

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING VIBRANCY IN YOUTH GROUPS

Kirk A. Astroth

4-H Youth Specialist

After completing the self-assessment instrument, you may find that your organization or program is in need of some improvement. Here are some specific strategies for change in each of the 5 domains of vibrancy that you could implement to improve your program's efforts to become truly vibrant.

PHILOSOPHY

Bring youth into the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of programs. Many groups have established youth planning committees to give structured advice to the program or organization.

Eliminate programs in which youth are merely passive or uninvolved.

Develop more programs that actively engage youth in their own learning as self-directed learners.

Involve youth in "real time" community service projects.

Ensure that program staff understand that youth should feel secure enough to try out new ideas and approaches without fear of ridicule.

Develop a mentoring system where older youth or adults are paired with youth participants. Many groups have found "buddy systems" or junior officers effective strategies for helping set the tone in youth groups.

Connect youth and youth programs to the community in which they live. Exchange trips, visits to other clubs, and other methods to explore what other groups are doing are effective ways to open new horizons for youth.

CULTURE

Develop a youth advisory board to give input to the program staff.

Engage youth in developing rules and guidelines for the program.

Practice listening to youth through focus groups, encounter sessions or others medium.

Ensure the security and safety of your facility.

Develop a shared cultural value in which everyone is respected and valued for who they are and for what they can become.

POWER STRUCTURE

Screen adult staff for their approach to autonomy or control. Use Edward Deci's instrument or other tools for assessing the orientation to control or autonomy.

Provide training to all staff in youth/adult partnerships. An excellent resource is "Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships" from the National 4-H Council.

Pair youth members with adult staff in all teaching and coaching roles, modeling youth involvement and contribution.

PROGRAMS

Constantly evaluate the range of programs you are offering to ensure relevancy and value to youth members. Offer a variety of ways for youth to evaluate throughout the year—anonymous surveys, focus-group interviews, open discussions or group meetings. Many groups use an anonymous method of soliciting ideas about needed improvements using a ballot box for written comments. Other groups have used more formal methods of evaluating the group's meetings and activities.

Anchor your programs in a knowledge of "best practices" for positive youth development. Consult with experts in what kinds of programs and approaches are proven and scientifically defensible.

Develop a vision and mission for your organization which will help bring focus and continuity to your efforts. What are you truly about? What do you do best?

Involve members of the community as instructors, resource people and in governance roles to ensure the program is anchored in the community.

Keep your groups small so that youth get individualized attention.

Analyze your physical facilities. Think purposively about seating arrangements.

- Do the facilities communicate a sense of warmth and welcoming?
- What is the nature of your signage? Do you have numerous "Don't" signs which communicate negative messages and punitive measures for non-compliance?
- Have you arranged your space to appeal to youth rather than be convenient for the staff?
- What considerations have you given to seating arrangements and configurations?

STAFF

Provide several incentives to staff to ensure a long-term commitment. These may be financial but they can also be incentives that are non-material. Recognition is a key ingredient in keeping staff motivated and involved.

How do you create a sense of loyalty and belonging among staff? Provide ways for your staff to interact informally outside of the program in ways that are fun.

Hire staff who develop trust easily and who are trust worthy.

Hire staff who know how to deal with the unexpected and can be flexible.

Train your staff to be advocates for youth and take a prominent role in the community in advocating for the rights of young people.

Conduct in-service training for staff in youth development principles and strategies to improve their skill base. Constant training is necessary to keep staff up to current standards and skills.

Contract with staff for set periods of employment.

These strategies are drawn from a vibrancy self-assessment tool developed by Dr. Kirk A. Astroth, Montana State University. For a further explanation of the concept of vibrancy, the five domains of vibrancy and how vibrancy applies to nonformal youth groups, consult the Fall 1997 article titled "The Vibrant Youth Group: Changing the Focus from Youth 'At Risk' to Youth 'At Their Best,'" *Resiliency in Action*, 2(4):13-17.