Best Practice Guide for Youth Engagement and Coalition Development

Best Practices for Youth Engagement and Coalition Development – Recurrent Themes

Recurrent themes in the literature:

- Throughout the literature there was a clear consensus that youth engagement/coalition development can be severely hindered if clear roles are not in place. These clearly defined roles help to set expectations and ensure that younger individuals feel engaged and challenged.
- Another recurrent theme within the literature was the importance of purpose, which needs to be created on both the individual level, as well as the organizational level.
- One of the strongest recurrent themes within the literature was the need to create a safe, welcoming space for youth to participate. Failure to do so can drastically limit the involvement of youth, as well as the collaborative abilities of a group.

Recurrent themes from key informant interviews - adults:

- There was a clear consensus that successful youth engagement requires the youth to feel like they have a strong voice by allowing them to participate in the conversation openly.
- Another frequent mention during the interviews was the need to be flexible, especially when working with the youth population that does not have full control over their lives.
- Similar to the findings from the literature review, the creation of a safe, welcoming space was also found to be a recurrent theme within the interviews.

Recurrent themes from key informant interviews – youth:

- Time and time again, youth mentioned that they continue to participate because they feel as though they have a voice, especially when they are provided with the opportunity to take on leadership positions.
- Youth also mentioned that it is easier to be involved in a group if there are clear goals in place. This ensures that everyone is on the same page and focused on the same achievements.
- As also found during the interviews with adults and within the literature review, each youth that was interviewed made it clear that they continue to participate because they feel as though the environment is safe and welcoming.

Best Practices for Youth Engagement and Coalition Development Graphic

Literature Review:

1. Clear Roles

2. Strong Purpose

3. Safe Environment

Adult Interviews:

1. Strong Youth Voice

2. Flexibility

3. Safe Environment

Youth Interviews:

1. Strong Youth Voice

2. Goal Oriented

3. Safe Environment

Recommendations:

1. Strong Youth Voice

2. Sense of Purpose

3. Create a Welcoming Environment

Recommendation 1:

A key ingredient for successful youth engagement and coalition development would be the presence of a strong youth voice.

- The easiest way to achieve this recommendation would be to ensure that there is an equal partnership in place with the youth and adult leaders. There needs to be shared decision making in place, otherwise the youth will not feel as though they are being taken seriously or even heard.
- It might seem like common sense, but it is crucial that adult leaders also touch base with the youth within the group to see how things are going, not only within the coalition but within their personal lives. This can ensure that the coalition really does have a strong focus on what youth want and need.
- Finally, a strong youth voice can be achieved by allowing for leadership opportunities within the coalition. This can truly take a coalition to the next level by allowing for more structure, as well as more responsibilities for the youth involved.

Recommendation 2:

