inclusive and effective youth engagement.

The City believes meaningful youth engagement that emphasizes access, equity and social justice (the elements of anti-oppression) leads to positive youth development. Research has shown that civic engagement increases resiliency and protects young people from at-risk environments and behaviour. Positive youth development eases their transition into adulthood.

All youth benefit from opportunities to have a voice, access and shared power with adults but there is a particular urgency to engage youth of colour. Because of changes in our economy many youth of colour are no longer finding well-paying permanent jobs. Many youth of colour — particularly newcomers — are living on very low incomes with limited opportunities for advancement. Some of these young people become enmeshed in the criminal justice system.

Youth engagement programs and approaches within an anti-oppression framework are especially effective with older, marginalized youth of colour who have not been reached by traditional youth-serving agencies.

When young people learn to identify and understand the systemic factors that affect their lives, they are able to move forward in positive, constructive and conscious ways. True inclusion and empowerment of Toronto's youth begins with providing young people with the opportunity to gain tangible skills, make real decisions and contribute to their community.

Not all youth programs are youth engagement programs

Whether it is visiting the library, attending an after-school program, or volunteering at the local community centre, there is a wide range of programs, services and opportunities for young people. Each contributes in a different way to positive youth development.

Youth engagement programs and approaches contribute to the development of youth by fostering active citizenship. They instill a sense of social responsibility that will follow youth into adulthood. Programs achieve these aims by providing opportunities for capacity building and leadership, and by encouraging youth to develop a sense of self-awareness that is connected to a broader social awareness.

While all positive youth development opportunities enable youth to acquire and advance a range of life skills, youth engagement programs deliver the added value of active citizenship and social responsibility. However, the structure and form of youth engagement may vary widely between organizations. For example, establishing a youth council or starting a youth engagement program are very visible ways of involving youth. But a youth engagement approach can also be applied to other programs and services — such as drop-in centres or literacy programs — by involving youth in determining how they are run.

This guide is an introduction to effective youth engagement programming as a strategy for healthy and safe youth development. It identifies some of the key elements and common challenges, as well as offering possible solutions and strategies. We hope that it will prove useful in your work and that it will support our common efforts towards a safe, vibrant and inclusive Toronto.



1. Youth engagement

Essential characteristics of youth engagement

Youth engagement programs and approaches will tend to:

- **Provide opportunities for skill development and capacity building.** Like conventional youth development programs, activities will seek to develop academic, intellectual, civic, emotional, physical, employment, social and cultural competence.
- **Provide opportunities for leadership.** Leadership in the youth engagement context involves a genuine transfer of decision-making power to the youth. At minimum, this means the ability to make decisions in the design and direction of their own programs. Youth may also participate as decision-makers in various levels of the organization such as serving on adult-led boards and committees. Some organizations have created separate structures in the form of youth-led advisory boards and youth councils.
- **Encourage reflection on identity.** Youth are supported in their development of a critical and political analysis of identity issues. This is often achieved through anti-oppression training, discussion and creative expression. Familiarity with identity issues enables youth to make the links between the factors that affect their own lives and the systemic factors that affect their community and society at large.
- **Develop social awareness.** As the youth gain a greater awareness of their own identities, they are encouraged to develop a consciousness beyond the self. They are guided through the transition from self-awareness to social awareness and given opportunities to reflect on the responsibilities of citizenship. In some programs, youth are provided with the skills, training, and resources to become the agents of change in their community.

Who is a “youth?”

Definitions of youth can vary widely between organizations. Definitions are also dictated by external factors, most often by the definitions used by funders.

At the City of Toronto, youth refers to those between the ages of 13 and 24. Federally, Service Canada defines youth as ages 15 to 29.

Many youth workers believe there is a marked difference in capacity and power between youth in high school, compared to those who are in university or college, in the workforce, or living away from home.

There is some concern that adolescence is being extended too far. Some have argued that the “youth” label infantilizes young adults and extends the period of their powerlessness.

When there is a wide range between the ages of youth participants, it may be useful to sub-divide participants into smaller age groupings or to tailor program activities to meet the specific development needs of participants. At CASSA (Council of Agencies Serving South Asians), “youth” encompasses three age ranges: 13–16, 16–24 and 24–30.



2. Preparing the organization for youth engagement

Is your organization ready for youth engagement?

One of the most challenging features of youth engagement programming is that it requires the genuine transfer of power from adults to youth in an organization. This can only happen if there is a real and substantial shift in the culture of the organization. Before implementing a youth program, prepare your organization so that it is a respectful and hospitable environment for youth.

- **Ensure there are strong adult allies and advocates.** Strong adult allies are necessary to train, mentor and support youth staff and participants. Without the adult leadership advocating for youth in the organization, traditional management structures and stereotypes may be too powerful for youth to overcome.
- **Hold anti-ageism training for staff, management and board.** Help all parts of the organization to put aside prejudicial attitudes about youth and prepare them to surrender some of the privileges of adult power.
- **Review your organizations policy and practices on inclusive decision-making.** Decision-making structures should reflect the clientele, membership and community served by the organization. For youth to have a voice in adult decision-making, there needs to be a proportional number of places for youth at the table.
- **Create and implement a mechanism for youth to safely raise concerns and to challenge organizational practices.** This means opportunities for youth-led discussions with no fear of reprisal and a genuine commitment by the organization to listen and to respond.
- **Include youth in the hiring process for staff.** The experience of being involved in a hiring process can be valuable and it can also produce useful insights into the relative strengths of candidates. Besides, it is youth who will be most affected by the hiring decisions.

The importance of staff

Staff play a vital role in the design, co-ordination and facilitation of youth programs. It is through their commitment and dedication that youth programs survive, grow, and succeed like the youth that they serve.

In many cases, it is the staff person who makes a program work, who draws participants back, year after year, and who becomes known and trusted as the face of the organization in a community.

But even more than that, staff are the advocates for youth in the organization. They bring the ideas, energy and realities of youth from the community back to the organization. They represent and articulate the needs of their youth participants. They are often instigators for change, pushing organizations to shift, evolve, and make space for youth.

In the context of youth engagement programs, youth workers assist and manage the transfer of power from adults to youth in the organization.



At CASSA, four out of ten members on the board of directors are under the age of 30.

In order for youth engagement to be successful, there must be commitment from the board, from staff and management. It can't be a token or an add-on. It needs to be integral to the core of the organization, embedded in the policies and process, everything informed and directed by young people.

