VOICES FROM YOUTH TEAMS: HOW TO CREATE SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

September 2003

Camille Dumond

Youth Researcher, HeartWood Institute
6 Windermere Rd.,   Halifax, NS   B3N 1M9
CAMILLEDUMOND@HOTMAIL.COM

Dr. Alan Warner, Research Director
HeartWood Institute

Marc Langlois, Executive Director
HeartWood Institute

Author Biographies

Camille Dumond holds an M.A. in Health Promotion from Dalhousie University. She works with young people and community associations organizing for social and environmental justice in Nova Scotia.

Dr. Alan Warner is the Research Director of the HeartWood Institute and an adjunct professor in Environmental Studies at Dalhousie University, Halifax Nova Scotia. He has been working with young people in community settings for more than two decades.

Marc Langlois has spent twenty years as a manager in the voluntary sector. In 1989 he co-founded and is now Executive Director of HeartWood Institute. His professional energy is now consumed in promoting, conceptualizing, and facilitating community-based youth leadership.

Voices from Youth Teams:
How to Create Successful Partnerships for Community Action

This is our community, we want to change it, we're not going to depend on somebody else to change it, we're going to do it - Musquodoboit, N.S. youth action team member

Our communities will only reach their potential as vibrant and healthy places when youth are welcomed as full participating members. Community youth development heralds this potential through a paradigm shift - recognising young people as assets, problem-solvers and leaders who can serve their communities, as well as being served by them. This shift is occurring in a wide range of places. These bright lights shine from inner city youth centres where young people are key decision-makers, to school-based youth groups that motivate educational reform, to youth-led conservation groups working to preserve the ecological balance (Burgess, 2000; Tolman & Pittman, 2001).

Community youth development is a powerful, transformative public idea that is challenging to put into practice. It means changing entrenched attitudes, behaviour patterns and cultural norms. Supportive adults, young people, and community associations often ask: How do we build the quality relationships that are the foundation for youth inclusion? What roles should we each take? How do we make the process fun, rewarding and sustainable? How can communities and youth work together to effect change?

Who best to provide answers to these questions than a diversity of youth and adults who are currently working in partnership to improve their communities. Their successes and struggles convey practical insights and helpful examples. This article is based on qualitative interview

research with participants from youth action teams in 12 communities across Nova Scotia.[1] We gathered stories from young people (28), all of the key adult support people (17), and a number of community agency representatives who had supported a team or received service from one (9). We talked to equal numbers of young men and women. Most participants were from rural areas, though two teams were drawn from a large urban centre. This article relates valuable lessons from these passionate change-makers for the benefit of youth and adults working together to build community in other contexts.

What are Youth Action Teams?

Youth action teams combine youth-adult partnerships based on mutual learning, teaching and action (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Lorens, 2001) with a framework for community youth development generated by the HeartWood Institute[2], a regional youth development organization in Nova Scotia. A team typically involves from ten to fifteen young people, ranging from age 14 to 18, a couple of supportive adult or young adult volunteers and a sponsoring community association. Most teams came together through a community rather than a school context. They involve a diversity of young people, many of who had been alienated from school or traditional youth groups. Although each team is unique, they share common characteristics such as: team-structured meetings and activities, a youth-driven culture and a commitment to community service. The framework centers on peer team support, youth-adult partnership, adventuresome

---

[1] Confidential one-to-one interviews with participants were audio-taped, transcribed and coded for analysis. This process identified important themes across interviews that were then discussed and confirmed with two focus groups of intact youth action teams. This process resulted in the key concepts and the mental map identified in this article.
[2] HeartWood's mission is to link youth leadership and community development in preparing young people for healthy futures. HeartWood creates learning experiences that develop personal leadership qualities through adventure, teamwork, environmental appreciation and service to others. The priority focus is to work with other youth serving organizations to support youth initiatives and leadership in local communities.

learning, leadership education, and meaningful contribution (Figure 1). Some of the actions the

teams have taken include those that educate (theatrical presentations about the effects of societal

violence towards women); advocate (working with municipal politicians on skateboarding

policies); create (starting a community garden); and provide a service (cleaning an estuary,

running a community youth festival). The youth action team approach promotes positive youth

development in tandem with community change through youth service and leadership.

