

Sarah Barbosa Consulting

# **The Non-Profit's Guide to Understanding Youth Engagement & Outreach**

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**The key to your  
organization's  
success isn't  
complicated.**

All you need is youth.

# Executive Summary

One of the key contributors to an organization's success is simple – it's youth. Youth, aged 18-30, should be at the heart of every community and organization. Engaging with youth will profoundly shape and alter your organization's impact and influence.

*The Non-Profit's Guide to Understanding Youth Engagement and Outreach* is a resource designed for non-profit organizations to familiarize themselves with youth engagement, and equip them with practical and tactical tools they can use to build their youth outreach strategy.

A shortage of volunteers threatens the sustainability and functioning of many non-profit organizations that rely heavily on their support for furthering their mission, day-to-day operations and various initiatives or services.

The antidote to this issue is simple. It requires that organizations raise their engagement level and work to bring young people into their organizations to build a strong, resilient, and sustainable community for the present and the future.

*The Non-Profit's Guide to Understanding Youth Engagement and Outreach* provides an overview of youth engagement, as well as the benefits it can bring to your organization. The guide delves into two effective youth engagement strategies and offers practical tactics to be implemented immediately to enhance engagement with youth.



# What is Youth Engagement?

Youth engagement is the deliberate process of authentically engaging youth in decision-making processes to create mutually beneficial partnerships between youth and their community.

Youth engagement involves actively seeking the input of young people and asking for their ideas, insights, and perspectives. Further, an essential component of youth engagement is to integrate their feedback into programs, services, policies, and decision-making processes.

It's more than just giving youth a seat at the table; it's about seeing them as equal partners whose voices are essential to your operations.



Photo by Matheus Bertelli



Photo by Matheus Bertelli

## Elements of Youth Engagement:

- Developing a more meaningful exchange of ideas and perspectives by incorporating youth into systems and processes.
- Designing and creating spaces where youth can be engaged authentically and meaningfully.
- Actively implementing feedback and input from youth.
- Promoting innovative ideas that work to future-proof your organization and build a resilient community.

# Why You Need A Youth Engagement Strategy

## **Programs and services gain depth, perspective, and expanded reach.**

Asking youth for their input could shed light on unique ideas that might not have been considered beforehand. Youth can analyze what worked for them and what did not and can work alongside you to adapt, broaden your program or project's depth, and expand your organization's perspective on the matter.

## **Attract and retain youth volunteers.**

Understanding what motivates youth volunteers can help your organization reflect on what impact youth can have within your organization. By asking youth what they see as meaningful engagement, your organization will be able to identify opportunities for youth and understand what your ideal volunteer is looking for and what you are looking for.

## **Grow support for your cause and organization.**

Creating opportunities to engage with youth can boost your organizational reputation or awareness for your mission, creating a positive association with your organization. It also makes youth feel valued, and they will likely build strong ties of commitment to your organization and want to utilize their networks to help you.

## **Build a strong community with youth at its core.**

When you start building a space dedicated to youth engagement in your community, it demonstrates how much of a priority they are to your organization and its longevity. From a youth's perspective, they will want to invest and give their time and efforts based on what you have invested in them.

# The Benefit of Youth Engagement

**A youth engagement strategy is a tangible tool or resource your organization can use to counter the larger problems it might face as a non-profit organization. It allows you to build a resilient and adaptable community that stands ready to take on any future challenge.**

How do you still ensure that your organization can thrive? How do you ensure that it can be sustainable and endure these changes?

## You invest in youth.

The solution to managing the uncertainty of the non-profit sector is by engaging youth in your community. It involves working now to create a base of supporters who will stand by you for the long term.

In turn, youth develop a sense of loyalty, dedication, and commitment to your organization, creating a long-term sustainable support base.



Photo by Matheus Bertelli

# Youth Engagement Models

Combining various elements from youth engagement models will prove to be the most beneficial process for building a youth engagement strategy that best suits your organization's specific needs.

## Examples of youth engagement models

To this end, two main engagement models are often used – the **Youth-Input Model** and the **Youth-Led Model**.

The Youth-Input Model allows organizations to gain valuable insights, feedback, and opinions from youth. On the other hand, the Youth-Led Model requires organizations to provide youth with the resources, tools, power, and autonomy to lead the change themselves.

By combining various elements from both these engagement models, organizations can create a comprehensive youth engagement strategy that meets their specific needs.



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY ONE

One effective strategy for engaging youth is to involve them in the decision-making process. This process requires that organizations work alongside youth to get their perspective and ideas on the decisions that will impact your work, your community and the programs or services you offer.

There are different ways to involve youth in decision-making processes. For example, organizations can create youth board members, youth councils, or youth advisory committees. Each of these options has its purpose, but they can be combined to best suit the organization's needs and goals for youth engagement.

By incorporating youth into decision-making processes, you will have access to youth who bring new ideas, unique perspectives and lived experiences directly from your community. This can help ensure that decisions are more inclusive and better address current and future needs.

## Youth Board Members

The board of directors steers the direction of your organization. How can decisions be made about the future of your organization without understanding how it could impact those who will experience that future? Creating seats at the table for youth is vital as they will influence and provide new ideas directly into the core of your decision-making and strategy process.