– Soni Dasmohapatra, Community Development Youth Co-ordinator, CASSA

Challenges for staff

Unfortunately, staff members often find themselves working from a disadvantaged position:

- Youth programming is sometimes seen as the responsibility of one staff person, whose work is done in isolation, separated from other programs in the organization.
- Youth workers who are youth themselves are often overworked, underpaid, and expected to accept more precarious working conditions than adult staff. Many youth workers feel a strong sense of loyalty to the youth and to the communities they serve. They know the work they do is important but they also feel weary and frustrated by the working conditions, the lack of job security, low wages, and the overwhelming workload.

In many parts of the sector, job expectations for youth workers are not sustainable. Poor working conditions undermine the integrity of an organization, result in high rates of staff turnover and burnout and weaken the effectiveness of youth programs.

It is not uncommon to find organizations where all the staff members hold permanent positions except the youth worker who remains on short-term contracts and earns significantly less than adult staff with similar portfolios.

Improving the work conditions of staff

Organizations need to review their staff policies and practices to ensure that they reflect the values of the organization and of youth engagement.

- **Commitment to youth.** Effective youth engagement programming requires a commitment to youth by the whole organization.
- **Better working conditions.** Working conditions of the staff can be improved by more appropriate scheduling of time, budgets and expectations. Staff require time for preparation, evaluation and administrative tasks related to the program. Staff should also have manageable portfolios. Too often, youth workers are responsible for the entire youth demographic, including anything youth-related that happens in the organization.

- **Commitment to staff.** An organization should be as committed to its staff as it is to its mission. This means providing staff with competitive wages, job security and benefits. Youth staff members deserve equal treatment with adult staff – equality in pay and in opportunity.
- **Training and capacity building, especially for youth staff.** Youth volunteers and participants often become the next generation of youth workers and facilitators in an organization. In order to make the transition, youth require ongoing training and skill development. Supporting youth in relevant and empowering ways requires knowledge, skill and creativity. Organizations should ensure that staff are well trained and supported to meet the complex needs of diverse youth.

If an organization is committed to youth engagement, then it must be incorporated into everything that they do. The organization must shift in order for that to happen — it is not the responsibility of one staff person. The organization must be open to change.

– Rachna Contractor, Co-ordinator for the Toronto Youth Cabinet, City of Toronto

Continuity and sustainability

One of the most important features of successful youth programming, especially when working with marginalized youth, is stability and continuity. This presents a real challenge for organizations across the sector where sources of funding are sometimes scarce and unpredictable. As a result, in order for programs to be sustainable, long-term planning must be embedded in programs with existing budgets. Continuity must be considered at the initial stages of program design. Consider:

- **The ability of organization to absorb graduate participants into the organization as staff or volunteers.** This strategy is particularly effective when it enables youth participants to become the facilitators and mentors for the next generation of youth.
- **The potential for partnerships.** There may be opportunities for joint activities organizations and initiatives.

- **Scheduling discussions with participants throughout the program.** This can happen as a group or on an individual basis. A common practice is to conduct an exit interview which can provide an opportunity for the participant to reflect on their experiences, give feedback and gain closure with the organization. The interview also provides staff with the opportunity to work with the participant to develop strategies and support mechanisms for the ensuing transition.

Sometimes, its about just opening a wedge. With time, this person — this one person — is going to have an impact because theyre going to open that wedge, just a little further. Because they will be in the position to mentor others, who will mentor others, and others, until that wedge becomes an opening.

*– Dawood Khan, Case Development Manager,
United Way of Greater Toronto*



3. Outreach and recruitment

In traditional hiring practices organizations will tend to look for the strongest candidate. But when recruiting for a youth engagement program, the aims are very different.

Youth engagement programs and approaches are designed to build capacity, to provide opportunities for leadership that would otherwise not be available. This means working with youth who may have no work experience, little access to extra curricular activities, who may be failing at school, or lack the usual markers of achievement. Youth who face multiple barriers are often under-served by more traditional youth programs for these very reasons.

Consider the ways in which your outreach and recruitment strategy can contribute to creating access, equity and inclusiveness for all youth.

What qualities are important when recruiting or hiring youth?

- Potential.** Do they have the potential to learn, develop and grow?
- Passion.** Are they passionate about the issue, concerned for the community and committed to change?
- Willingness.** Youth engagement programs provide intensive training and ongoing support to participants. Are they open, willing and committed to having that level of investment placed in them?
- Authenticity.** Is this a “typical” youth in the community? Are they representative of the very demographic that this program is intended to support?

Rethinking outreach

Outreach should be conducted with strategic objectives in mind. There needs to be conscious deliberation, consistent messaging and clear language to describe what the program is about and specifically, what is the expected product or deliverable. Is the program an organic process where the youth will decide on the project outcomes? Or are there particular objectives for the youth to meet and deliverables that they are expected to complete? Critically consider whether the outreach strategy will reach the targeted youth. (See also, Section 9, “When things don’t go as planned”.)

Outreach is always a question of relevance. Youth is a population characterized by transience and so whatever it is that you are doing, it must be relevant, now.

– ***Dawood Khan, Case Development Manager, United Way of Greater Toronto***

When we organized a workshop in Davenport-Perth on police brutality, we didn’t call it something else like “youth-police relations.” We called it a “workshop on police brutality”. We didn’t try to dress it up some other way. We called it for what it was and there was something very powerful about naming it, validating the experiences of those in the community, and having that as forming the basis for collective action. And the youth, they just came and came...

– ***Maya Roy, Program Support Analyst, Community Safety Secretariat***

We don’t even do outreach we are so full. This studio is at Lakeshore and Islington but I’ve got people coming from Malvern, Parkdale, Rexdale. It takes some of them two hours to get here on the TTC. The studio is just the kind of place where people feel like they can bring their friends. And as a service provider, you can just tell, the need is there. That’s why they’re here.

– ***Gavin Sheppard, Project Co-ordinator, IC Visions***

A case study:

Walking the talk

When I was working at For Youth Initiative (FYI), we were looking for someone for our summer program. We had some really strong candidates – university students with organizing experience, that sort of thing.

And then there was this girl: age 16, a high school student, really a typical youth from that community. And she gave a terrible interview. Terrible. It turns out she lost her cell phone that day and that was it for her. It ruined her day. But you have to see it from her perspective. At her age, given her economic situation, losing her cell phone is a tragedy because she really couldn't afford to get another one.

So we had to decide, are we going to walk the talk? If we were really going to work in this community, we have to invest in the youth from the community.