Youth action teams emerged as a response to HeartWood's observation of young people's

frustration upon returning to their communities after participating in adventure and leadership

programs. These programs inspired youth to take positive action in their communities. However,

back in their communities they had no outlet or support for following through. Like many young

people across North America, they felt unheard, stereotyped, and marginalized (Finnegan, 1998).

Responding to these youth, HeartWood began working with young people and local

communities to move beyond short-term, isolated program delivery towards nurturing

meaningful, long term, youth engagement. In 1997, with the support of private foundations,

community recreation and health departments, HeartWood helped 15 communities initiate youth

action teams.

The interviews used an appreciative inquiry approach (Elliot, 1999) in which participants shared

positive examples of their roles in youth engagement and community development. They told

HeartWood research staff what was working and what more could be done to create "dream"

partnerships in the team context. Their stories[3] contained key ingredients for the hard, engaging

work of building strong, positive youth/adult partnerships.

What is at the Heart of Successful Youth/Adult Partnerships?

As youth workers and community developers, we need to figure out what young people value in

order to engage them effectively. At the heart of the process, the young people described a set of

core values that served as the teams' energy source, guided their interactions with each other and

provided a sense of purpose. These core values were critical in helping the team develop a

healthy "culture" which made their work together meaningful, fun and sustainable. The nested

circles of the dream team mental map (Figure 2) emerged from the analysis of participants'

stories and insights. It illustrates how these core values shaped the types of roles and tasks youth

expected adults and young people to take, and how these roles influenced the teams' work with

the community. Furthermore, the four compass points, youth, adults, community link, and

training organization, are the key resources that have a role in enacting and supporting the core

values.

---

[3] Youth and adults agreed about many aspects of what makes a dream team for community youth development. Where their perspectives diverged, the results are reported separately.

The Dream Team for
Community Youth Development

Training Org.

How do we work together?

Youth/Adults

What is my role?

Team/Community

Youth: Engaged Citizen

Why am I here?
Core Values

Adult Support: Coach

Community link

Figure 2: Mental Map of Community Youth Development processes on youth action teams

Core Values

Full engagement only occurs when individuals have the opportunity to act on their deepest values. Supportive adults need to recognize these values to help create opportunities for action. What did youth tell us they valued? They greatly value opportunities to follow their passions. Connecting with other people was vitally important. Making a positive difference was essential. Finally, young people said that they wanted to take concrete action - "actually do stuff". In the context of youth action teams, these core values synergized to create a fun, adventurous, and service-oriented team culture.

Following passions

Youth want to tap into their passions, and be supported in pursuing them. Trying new things, feeling safe, having wildly fun times, expressing oneself, and exploring new paths are all elements of this value. One young person remarked "*we [the team] don't back down if someone wants to try something, they go ahead and do it… we always try something adventurous*". Sometimes "following passions" involves the thrill of taking a risk to accomplish personal goals. One youth describes her first taste of a leadership role at a training camp by saying, "*It pushed my personal boundaries so that was a thrill. It's given me the courage to take on things that I wouldn't have dared before*".

Connecting with others

Youth and adults want to connect with each other and with community members in a committed and meaningful way. They want to turn traditional power relationships on their head and work

with each other as equal partners and friends. One youth described what he valued most about his involvement by saying, "*We respect (supportive adult volunteers) and they respect us back and there's just a really close relationship between everybody.*" Another youth echoes the importance of personal connections by saying, "*I think when it comes down to it, we're always going to be there for each other, we're connected and we're really, really close.*"

Making a difference

Youth and adults are drawn to youth action teams because they want to make the world a better place. For many youth, this value manifests itself in their strong desire to make their communities more youth inclusive. For example, after helping to host a youth festival, one youth explained that the most important thing about her team was "*being able to give back to the community. There's such a big division between the elders and the younger ...it's going to help kind of, you know, close the generation gap a little.*" Other youth and adults discussed the importance of "*really making a difference*" through their work on the team. Young people feel engaged when they take action to meet a genuine need and see the positive impact of their actions. Youth cited examples such as chopping wood for an elderly woman in a rural town, and hosting a community wide anti-violence ceremony.