Photo by Andrea Piacquadio

## Youth Councils

A youth council is a group of 5-10 young individuals who advise, create, and work alongside your organization to bring a youth perspective to your projects and programs. A youth council can become a structured permanent body within your organization dedicated to youth involvement and engagement. Whether it's running programs or services by them, asking them to lead on a project, the options of how they can help are endless.



Photo by fauxels

## Youth Advisory Committees

Similar to the youth council, a youth advisory committee is a group of young individuals who come together to discuss relevant issues impacting your community. Their focus is providing feedback and raising issues that they have noticed within your community. A youth advisory committee would take a bottom-up approach and regularly bring up problems they identify and potential solutions for them. With the option of leading the solution, if applicable.



Photo by Jason Goodman

# Result:

Transform your organization and community by investing in and engaging with youth. Take it one step further by incorporating youth into decision-making. It is important to demonstrate to young people that their opinions and experiences are valued by listening to what they have to say and incorporating their solutions into decisions.

# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TWO

A powerful way to engage young people is by providing them with leadership opportunities. This can create new opportunities to collaborate on tackling larger issues identified in your community.

Creating leadership positions for youth involves finding gaps or areas within your community where a youth perspective would be vital for its progression.

The result would be high-quality, youth-created solutions that address issues now and in the long term.

Youth leadership opportunities come in all forms, but a few include youth-led projects, youth leadership positions and a youth leadership training and development program. The three serve the unique purpose of developing youth talent and leveraging their leadership skills to enact change and solve problems in your community.

## Youth Led Projects

Youth-led projects have one goal in mind – letting youth identify issues they see and find solutions to them. Your organization can set the parameters of the engagement by providing a theme or area of concern that needs to be addressed and letting youth create a solution or project that does just that. Or even better, consider hearing what problems they have noticed in their community and letting them lead the solution. Youth-led projects are ideal initiatives for organizations that are seeking ways to elevate youth in their community or have a group of youth who are already showing their willingness and interest for more responsibility within your organization.

## Youth Leadership Opportunities

Identifying and leveraging natural youth leaders in your community will prove to be an asset to your organization. Integrating youth into your mission can be done by encouraging young people to take on leadership roles. Which in turn demonstrates your support of them and showcases the value they bring to your organization. Youth leadership opportunities could include dedicated youth seats on your board of directors, youth leaders who run activities or programs, or youth leaders who organize youth-focused activities in your community.

## Youth Training Development Programs

Youth are always looking for different opportunities to learn, grow and expand their knowledge. Creating a youth training and development program is one way to keep youth engaged in your community, invest in their development and growth and guarantee that your organization is being passed down to the next generation of youth who care and understand your community on a deeper level. A training program is also a tool organizations can use to break down industry barriers, retain youth, and encourage them to commit to their community.

## Result:

Investing in youth leaders in your community and creating opportunities for them to engage can have a significant impact on your organization's future. By investing in youth leaders today, you can build a dedicated base of volunteers who understand your community and industry, care about your mission, and are willing to drive it forward.



# Action Steps

Now that you have a clear understanding of youth engagement it's time for you to begin thinking about and building your youth outreach strategy. Here are just a few initial steps you can take to get the process started.

- 1** Assess your current level of youth engagement and relations with youth in your community.
- 2** Examine what areas of your organization would benefit from youth involvement.
- 3** Appoint someone in your organization to lead the youth engagement outreach strategy.
- 4** Determine your youth engagement objectives by considering what it would mean to your organization and what areas or benefits you want to see in your community.
- 5** Decide which tactics you would like to implement and start planning your youth strategy.
- 6** Reach out to Sarah Barbosa Consulting to help implement your action plan or develop your strategy.

# Concluding Remarks

***Youth engagement: Deliberately engaging youth in decision-making to create a mutually beneficial outcome between youth and a community.***

Engaged youth can revolutionize a community. The ideas, perspectives, and solutions that youth bring are invaluable and will set your organization apart from the rest. We have reached a point in our society, in our community spaces, where avoiding youth engagement or simply not engaging youth is a risk to your organization's future and communities' long-term plans.

Youth engagement is what your organization needs. It's the support you have been searching for, the solutions that will help your community and the resilience that will carry your organization's mission forward for decades to come.

This guide serves as a starting point for your journey with youth engagement – a journey that asks you to commit to bridging the gap between young people and your community.

**The key to your organization's success isn't complicated: All you need is youth.**

# References

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*Guide: Meaningfully Engaging Youth, Tamarack Institute.*

<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/Guide%20-%20Meaningfully%20Engaging%20Youth%20EN.pdf?hsLang=en-us>

## Further Reading

- [Empowering the Future: How Youth Engagement Builds Community Resilience](#)
- [How to Effectively Engage Youth in Your Community: Tips for Organizations](#)
- [What is Youth Engagement?](#)
- [Unpacking the Why: What Motivates Youth Volunteers?](#)
- [Youth Outreach 101: Tips for Recruiting Young Volunteers](#)

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