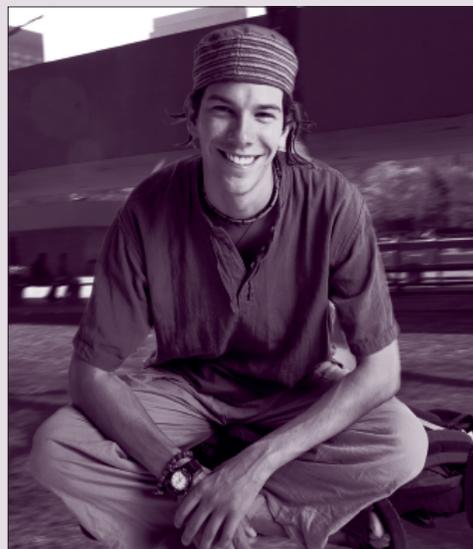
So we hired her. And she rocked. She had the most successful program of anyone. There were probably a hundred youth that came out to her stuff because she knew exactly what they wanted. She stayed on with us after that summer as a volunteer. And people would come out, just because she was the one organizing it.

For us to hire her that summer, there had to be a cultural shift in our thinking. At that time at FYI, there were only the two of us, so we could just make that decision. It's much harder to make that happen in a larger organization. And it is a cultural shift in how we think, what we do, and how we put our principles into practice.

If you choose to work with marginal youth, you have to accept a higher rate of failure. You have to take

those higher risks because that's just the way it is. But when things work, they work so much better than anything else.

– Dawood Khan, Case Development Manager,
United Way of Greater Toronto



A case study:

A participatory selection process: The Youth Documentary Training Project

In a conventional selection or hiring situation, the exchange is essentially one-sided because the applicant does all the work, by submitting letters of interest, providing resumes, attending interviews and answering questions. Despite these efforts those who are not selected often gain little from the application process. The whole experience can be stressful, sometimes even humiliating.

The application process can be a positive experience that provides tangible benefits for youth. This is an important consideration when working with youth who routinely experience rejection and exclusion.

For the Youth Documentary Project, the City of Toronto was seeking ten to twelve youth for the five-month project in 2005. Instead of conducting individual interviews, 30 applicants were invited to participate in a three-hour workshop on storytelling through film led by a filmmaker.

During the workshop, the youth had an opportunity to learn about the project, talk about points of view in filmmaking, analyze a documentary, join in discussions, and work in small groups to create and perform an improvised presentation. Food and TTC tokens were also supplied.

The workshop format allowed the applicants to:

- **Relax and have fun.** The focus shifted away from competition and performance. Instead, the youth had an opportunity to get to know one another, share their knowledge and experiences and be creative together.
- **Learn.** The applicants gained valuable knowledge and skills from the three-hour workshop.
- **Demonstrate a range of skills.** The workshop involved a number of elements – teamwork, public speaking, creativity, problem-solving, one-on-one interaction, etc. The youth had a range of opportunities to showcase their talents. The City Selection Team also had more time with each of the applicants in a more natural setting.
- **Make their own assessment about the project.** Since the workshop provided a longer and more in-depth exchange with the project co-ordinators and potential teammates, the youth could make a more informed decision about whether the project was a right fit for them.

The process allowed the City Selection Team to:

- **Focus on building a diverse and complementary team.** By meeting as a group, the Selection Team could consider not only individual abilities but also how the group would function as a whole. For example, youth with strong and outgoing personalities may be natural leaders, but problems can arise if there are too many leaders in the group. Conversely, a quiet person may seem like a weaker candidate on their own, but in a group setting they work easily with everyone.
- **Get to know a range of youth to consider for other projects.** The City Selection team had a more informed view of the interest and abilities of a broad range of youth. Non-selected youth could be referred to other projects and opportunities.

4. Representation and accountability

Organizations and programs often select youth to represent their peers. Sometimes representation is in a formal capacity (e.g. being the youth rep on an adult-led selection committee.) Often, representation is more informal even unconscious (e.g. being the lone South Asian young woman who is expected to represent the experiences of all South Asian young women). Representation can be a complex issue, especially when staff and youth representatives alike are striving to be responsible to those they represent. Since representation can be a complex issue it requires some consideration to help youth be responsible to those they represent.

What does it mean to be representative?

Representation is linked to accountability as well as diversity. It is not enough that there are diverse faces at the table, if the individuals present are not engaged in the community that they are intended to represent. Being from a community does not mean that a person is engaged in that community.

No one person can speak for a whole community.

Unfortunately, it often happens that youth are invited to participate as though their individual voice were representative of a community, neighbourhood or, sometimes, of all youth. If young people are expected to speak on behalf of some larger community, mechanisms must be in place to ensure that they are, in fact, representative of that community. They also have a responsibility to report back and engage in an ongoing dialogue with the community.

Opportunities for leadership and influence should be partnered with training and support so that youth can become skilled decision-makers. Youth need to be provided with the necessary information to understand the impact of their decisions. Without the appropriate support and mentoring, young leaders may not have a developed sense of social responsibility or know how to be accountable to a larger community.

Insincere programs are ineffective programs

In order to provide meaningful opportunities for youth, programs need to go beyond a tokenistic or superficial inclusion of young people. Organizations must make a real commitment to initiatives that will deliver substantial and long-term benefits to youth.

When is youth programming exploitative?

- When youth initiatives are tokenistic or opportunistic. Adult-led organizations may be interested in accessing sources of funding but have no real commitment to engaging youth.
- When youth are invited to participate but their views are not valued and they have no opportunity to speak.
- When youth are used as a source of cheap labour. Youth may be recruited as volunteers but not offered positions as staff. Or, youth are hired as staff but are paid significantly less than adults in the organization.
- When youth are being used as a kind of “poster child.” Youth are invited to participate in high profile or media events, but there is no real investment in them in terms of long-term support or skill development.

Not all adult-led youth initiatives are interested in youth for the right reasons. Because it's the trend, because that is where the money is, because under the guise of volunteerism youth labour comes free . . . and a host of other disingenuous reasons were cited as to why some adults start organizations and projects for youth and why they don't work.

– Denise Andrea Campbell for the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation

5. Engagement within an anti-oppression framework

When working in a diverse city like Toronto, it is essential to address the complex dynamics that differences in race, class and sexual orientation, among other factors, bring to youth engagement initiatives. Today, almost 50 per cent of the city's population was born outside of Canada, and more than 40 per cent identify as "visible minorities." Anti-oppression education provides young people with the tools to unpack the systemic factors that affect their lives. It challenges them to explore other ways of being and learning.

If youth engagement has a vision of building a safe, healthy society where all youth have a voice then anti-oppression work is a prerequisite. Access, equity and social justice in communities are also end products of anti-oppression work. Youth engagement in an anti-oppression framework creates a context within programs and organizations to continually recognize and challenge attitudes, behaviour and practices that create barriers to the meaningful participation and empowerment of youth.