Taking action

Hands-on, experiential activities draw many youth and adults. One adult support person said, "*The biggest thing youth kept saying was that there wasn't anything to do in the evening and weekends*". Taking action, whether through meetings, service events, or camping together, is a primary way that teams develop a sense of purpose. One young person noted, "*I like getting

together with them and doing things, nothings' ever boring with the youth action team". Taking

action is valuing and harnessing the vital energy young people have to create positive change in

themselves and their communities.

Core Values in Practice

Together, these youth-articulated values challenge deep-seated misperceptions faced in

community youth development work. First, there is a widespread perception that youth lack

motivation to get involved in issues (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). However, young people may see

traditional opportunities as unrelated to their passions. Youth want to make a difference, and are

motivated to get involved when they have or can create exciting opportunities to act as change

agents. Ideally, these opportunities are connected to their passions, dreams and hopes for the

future. Youth/adult partnerships help young people clarify these connections to community

issues.

Second, the perception that youth lack skills to make real differences is challenged when the

focus is shifted to youth and adults connecting and building each other's capacity. The synergy

that occurs when youth and adults embark on a journey of adventurous learning results in both

partners gaining and using skills to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Deficit

thinking is replaced with building on each other's assets and positive energy to take action in the

community.

Finally, young people confirmed the transformative effect of youth action on negative adult

attitudes toward young people. Through the team context, youth actions become highly visible

events that challenge damaging stereotypes and highlight youth roles in building communities. Adults who get to know youth through the teams speak of "the domino effect" on community attitudes toward youth. In one instance, after hearing a team give a skilled presentation to high-school students about sexual health issues, the school's administration requested that the team help them develop a plan to raise awareness about issues of racism. In combination with youth actions, adults champion youth as community builders, and the word spreads and creating more opportunities for youth impacts.

<center>**Individual Roles and Tasks**</center>

While these values exert a powerful draw, it can be very challenging to translate them into action. One key to success is the nature of the youth and adult roles within the team. Young people articulated clear, practical role expectations for the work of supportive adults.

The Adult Support Person as Coach

Young people and adults viewed "a successful adult" in a youth/adult partnership as taking on the role of guide and coach who (a) cares for and is personally committed to the youth, (b) provides opportunities for youth participation, leadership and ownership, and (c) sets high expectations (motivates and inspires youth) while holding them accountable. Ideal youth-adult relationships are based on non-hierarchical relationships, caring and respect. One youth summed up this role as "*more based on friendship than on being an adult… they are there in our lives when we need them, and they are actually taking an interest in our lives… they're more to help the group stay on track sometimes, create opportunities for the youth.*" Youth identified three key task elements of the coach role. These tasks are important, particularly for adults seeking

egalitarian relationships who may neglect to provide appropriate guidance as youth attempt

community action (Camino, 2001; Stoneman, 2002).

• **Connecting youth to community resources**. Successful adult support people facilitate youth's

connections with community members (sometimes by lending credibility to youth projects),

getting access to space and materials, and providing transportation. Adults help youth tap into the

social hierarchy of the community. Contacting and connecting with adults to get space, funding

help, or practical support can be awkward for many young people. Supportive adults need to

recognize this challenge and provide extra encouragement and assistance.

• **Facilitating healthy team dynamics.** Young people explained that successful adult support

people help youth work together effectively, deal constructively with conflict, and take time for

play and bonding. As one young person noted, "[our adult support person] *kind of just keeps us*

civilized and makes sure we don't all talk at the same time and everybody's opinions get heard."

Youth expect supportive adults to be familiar with group processes and skilful facilitators of

group dynamics.

• **Providing initial structure**. In the beginning, adults may take more initiative in performing the

organizational work for team processes and events. Young people regard this initial support as

important for helping the team bond, connect with community resources, and gain leadership

skills. One youth commented, "*The adults really pulled us together from the beginning and they*

are holding us together right now still. So we haven't really branched out and got our own

independence yet but as the group grows I think we will someday achieve it."