Various comments made within the interviews led to the conclusion that successful youth engagement and coalition development would truly struggle without a strong sense of purpose in place.
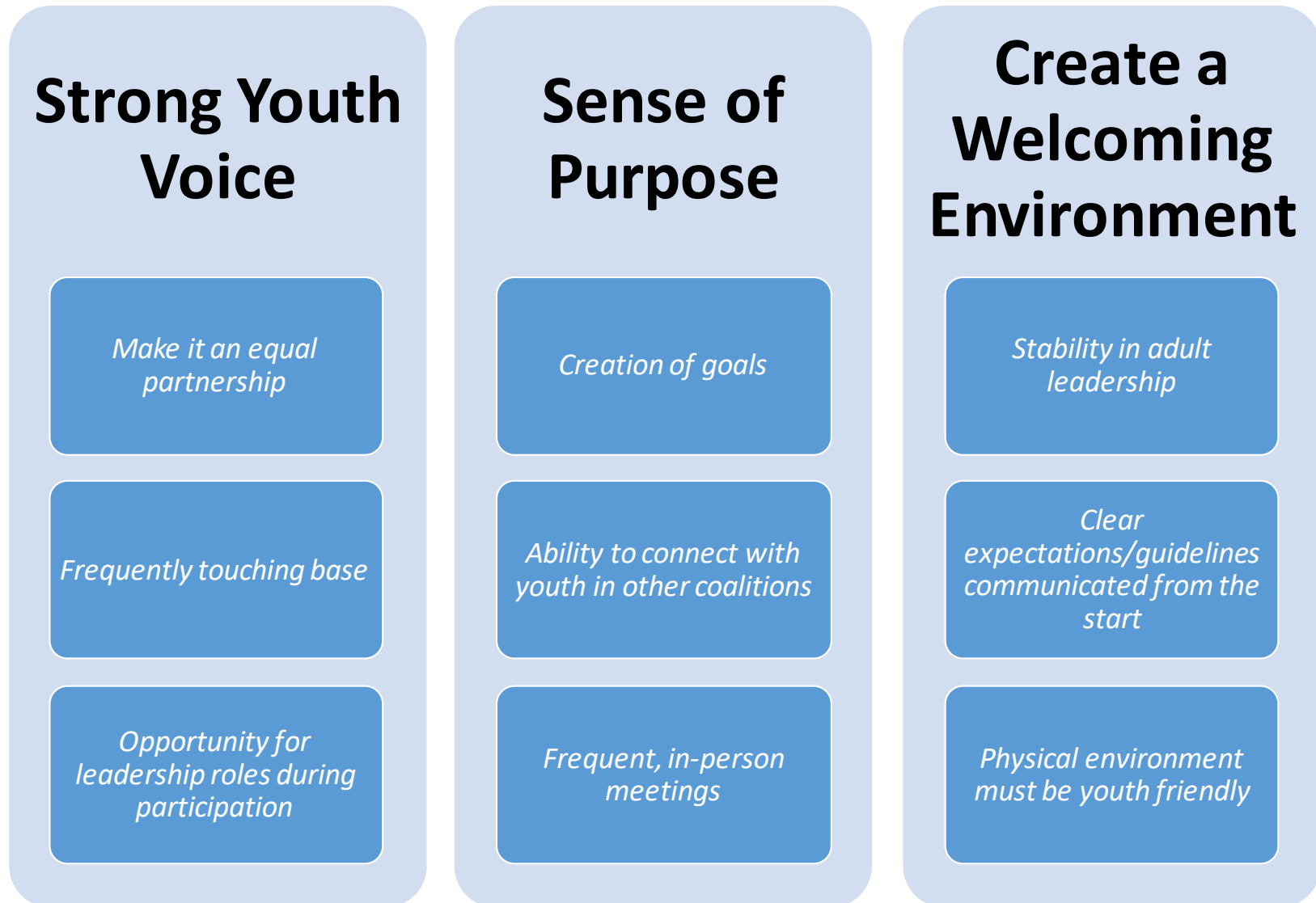
- The key to achieve this recommendation is to have set goals in place that the group can work towards. Youth need to feel as though they are making a difference, otherwise they will lose interest – through the creation of goals, the youth can easily see what is being worked towards, as well as tangible steps to achieve it.
- This can also be achieved by giving youth the opportunity to connect with youth in other coalitions. This can allow for open communication and idea sharing among the groups. It can also allow youth the opportunity to talk about the impact that they have made thus far and really solidify individual and group purpose.
- One final way to ensure a sense of purpose is created within a coalition for youth would be to organize regular, in-person meetings. Failure to do so can result in a lack of follow through, which then severely hinders the ability to build a strong purpose. As learned from interviews with the youth key informants, meetings should be held monthly, at the very least. Although, many showed interest in trying to meet more regularly, but recognize this can be difficult due to scheduling conflicts.

Recommendation 3:

The creation of a welcoming environment is likely one of the most crucial requirements to achieve successful youth engagement and should be at the forefront when developing a new coalition.

- Perhaps the best way to achieve this recommendation would be to ensure stability in adult leadership. If the youth involved are unable to create a relationship with the adult leaders, there will be less meaningful engagement.
- This recommendation could also be achieved by having clear roles and expectations in place from the start. Prior to joining the group, the youth should be provided with a document that describes what is expected from them. Adult leaders should also take the time to regularly reinforce what is expected at the start of meetings.
- Finally, the actual environment needs to be youth friendly. This includes everything from the location and the time of meetings to the actual room configuration. All of this requires youth input, as well as flexibility.

Recommendations and Best Practices Graphic

Strong Youth Voice

Make it an equal partnership

Frequently touching base

Opportunity for leadership roles during participation

Sense of Purpose

Creation of goals

Ability to connect with youth in other coalitions

Frequent, in-person meetings

Create a Welcoming Environment

Stability in adult leadership

Clear expectations/guidelines communicated from the start

Physical environment must be youth friendly

Key Quotes from Adults

"Something that we really focused on was taking a step back and [letting] the youth leaders really be in charge of the group."

"While they want to be involved, they do not have complete control over their life yet. So you have to be patient, understanding and flexible."

"We know that youth really want to be listened to. [...] They want to be talked with and not talked to."

"The youth that most readily raise their hand to jump onto something like a council for prevention are going to be the youth that are already spread thin in terms of other commitments."

"The other thing is meeting the youth where they are at, whether it be location-wise, time-wise or skill-wise."

"It's important to continue to support the students, whether it is related to the coalition or not."

"I think the more that we can communicate the value in their participation, the better it will be."

"It's really hard to find the perfect balance between being a mentor, but also helping them along the way in terms of their life skills."

"Adults have to know how to relate to young people. [...] If you do not have grace or a willingness to be vulnerable with them, it will not work."

Key Quotes from Youth

"[Participation] has allowed me to become a better leader and public speaker."

"I think it's cool that we are not trying to solve problems everywhere, but we are focused on high school students."

"I like having a responsibility within the coalition, and it has made me feel more organized and useful."

"I feel like it is hard to find good ways to help your community that is consistent, and this has been a very consistent group."

"It is easy to be a part of this group because of the other kids my age."

"[Participation] has gotten me out of my comfort zone and be more involved in different things."

Limitations:

It should be mentioned that one severe limitation of this project was the ability to speak with a large enough sample size of youth to make it a statistically significant sample. Unfortunately, despite best efforts to connect with youth in various locations throughout Colorado, only 5 were available for an interview.

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