What does it mean to work from an anti-oppression framework?

- Actively working to acknowledge and shift power towards inclusiveness, accessibility, equity and social justice.
- Ensuring that anti-oppression is embedded in everything that you do by examining attitudes and actions through the lens of access, equity and social justice.
- Being conscious and active in the process of learning and recognizing that the process as well as the product is important.
- Creating a space where people are safe, but can also be challenged.

Putting principles into practice

People can know all the "isms," but still not practise anti-oppression. They may understand the oppression in their own lives but fail to acknowledge the oppression of others. It takes time to internalize and operationalize. In the meantime, facilitate the process by setting the groundwork for anti-oppression:

Establish an anti-discrimination policy. Ensure that the policy is distributed and understood by all the staff and participants. It represents a minimum standard of conduct and is something to fall back on if any disputes arise over the course of the program. An anti-discrimination policy is absolutely necessary if no anti-oppression training is included as a part of the program.

Conduct anti-oppression training. This has become a common practice in many organizations. A workshop will help to familiarize participants with the concepts and language of anti-oppression. It provides the basic tools for naming and analyzing oppression. An anti-oppression workshop at the beginning of the program sets the foundation but training must be ongoing. Consider conducting multiple workshops as different issues arise during the program.

Create a social contract. As an introductory exercise, ask participants to establish ground rules for working with one another. Typical suggestions include respect, listening, and co-operation. Write the results on flip-chart paper and post it in the room. It is useful to revisit the social contract before anti-oppression training, or when things get heated in the group. It is a reminder of how the participants have elected to work with one another. When developing your social contract, consider the following questions:

- What has to happen for the group to succeed?
- How should the group resolve conflicts?
- What happens if someone is being disrespectful? Who gets to decide what is disrespectful?
- Is the facilitator bound by the same rules?
- How do we amend the social contract?

Be a role model. In practice, anti-oppression education is an organic process. The most important learning often happens outside the workshop and in the moment as the group struggles with how they work with one another and how they act in the world. The facilitator plays a pivotal role in this informal learning process. Consider how your own behaviour might better embody the values and principles of anti-oppression.

Actively build relationships of trust and respect.

Anti-oppression training is an active growth process. It requires youth to take risks – risk in challenging others and risk in being challenged themselves. For many youth trust does not come easily. Building their relationship with other participants and staff are critical to supporting their ability to take risks. Building positive connections also enables youth to treat each other with respect even when feelings of anger and resentment arise. Youth are better able to accept anti-oppression as a growth process when they are able to experience their peers as real people also struggling with learning and unlearning specific attitudes and behaviour.

Common challenges in anti-oppression training

1. Traditional workshops and rigid approaches to anti-oppression may not be effective with youth participants.

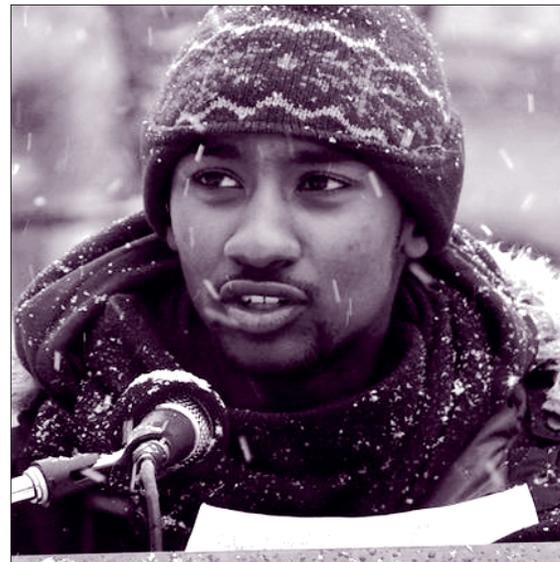
Anti-oppression education, like any other aspect of youth programming, needs to be relevant and meaningful. For youth who show resistance to authority and school-like models of learning, traditional workshops and trainings may not be effective. Others may find a rigid or self-righteous approach alienating and be turned off by bright-line distinctions between right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

- **Engage youth in a dialogue.** Encourage participants to think and to reflect by asking questions: “What did you mean when you said . . .?” “What do you think about this song/video/movie?” “What do you mean when you use the word . . .?” Discussions do not need to take place as a separate training or workshop. They can be integrated as part of overall the learning process.
- **Speak with credibility, not with authority.** Authority is based in power. Credibility is rooted in experience and knowledge. By sharing your thoughts and reflections, you demonstrate your familiarity with the concepts and the depth of your understanding. It is not about always having the “right” answers. Do not be afraid to acknowledge ambiguities and contradictions, but indicate how you would explore and resolve the issue.

2. Participants have diverse backgrounds and range widely in their exposure to anti-oppression education.

Participants will likely come to the program with very different perspectives and with varying levels of familiarity with anti-oppression.

- **Use the diversity of their experiences to demonstrate the complexity of identities and of oppression.**
- **Participants who have a more advanced analysis make great allies.** They can be invited to teach and lead discussions.
- **Remember too that anti-oppression is a learning process.** Participants need many examples and opportunities to put ideas into practice.



It’s a way of thinking about how not to oppress and how not to exclude.

– Violetta Illkiw, Youth Engagement Program Co-ordinator, Laidlaw Foundation

3. Resistance to the anti-oppression framework.

It is not uncommon for anti-oppression education to elicit feelings of discomfort, confusion, fear and anger. Most people are unaccustomed to being challenged or having to reconsider their belief system. It is not easy for people to recognize their own privilege or, conversely, to accept that they face systemic barriers. Participants can also feel threatened by being asked to share personal feelings and experiences.

- **Ensure that it is a safe and supportive learning environment.** When participants are better acquainted and share a level of trust and understanding, it is easier to open up, explore beliefs and surrender old assumptions. People need to feel they are safe from personal attacks. Revisit the social contract and emphasize the importance of a respectful learning environment.
- **Sequence activities from lower risk to higher risk.** Organize activities in order of increasing level of self-disclosure. Another way of progressively increasing the level of risk is to move from individual reflection, to speaking in pairs and small groups, before engaging in a discussion with the whole group.
- **Clarify the distinction between individual, institutional and cultural manifestations of oppression.** Many believe that oppression occurs as a result of individual acts of prejudice or intolerance. It is important to explain that oppression operates on multiple levels:

Individual: Attitudes and beliefs that motivates acts of discrimination against a social group, e.g. a shopkeeper who suspects all black customers of stealing.