In successful teams, the adult role shifts over time. Young people expect adult volunteers to move from taking leadership to supporting young people in these roles as they become more skilled and confident. Ideally, the supportive adult remains a partner, encouraging young people as take more initiative in organizing and planning actions.

Youth Role as Involved Citizen

The ideal youth role is one of full engagement and commitment to the team. As one young person noted, "*I think we need to be committed to the youth action team and committed to doing stuff. What's the point of being in a youth action team if you're just going to be a youth team, you need to actually do the action and be who we are and just have fun at the same time*". Key elements of the youth role are youth ownership*,* shared leadership and positive teamwork, and ultimately "stepping up" to take on more responsibility in the partnership.

• <u>Youth ownership.</u> On successful teams youth provide impetus, creativity and act as 'equal partners' in organizing team events and activities. A critical issue is the ability of the young people to make final planning and event decisions. Even though adults may initially provide ideas or suggestions, the choice to follow through belongs to the young people. As one adult support person noted, "*The keys to success were the youth wanted to do it and took ownership of it. They made the posters and put the posters up and that type of thing... [We left] it in their hands... for them to make the decisions*."

• **<u>Shared leadership & positive teamwork.</u>** Adults and youth agreed that youth should have a large role in designing and managing activities, and setting group standards. In successful partnerships, youths and adults adopt a profound shift in the meaning of leadership, encouraging many people to share in decision-making responsibility. In this way, specific young people take leadership of aspects of projects that are appealing to them, and work with the team to get things accomplished. One young person noted "*[It's important that the] whole groups gets to make the final decisions, but if you go off and kind of do everything by yourself, then nobody else knows what's going on so if you do your little piece, and bring it back and get everybody else's opinion on what you've been doing, then it works out fine.*"

In contrast, two struggling teams noted that youth leadership responsibility rested with only a few young people. On one team, this was built in to the team structure through elections for 'president' and 'secretary'. This approach is not consistent with valuing 'equality' and may discourage other youth from feeling invested in the team.

• **<u>"Stepping up" in the partnership.</u>** Young people want to grow into coaching roles as they gain experience and confidence. Youth describe how 'stepping up' to coaching others feels like giving back after having been coached by supportive adults. The stepping up process also helps the team sustain youth leadership with the turnover of young people as they "age out". The teams that remained open to new youth members were those in which older youth recognized their role in supporting and coaching younger youth. A second, exciting way of "stepping up" was youth teams supporting other youth teams. Youth talked about really feeling engaged when they were

helping other teams through hosting youth forums, creating videos on how to start a team, or offering advice in heart-to-heart discussions on group problems.

How Do We Work Together in the Community?

The purpose of the youth-adult partnership is to work together to create positive change in the community, shifting the bottom line from traditional youth development success indicators of individual change and growth to include indicators of community change and growth. Many young people talk about "getting out there and doing more stuff" as an aspect of how they would measure their success as a team. The 'stuff' varies. In describing successful times, teams talked about events as diverse as bottle drives, hosting community celebrations, speaking to schools about drug use, and raking leaves at a cemetery to show goodwill after youth were blamed for vandalism. The type of service is not as important to young people as the quality of the event (Pittman, 2003).

The best community actions are fun and challenging and leave youth and adults feeling they have made a difference. These events contribute to both youth and community development. How do teams and communities work together to achieve this balance? Developing projects that are meaningful both for the youth and the community is a central tension in community youth development research and practice. The stories from the young people and supportive adults provided insights on how they define actions that resolve this tension.

Actions that contribute to youth development. Successful teams choose and develop community work that taps into the passions of the young people. One youth described helping a team member explore her interest in photography through creating a youth-issues newspaper saying, "*there's got to be some way we can offer a few more opportunities for people to explore what they think they might be passionate about.*" The adult support role includes ensuring service projects are meaningful for those involved. One adult support person emphasized this by saying *"I want it to be a valuable experience for me and for them and for the people that we're serving".* Part of this role involves helping teams to 'let go' of service projects they are not finding stimulating or meaningful. For instance, one adult volunteer helped her team recognize that they needed to discontinue visiting a senior's home when it became apparent that the team was not fully engaged by their experiences there. Instead, they chose a new service project through considering what particular skills or experiences team members were seeking.