Institutional: Laws and policies enacted by institutions that disadvantage some but advantage others, reproducing systems of inequality. Examples of institutions include government, education, law, religion, and the media; e.g. A school that discourages people of colour from applying to university, encouraging them to enter trades and technical colleges instead.

Cultural: Social norms, roles, language, music or art that reflect and reinforce the belief that one social group is superior to another, rendering inequalities as normal and deserved; e. g. all the popular characters on a television program are white, thin and heterosexual.

- **Differences in power.** Different social groups have unequal access to power and privilege. Even stereotypes are not equal – consider the assumptions society holds of young black men (e.g. aggressive, lazy, prone to criminal behaviour) in contrast to young Asian women (e.g. docile, hard-working, good at school). While all individuals are capable of prejudice, abuse, violence and intolerance, only privileged groups have the power to enforce their prejudice at the institutional and cultural level.

- **Anti-oppression is everyone's responsibility.** It is important to explain that the purpose of anti-oppression education is not to assign blame but for everyone to take responsibility in confronting social injustice. The focus is on understanding how systems of oppression operate, who benefits, why and how to transform them.

4. Some of the ideas taught in anti-oppression may conflict with participant's religious and cultural beliefs or family values.

How do you respect someone's religion or culture when it promotes intolerance? Cultural and religious beliefs raise difficult challenges for anti-oppression education. Facilitators need to find a balance between being respectful of people's beliefs while promoting the values of inclusiveness and tolerance. This means having to pass judgment on which beliefs can be accommodated and which values will not be compromised.

- **Beliefs reflect values.** No one should be made to feel isolated or alienated, but it is important to think critically about beliefs. Beliefs are value-laden. They are loaded with judgment on what is right and wrong, and what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In your discussion, raise the following questions:
 - Do all religions or cultures believe the same thing?
 - What are other sources of values and opinions?
 - Do these beliefs help us work better work with one another and include one another?
 - Can we agree to suspend or at least examine the beliefs that prevent us from including one another and working together?
 - Change behaviour if not beliefs. You cannot always alter peoples beliefs or change how they feel. But you can change behaviour towards one another. The behaviours that should be encouraged are those that encourage the full participation of all youth.

5. Participants are not working in a co-operative or inclusive manner.

Although a social contract is in place and the participants have undergone multiple anti-oppression trainings, the group may still be operating in ways that are not inclusive or that reproduce social inequalities. Anti-oppression is a process that requires both learning and unlearning. In many ways, the unlearning part is more challenging because it requires a conscious effort to alter old habits, ways of thinking and being. It is also difficult to practice co-operation when society tends to reward individualism and dominance.

- **Identify and alter the power dynamics in the group.** Initiate reflections on how the group is working. This can occur through group discussion or by asking participants to represent artistically how the group is working. Invite participants to reflect on who plays what role in the group. Possible roles could include leader, follower, mediator, devils advocate, idealist, loner, etc. As an exercise, assign a different role for each participant to play during a meeting. How does this alter the group’s dynamic?
- **Recognize and reward co-operation.** Society tends to reward individual success. It is important to recognize, validate and give incentives for counter-values like co-operation, consensus, and teamwork.

Staff support

Anti-oppression is a learning process for everyone and it can trigger feelings and emotions for staff facilitators. This is a particular challenge for staff who are youth and who may have only recently undergone the program themselves.

- Youth workers need to monitor their own feelings and to seek support when necessary. Talk to an ally or supervisor or seek additional training to handle the situation.
- Participants may make statements or behave in oppressive ways that youth workers find offensive. Facilitators need to identify the things that make them uncomfortable especially when they find themselves passing judgments on the participants. Tell the youth what they are struggling with. For example, *“I am struggling here because . . . I see this . . . but I also see this . . .”* Engage participants in a dialogue to come to a collective solution.

- Supervisors also need to recognize what their staff needs. Consider regular performance reviews that are constructive, rather than punitive. Highlight achievements, establish goals and identify development needs.

Ensuring that spaces are safe for all

Working with youth marginalized by race and poverty is critical to making programs and communities inclusive. But while organizations are committed to inclusion, staff can sometimes feel threatened by the youth that they support. Differences in how youth dress and act, their demeanour and expression, especially when they are hurt, angry or frustrated, can lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and conflict. It can also cause staff and participants to feel that the space or program is no longer safe for them. In building and maintaining spaces that are safe for all:

- **Recognize the difference between intent and impact.** Sometimes staff may intend to create a safe space but the impact of their actions is to create an unsafe space for some youth because of the stereotypes and pre-judgments which they bring to the process.
- **Check your perception of your personal safety.** Naming and claiming your own safety parameters and the multiple mental maps that helps to frame it, will enable an openness and willingness to “check oneself” and take steps to make changes. It is important to understand and acknowledge your own personal boundaries.
- **Check your perception of youth.** Which youth is the space being made safe for? What perceptions of young people are guiding attitudes, procedures and policies about safety or lack of safety? Can these perceptions unknowingly result in youth anger and further marginalization?
- **Brush up on anti-oppression training for staff and policy-makers.** Anti-oppression is a learning process. Youth workers and policy-makers can benefit from routine anti-oppression training that sharpens their knowledge and skills in analyzing and understanding everyday situations.

A case study:

Hip-hop based programming

Experience has shown that hip-hop based programming is very effective in reaching marginalized urban youth. It is a culture of resistance that speaks to the realities of the urban, poor and disenfranchised. Regent Park Focus, For Youth Initiative (FYI) and Inner City Visions are some examples of successful programs here in Toronto.

Hip-hop music and culture have been used in innovative ways to develop an impressive range of skills: literacy and other academic skills; critical thinking and analysis; cultural, political, and media literacy; life skills, especially where programs are geared towards technological skills and entrepreneurialism in the urban music industry.

But it is also a medium with often graphic and violent expressions of sexism and intolerance. This poses a challenge to educators seeking to work from an anti-oppression framework.

Hip-hop can be a powerful tool for developing skills in critical analysis by engaging youth in dialogue. A discussion may begin with the portrayal of women in a particular song, but it can lead to a broader discussion on stereotypes, on how language affects perceptions of women, or how the media reproduces and reinforces gender inequality.

Marginalized youth who experience oppression often possess an anti-oppression analysis although they may speak about it in a different language. The challenge for youth workers is to recognize, validate and further the analysis, to translate that intuitive understanding into a broader social context where young people can begin to move for social change.

I was in the studio one day and there's this kid. I swear his whole album has nothing but carnage, people dying and getting shot. And so I went up to him and I said, "Can you please, just once, write a song where nobody dies. Maybe your grandma dies, I don't know. But no one gets shot." Everyone laughed because they knew what I was talking about, but it got them thinking. That kind of violence is a part of their reality, but I think, there are always three dimensions to every life. I just want to hear what's on the other side.

So a couple of days ago, I see the guy on the streetcar and he says to me, "I'm working on that conscious track for you." And I said, "No man, that track is for you." And he goes, "No. It's for you. I'm going to impress you, you'll see."

*– Gavin Sheppard, Project
Co-ordinator, IC Visions*



6. Access, incentives and enabling participation

Positive reinforcement is an important aspect of youth engagement programming. Ensure that the contributions of young people are generously acknowledged both publicly and privately. Consider ways in which participants can be recognized and awarded for their accomplishments. Some common practices include awards, certificates and graduation ceremonies. Other incentives include stipends and honoraria. Overall, attention needs to be given to a variety of incentives and approaches which will enable youth, especially marginalized youth, to access and fully participate.

Stipends and honoraria

Research indicates that the use of stipends and honoraria have a positive effect on the recruitment and retention of participants in youth engagement programs. Besides providing an obvious incentive to join and imparting a sense of responsibility, there are other reasons for awarding stipends:

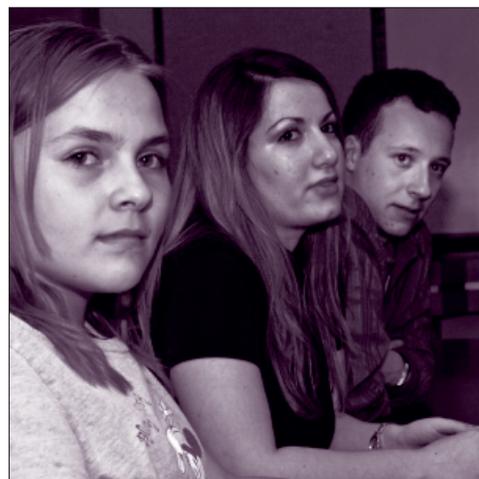
- They support youth who are unemployed or who have acute economic needs.
- They are a positive incentive for parents who would otherwise prefer their child to take a part-time job or who do not understand the value of extra-curricular activities.
- They address issues of access and equity. For those who struggle with economic hardship, volunteerism may be a luxury that they can't afford. Stipends provide a means for these individuals to enjoy the benefits of volunteering – the opportunity to work with their peers, to develop skills, and give back to their community.

Common problems and pitfalls

Great care and caution should be given to the way in which the issue of money is framed and managed in the program. Consistent messaging is key — this means consistency in language and in administration.

- **What is the money for?** Is it considered a stipend, an honorarium, compensation for participant's time and efforts or a token of your appreciation?
- **What is important?** While it may be the monetary rewards that initially attract some participants, if the program has real value they should come to feel that the skills and experience they have gained are more significant.
- **Be careful not to offend.** Some youth may be sensitive to the perception that they are poor or are participating only for monetary gain.

- **Equity.** Conflicts arise most often when some youth participate more or less than others but receive the same compensation. There needs to be a principled approach to how money is awarded or withheld. Engage the youth in a dialogue on what they believe is fair. Together develop policies on how stipends should be distributed.
- **This is not a job.** It is ill-advised to compare participation in the program with holding a job. At one organization the youth became very angry and confused when they were informed part way through the program that they were not in fact employees of the organization and not entitled to employment rights protection.
- **Accommodation.** Unexpected issues often arise when working with more marginalized communities. Organizations need to be flexible and willing to accommodate the unique needs of participants. For example, some youth may not have bank accounts or have easy access to bank machines. Consider providing stipends in cash rather than by cheque.
- **Regular and timely payments.** Although participation in the program is not the same as having a job, participants may rely on the stipends as a main source of income. It is best to provide a schedule of payment so that they have a sense of when and how much they will receive. Take into account any delays that may arise from complex financial systems and iron them out before youth start the program.



Building supports from parents

For many young people, their parent's permission is critical to their participation in a program. Unfortunately, not everyone understands the value of extra-curricular activities.

- Some parents believe that extra curricular activities will distract the young person from their studies.
- Others are concerned that the program will compete with responsibilities at home, especially in families where the youth is responsible for the care of younger siblings.
- New program or program locations, new staff, or evening meetings can raise safety concerns for some parents of younger or newcomer youth, especially if they are girls.
- Some parents are concerned that the program allows or promotes associations with inappropriate peers. For example, some parents have reservations about allowing their child to work in mixed-gender groups or, when programs are directed at "at-risk" youth, parents believe there is a potential for negative influence by other participants.

Strategies for intervention

It may be necessary for youth workers to intervene on behalf of youth participants. The best strategy will vary with the person and the situation. Intervention will not always be successful and youth workers need to respect the decisions of parents and guardians. However, when youth come from situations of violence, abuse and neglect, when the program represents their only outlet and means for gaining validation, a successful intervention is critical.

- **Consult with the participant.** Family dynamics are complex particularly between adolescents and their parents. Any interventions by youth workers should be done with the permission and consultation of youth participants. Ideally participants would see intervention as their solution to the problem. Ask them what strategies they think will work. If intervention is likely to be necessary for the majority of participants, raise it as a topic for group discussion.

- **Involve the parents.** It may be wise to take a proactive approach to developing relationships with parents. Some strategies include being present and visible in the community; keeping parents informed by calling home, sending newsletters and writing letters; and organizing meetings and events where parents can participate. Bear in mind that youth are often protective of their privacy and independence. They may become suspicious if youth workers become too close to their parents. Additionally, ensure that parents do not infringe or compromise the safe space that has been established for the youth. Ask parents to wait in the waiting room or in the parking lot.
- **Frame the message.** Parents want to know what their children are doing and that what they are involved in is good for them. Consider the following messages and strategies when speaking with parents:

Parents need to be reassured that education is a priority and that the program has educational value and develops important job skills. Consider as well if there are ways to increase it's educational value. For example, by scheduling time for homework and providing tutoring; organizing field trips to a university; inviting important guest speakers to work with the youth.

Explain that good grades are not enough for youth to succeed. Youth also need to develop life skills like time management, leadership, conflict mediation and public speaking. Additionally, university and scholarship applications look for candidates who are well-rounded and who demonstrate leadership and social responsibility.

Parents are sometimes more open to communication when the youth worker comes from a similar cultural, religious or linguistic background. If there are multiple facilitators in the program, consider who might be in the best position to speak with parents.

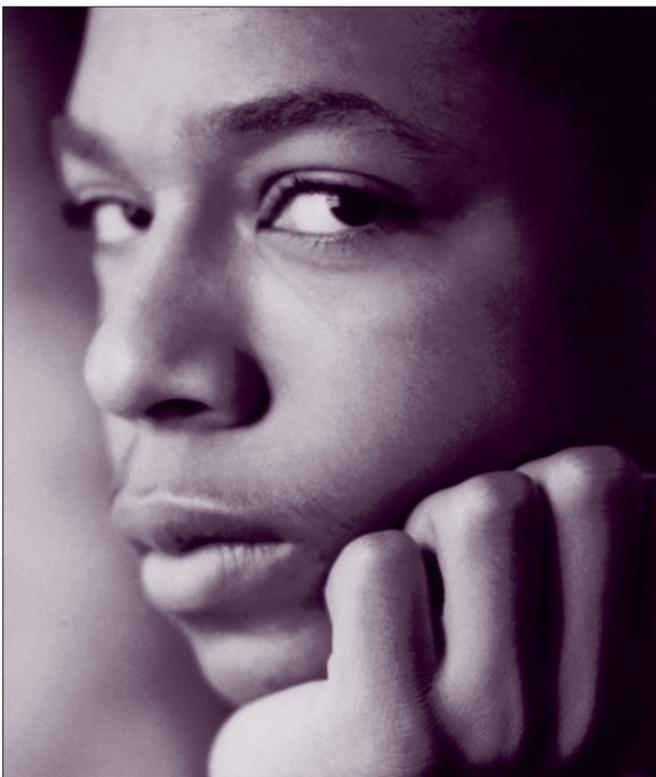
The program should appear "official." Consider printing documents on letterhead, assigning titles to staff and having business cards available.

7. Absenteeism, lateness and disinterest

The reasons for lapses in responsibility by youth participants can be quite complex, involving both personal and social factors. Whatever the reason, participants have a responsibility to the organization and to their peers. Here are some strategies for handling absenteeism, lateness and disinterest.

- **Be flexible.** Give participants lots of chances to improve. Former youth worker Dawood Khan observed that “flexibility is key to working with marginal youth – as long as you are getting mostly what you are looking for, you have to be willing to let the rest go. For the most part, I didn’t care what happens as long as the youth meet the outcomes. But that kind of flexibility is hard to maintain in a larger organization.”
- **Ask, why?** Why is this person late or absent? Youth participants have other responsibilities, like school or work and the program may not be a priority. In other cases, it may be the parents who prioritize responsibilities at home over the program. Consider, as well, whether there is something you could do better. Why do the youth no longer come or care to come on time? Is there a better time or place for the youth to meet? Are the youth missing particular skills that contribute to the absenteeism or lateness?

- **Problem-solve, don’t punish.** Approach disciplinary issues from the perspective of collective problem-solving rather than punishment or blame. Discuss the problem as a group and together determine how it should be resolved.
- **Encourage the youth to establish their own rules.** The participants should establish ground rules and guidelines for themselves. This includes being able to determine, “What is late?” and the consequences that ensue. The youth are responsible for holding one another accountable; the success of the program is for them. But youth workers can facilitate this process by keeping the youth informed especially when there are important activities that no one should miss.
- **Adjust compensation and rewards.** Some programs will withhold or adjust stipends and other rewards when participants are late or absent. While flexibility is important, equity must also be a consideration. Participants are not always happy to see someone receiving the same rewards if they have done less work.



I see tokenism when youth service providers invite one youth to participate but everyone else is an adult. Because when you are just one person, you have no voice.

– Julet Allen, Youth Co-ordinator, Toronto Community Housing Corporations

Tokenism is when someone is picked for their identity group and nothing else. They don’t necessarily have the knowledge, analysis or any real connection to the community that they supposedly represent and so they have no legitimacy to make decisions on behalf of that community. If a person is supposed to represent a community, they need to have experience with that community, need to be engaged with that community, so they can speak for that community, recognizing that no one person can speak for a whole community.

– Rachna Contractor, Co-ordinator, Toronto Youth Cabinet, City of Toronto

8. Dominant personalities

Youth have different levels of social skills, learning objectives and ways of working. Balancing needs within the group can be challenging. It is especially difficult when there are dominant personalities in the group. Some examples of dominant behaviour include:

- **The youth dominates the group by silencing less experienced participants.** The person is always the first to speak, speaks often and at length, or always volunteers to speak on behalf of the group.
- **The youth doesn't listen or give credit to the contribution of others.** He or she often repeats what has already been said and seems unable to work in a group unless as the leader.
- **The youth behaves in ways that suggests a sense of superiority.** Youth who are accustomed to excelling or being "at the top of the class" may sometimes engage in dismissive treatment of other youth including youth staff. They may demonstrate a greater interest in connecting with adults or those they perceive to be in positions of power. More subtle behaviours include a tendency to speak and listen only to the facilitator as though they were in a dialogue rather than a group discussion.
- **The person hijacks the learning process** by using the program as only as an opportunity for personal achievement.

Why you should intervene

It can be difficult for staff to intervene, especially when the other participants view the dominant personality as the natural leader of the group. But intervention is necessary when:

- **The group is reproducing inequalities and structures of privilege and oppression.** One of the functions of youth engagement programming is to create a safe space for youth. This requires disrupting traditional power dynamics so participants can be free to try on new roles and take on new challenges.
- **The person is modeling a form of leadership that is oppressive and self-interested.** This is antithetical to real youth engagement which is intended to develop citizenship and social responsibility.

- **The person is inhibiting the learning process of others.** By dominating the group, the youth is actually imposing his or her vision of the program onto the others. If the one person does not know how to give space and the other participants do not know how to take space, it falls on the facilitator to create space.

Strategies for intervention

Dominant personalities are sometimes the most difficult to get through to because of their perception that they have nothing to learn. They can pose a real challenge for staff facilitators, triggering feelings of stress, frustration, even resentment. This is a particular problem for less experienced facilitators, who may feel as though they are in competition with the participant for control of the group. Ongoing staff training and organizational support is recommended, along with the following strategies:

- **Recognize and award collective achievements.** It is important to provide positive reinforcement when youth cooperate and work effectively together. Emphasize the positive not only the negative.
- **Refer to the social contract or anti-oppression training.** A good social contract will have mechanisms for resolving disputes or managing problem behaviour. Hold the group accountable to the terms they have established for themselves. Refer to the anti-oppression training and encourage the participants to identify and unpack the power dynamics in the group. Have they put their anti-oppression training into practice?
- **Change the dynamics of the group.** Split the group into small groups or pairs, go around the circle, or use a talking stick so others will have an opportunity to speak and lead. By being explicit about your strategies you can help to convey who has the authority to speak and who needs to listen. For example, "In the following exercise on racism, only the people of colour will speak." Explore alternate ways for participants to express themselves — through art, music, or free-form expression.
- **Talk to them. Consider what is this person's need?** Do they dominate the group out of a desire for attention and recognition or are they stepping up because they believe no one else will? It may be that the young person feels the group is moving too slow or that the group discussions are ineffective. Talk to the youth about their perception of the program. How might the program be better fitted to suit their learning objectives?

- **Challenge them.** It is difficult to challenge attitudes in the abstract but you can challenge statements, actions and behaviour. If the youth has acted in a derogatory or disrespectful manner, name it. Help them examine what has happened and what is motivating this behaviour. Relate it to the social contract, or the lessons learned in the anti-oppression training.
- **Build their capacity to enable others.** Youth who are widely recognized by adults as “achievers” or “leaders” are often rewarded for winning or out-doing their peers. As a result, they may lack the skills to work effectively with other youth even when they want to. Talk to the youth about this dynamic. Explain that even the most effective leaders actively build their interpersonal skills. Provide strategies and techniques that help the youth better engage and enable others.
- **Let them work alone.** The youth may believe they would gain more from the program if engaged in individual work or had more individual attention. Is there a way of accommodating them in the program? In many ways the youth is “missing the point” by working alone. But that is the very lesson that they need to learn so let them learn it – in their own time and on their own terms.



Design your own anti-oppression training

Models of leadership

General anti-oppression training on power and privilege may not be enough. Consider tailoring an anti-oppression training session specifically based on models of leadership. What messages on leadership does this group need to learn?

1. Conduct a group discussion or exercise on:

- a) What qualities does society value in a leader?
- b) Who are the leaders at school or in their community? What kind of qualities do their peers (youth) value?

Consider qualities like looks, popularity, "cool". Do qualities like race, class, gender or sexual orientation matter?

2. As an individual exercise, consider:

- a) Are you a leader? Why or why not?

Write your answer on a cue card.

- b) Turn the card over and...

If you think you are a leader, write down what you could do to help others in the group to be leaders.

If you didn't think you were a leader, write down what you need the group to do so you could be a leader.

- c) Reconvene as a group. Share and discuss.

3. Conduct a group discussion on:

- a) Is helping others lead themselves an important quality in a leader?
- b) What qualities do they value as a leader? How is it the same or different from what society values?

At the end of the exercise, revisit the group's social contract. Is there a way of incorporating what we've learned with how we work with one another?

9. When things don't go as planned

When youth make the “wrong” decision

Ironically, one of the pitfalls of youth-led decision making can be when youth make the “wrong” decision.

Youth workers have felt decisions to be “wrong” when:

- The participants decide to take on a project that is beyond the resources or capacity of the group.
- The youth engage in an activity or process that is unethical, not inclusive, or compromises the integrity of the organization.
- The youth are heading in a different direction from the one intended by the program.

What to do

When subtle persuasion and advice does not produce the desired results, youth workers are left in an unenviable position. They can stand by in the face of what seems like impending disaster, or usurp the decision-making powers of the youth. There are no hard and fast rules for when to intervene, how to intervene and the appropriate level of intervention. The stakes are different in every situation.

Here are some suggestions to guide your decision:

- **Support the decision-making process even if you can't support the decision.** Youth participants need training and information in order to become skilled decision-makers. Violetta Illkiw of the Laidlaw Foundation observed: “Giving youth decision-making powers includes providing the information necessary to make those decisions. They don't always come already informed about the impact of their decisions. All the mechanisms need to be in place in order for youth to make those decisions. Providing them with what they need includes helping them understand what they need.”
- **Demonstrate your credibility, not authority.** Youth workers should share their experience and expertise — that is their role in youth engagement programming. There is a difference in demonstrating one's credibility and speaking from a place of authority. In the end, the decision falls on the youth, but the youth worker can and should contribute to the discussion.



At the Jamestown Youth Engagement Project, when the youth found it difficult to balance their schoolwork with the program, the staff changed the program. Participants now have scheduled periods for homework and receive training in time management.

When you're working with at risk youth, you have to accept the fact that not all of them will pull through. It's not about lowering your expectations – it just means that you have to provide lots of support and never revert to this instant disciplinary mode.

– Farah Khan, Youth Co-ordinator, METRAC

When is leadership a form of oppression?

An oppressor is one who uses her/his power to dominate another, or who refuses to use her/his power to challenge that domination. An oppressed is one who is dominated by an oppressor and by those who consent with their silence.

*– “Real Definitions”, Colours of Resistance
(www.colours.mahost.org)*

- **Let it be.** Sometimes people have to make their own mistakes. This means stepping back and letting things fall where they fall. As the staff person, it may be wise to cover yourself, inform the necessary people so they can prepare for the consequences. But recognize too that there are some things, you just can't allow. It's okay to say no. Youth engagement is a learning process for everyone.

When youth go off the path

Youth participants will sometimes “stray from the path” and head into directions that were not intended by the program. This can happen when the objectives or goals of the program fail to meet the developmental needs of the youth participants:

- It may be a result of poor program design, a consequence of funding-driven rather than youth-driven programming, or a top-down rather than bottom-up approach.
- The youth may not fully understand the issue or understand their role in contributing to a solution.
- The youth are not interested in this issue, but the issue is a legitimate one in the community.

Do not be alarmed. Research suggests that this happens often and funders are well aware of the problem.

Contact your funder. The mark of a good funder is flexibility. They understand that things change, people make mistakes, stuff happens. As long as your desired outcomes remain consistent, as long as it is still a youth engagement program, and youth are benefiting from the experience, the funder is likely to support your changes.

Engage youth in development stages of the program.

These problems are less likely to arise if youth have input at the development stages of a program.

Reconsider your outreach strategy. The problem may not be with program design but in your outreach. Have you failed to engage the targeted youth?

If the youth want to go in a different direction, I just deal with it. I go and talk to the funder, as long as it's the same theme, it's never been a problem. Most of the time, it's not like the youth want to go in a different direction so much as they want to take the program to another level. If the program is there for the youth, then it should be process-driven by the youth.

—Farah Khan, Youth Co-ordinator, METRAC



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True decision-making power means youth have a choice in what they want to learn, how they want to learn and when they want to learn it.

–Rachna Contractor, Co-ordinator, Toronto Youth Cabinet, City of Toronto

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