Young people told us that successful teams balance a task and relationship orientation. Teams must take time to play, bond and do fun things together. Play helps adults transcend traditional power relationships with youth. One young person noted that *"to be successful, teams have to get to know each other. You have to know what buttons not to push. Go on camping trips and stuff. Stuff like that where you almost got into a situation where you have to trust the other person."* Balancing community action with building strong, nurturing team relationships is key to both the youth and community development that occurs through the team. The team's commitment to nurturing each other results in choosing projects that help each other grow, and in choosing projects that use the strengths the team has built together.

Actions that contribute to community development. Community development involves looking at the root causes of issues and working together with those at the margins of society. It enables people to work together to control social, political and economic issues that affect their lives. These principles are present on youth action teams as youth and adults work in egalitarian, long-term relationships to address youth-defined issues. However, this approach is not automatically mirrored in team/community relationships. Teams struggled at times to work in partnership with members of the broader community. For instance, some of the youth action teams said that it was difficult to know what to do, we "*just do what we thought the community wanted, but we never really asked them what they wanted.*"

Young people identified the importance of communicating with the community as a key means to help youth/adult partnerships determine the nature of service efforts that can contribute to community development. In these instances, the teams have told the community who they are and what they have to offer while seeking feedback on community issues. Holding a public meeting is one method that has helped teams to choose meaningful actions that create positive change.

When it came to youth issues, most young people saw themselves as inspired and effective community developers - tackling issues of youth exclusion and discrimination in their towns. For instance, teams engaged in visible community services (throwing town parties), created fun opportunities for youth participation in community life (youth festivals, holding booths at town fairs), and took on municipal policy makers in creating youth-friendly spaces for skateboarding. The positive exposure helped crack open negative youth stereotypes. One youth remarked, "*I*

think they view us better now that they saw us at the fair and how we kept three or four different booths going for people to do, so I think they kind of look at us better, not as just bad kids. I'd rather they respect me." These community actions enabled adult residents to see youth as a vital part of the community and began to establish a positive pattern of youth-adult interactions in community arenas.

Overall, successful team projects require youth and community input, and must meet youth and community expectations. Youth and adult partners must openly discuss whether these expectations are fulfilled through specific team activities. Teams should not feel trapped in service activities that do not draw on their passions or make them feel like they're making a meaningful difference. Teams may require ideas, support or training on ways to obtain broader community input to decide on projects. Finally, community input and practical action must ultimately be balanced with time for play and teambuilding to create the "dream team" that meets the core values that draw in youth.

Young people and adults, partnering through youth action teams, provide rich insights that help deepen our understanding of what it takes to engage youth and adults in transforming their communities. There is a synergy of the elements in the mental map that is greater than each part. The successful team has a culture that meets the core values identified by youth, works within clear youth and adult roles, and make thoughtful choices on how to work with community members and take meaningful local action. The learning will continue as youth action teams move through action, reflection, growth and change as part of the community youth development

process. To paraphrase one adult volunteer describing his learning with a team, "*it's an adventure, it's fun and exciting, and we're changing society – changing the world!*".

References:

Burgess, J. (2000). Youth Involvement Can be the Key to Community Development. *Community Youth Development Journal, 1,* pg

Camino, L. & Zeldin, S. (2002). From Periphery to Center: Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement in the Day-to-Day Life of Communities. *Applied Developmental Science, 6,* 213-220.

Elliot, C. (1999). Locating the Energy for Change. Winnipeg: IISD. Available: http://iisd/ca/ai/locating/htm

Finnegan,William. (1998). *Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country.* New York: Random House.

Pittman, K. (2002). The Power of Engagement. *The Forum for Youth Investment.* Available: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/youthtoday/powerengage.htm

Stoneman, D. (2002). The Role of Youth Programming in the Development of Civic Engagement. *Applied Developmental Science, 6,* 221-226

Tolman, J. & Pittman, K. (2001). Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results. *The Community and Youth Development Series, 7.* Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation.