

# **Voices from Youth Action Teams: Creating Successful Partnerships for Community Action**

by Alan Warner, Marc Langlois, and Camille Dumond

*“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.”*

*— Youth Action Team member, Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia*

Our communities will only reach their potential as vibrant and healthy places when youth are welcomed as full participating members. 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? A paradigm shift occurring in youth development practices can help answer these questions. The principles and practices of Community Youth Development (CYD) are taking hold in a wide range of settings, 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). CYD is an approach that espouses the principle that when youth are enlisted as active agents of community building, it contributes positively to both youth development and community development. CYD assumes the involvement of young people in their own development and that of the community (Curran & Hughes 2000). Though a powerful and transformative public idea, CYD is challenging to put into practice. It calls for changing entrenched attitudes, behaviour patterns and cultural norms.

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 bring practical insights and valuable lessons. This chapter is based on qualitative interview research with participants from Youth Action Teams (YAT) in 12 communities across Nova Scotia. A YAT in this context is a group of young people and supportive adults taking action together on things they care about in their community. The research gathered stories from 28 randomly sampled young people ages 14 to 19, 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. The teams involved a diversity of young people, many of who had been alienated from school or traditional youth groups. Participants had been involved with their teams for varying lengths of time, from a couple of months to three years. This article relates valuable lessons from these passionate change-makers for the benefit of other contexts where youth and adults can work together to build community.

## **What are Youth Action Teams?**

The participants we spoke with were involved with YATs that formed around a framework for CYD generated by the HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development. HeartWood is a youth development organisation founded and based in Nova Scotia and now working in

communities across Canada. The youth development component of HeartWood's CYD framework encourages programs that espouse peer team support, youth-adult partnership, adventure-filled learning, empowering learning cultures, and meaningful contribution.

YATs emerged as a response to HeartWood's observation of young people's frustration upon returning to their communities following their participation in adventure and leadership programmes. Though these programmes inspired youth to take positive action in their communities, 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 this type of concern, HeartWood began working with young people and local communities to move beyond short-term, isolated programme delivery towards nurturing meaningful, long term, youth engagement. Beginning in 1997, with the support of private foundations, community recreation and health departments, HeartWood helped 15 communities initiate YATs. Each team participated in several 1 to 3 day leadership/teambuilding experiences with HeartWood staff over between 1 and 5 years.

A YAT typically involves from ten to fifteen young people, ranging from ages 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. 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. Some of the actions the teams have taken include those that: educate (theatrical presentations on 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 YAT approach promotes positive youth development in tandem with community change through youth service and leadership.

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 us what they valued about their youth engagement experience, what was working, and what more could be done to create strong partnerships within their team and in the community.

### **Core Values at the Heart of Successful Youth Action Teams**

Full engagement only occurs when individuals have the opportunity to act on their deepest values. Youth workers and community developers need to determine what young people value in their engagement. The young people interviewed through this research project described a set of *core values* that served as the team's 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 youth who were interviewed described the following values in explaining what was important to their engagement: opportunities to follow their passions, connecting with other people, making a positive difference, and finally, young people said that they wanted to take concrete action - “actually doing stuff”. In the context of YATs, these core values synergized to create fun, adventurous, and service-oriented team cultures.

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 other 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 YATs 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 teams. 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 attract 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 group play, community service, or a planning meeting, are primary ways 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.

### *Implications of the core values on practice*

The core values of youth engagement identified by this research can serve as a useful filter to evaluate youth programs. The values can be very challenging to translate into action; they are not

intended as a quick fix solution to programs. However integrating them into a youth group culture in a meaningful way is sure to bring significant results. Together, these youth-articulated values challenge deep-seated misperceptions faced in youth work.

First, there is a widespread perception that youth lack motivation to get involved in issues (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). However young people may see conventional 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 and adults relating as partners can 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 (Tolman & Pittman 2001). 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. Inspired by youth action, adults champion youth as community builders. It was in fact the building of partnerships with adults and the community that surfaced as a primary offering of our analysis. Adults and the emerging youth leaders involved with YAT's need to recognize the importance of addressing the core values to help create opportunities for engagement and community action. The following section will expand on this idea.

### **The Individual Roles and Tasks of Youth and Adults**

Young people in our research articulated clear, practical role expectations for the work of supportive adults and individual youth as part of YAT's, and generally with-in youth initiatives. The nested circles of the YAT mental map (figure 1) emerged from the analysis of youth participant's stories<sup>1</sup> and insights. These stories contained key ingredients for the challenging and engaging work of building strong, positive youth/adult partnerships.

The four compass points in figure 1 frame the youth and adults roles in a CYD context. The four points youth, adults, community link (supportive individuals, agency or organisation), and training are the key resources identified by HeartWood for enacting and supporting CYD initiatives (CYD Framework, [www.heartwood.ns.ca](http://www.heartwood.ns.ca)).



Figure 1: mental map of Community Youth Development processes on Youth Action Teams.

### ***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 committed to the youth personally, (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 the 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.*”

The youth identified the guiding and coaching role of their adult partners as having three key task elements. These tasks are important, particularly for adults seeking egalitarian relationships whom 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 organisational 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.*”

Most teams gave examples of how this role shifted emphasis over time. Adult support people moved from taking on leadership roles to supporting youth in these roles as the youth become more skilled and confident. The “stepping back” process seems to be a very gradual, natural progression and youth involved in stepping up tend to be older and more experienced. Ideally, the supportive adult remains a partner, encouraging young people as take more initiative in organizing and planning actions.

### ***Youth Role as Involved Citizen***

Youth talked about the ideal youth role as 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*”. Identified 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.

**Youth ownership.** Successful teams were seen as those where youth were providing impetus, creativity and acting 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. Teams in which youth demonstrated ownership of projects reported youth feeling invested in the team, developing more skills, and having more fun than if they were just ‘following orders’. 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.”

**Shared leadership & positive teamwork.** Adults and youth agreed that youth should have a large role in designing and managing activities, and setting group standards. Youth also talked about the importance of spreading leadership around in the group. 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.

**“Stepping up” in the partnership.** It was very important to many youth that they take on more of a coaching role with younger youth as time went on. Youth describe how ‘stepping up’ to coaching others feels like giving back after having been coached by supportive adults. Some teams struggled here, feeling that newcomers would threaten the strength and closeness of their team. Teams that overcame the challenge of remaining open to new youth members seem to be those in which older youth recognized their role in coaching. A second means to “step up” was through providing support to other youth teams. Youth talked about feeling very 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.

### **Youth and Adult Partnerships Working 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 (Tolman & Pittman 2001). Many young people talked about “getting out there and doing more stuff” as an aspect of how they would measure their success as a team. The ‘stuff’ varied. 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 2002).

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 CYD 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 do community work that engages people on the team and taps into their passions. Projects ideally should be chosen to reflect these passions and energies. 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 and that just comes when you know somebody.”* 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 to include 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 YATs 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 YATs 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, particularly from teams that struggled to connect with their local communities, shared a recognition of the importance of communicating with the community. This communication is a first step in helping 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 a positive change in the community.

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.

### **Sustained Youth and Adult Involvement**

Successful YATs and youth-adult partnerships are challenging to establish, but youth and adults indicated that teams blossomed when they anchored themselves with passionate core values, developed effective youth and adult roles, and found meaningful community projects. The greatest challenge was maintaining the team over time, and sustaining effective adult involvement was particularly difficult.

#### ***Adult involvement***

Most of participants in this research talked about the need to identify and attract passionate adult leaders who respect and value youth as partners for community change. These ‘bright lights’ are adults who are passionate about youth, their community or a particular issue (social justice, environment, housing etc.), and who can work with youth in a way that enables the youth to take ownership and leadership of the project. These people may include local residents, younger adults, people entering retirement, those from diverse backgrounds, and those identified by youth as potential adult supports they want to have on the team. Although successful YATs create ways to sustain themselves and bring new people in every year, getting more committed adults meaningfully involved with the team was a struggle for most groups.

The primary conditions which were perceived as discouraging sustained adult involvement were that (a) adults may hold negative youth stereotypes, or perceive that they can’t work with youth,

(b) adults juggle many other commitments already, including children and employment, and (c) sometimes, teams developed one adult support person who had a disproportionately large role in sustaining and supporting the team instead of multiple adult supports with a shared commitment.

One of the key themes emerging from the diverse strategies teams proposed to recruit and sustain bright light adults was the importance of a team's awareness and encouragement of sustainable leadership. Some teams discussed success stories in which they recognized when they were becoming too dependent on individual adults and/or community agencies, and sought out other sources of support. Furthermore, the issue of sustaining adult support involvement is linked to youth 'stepping up' to the coaching role. This can increase youth ownership and reduce the time and energy required from adult support people.

### ***Youth involvement***

The bottom line for youth was that they wanted team members who wanted to be there, and were passionate about doing things in their community. One young person explained, "*I think we need to be committed to the youth action team and committed to doing stuff.*" Youth wanted new team members who were committed, action-oriented, and fun – who would come to meetings and get involved in activities. Some of the primary conditions discouraging youth involvement or sustained leadership that emerged from the interviews were (a) youth graduating and/or moving away; (b) negative youth perceptions of the YAT, and (c) team attitudes resisting newcomers. For instance, although many teams talked about wanting to recruit new youth, a couple of teams struggled with some members resisting new youth entering the team.

Successful teams sustained positive youth involvement by encouraging a culture of youth recruiting and accepting new members, and of youth mentoring other youth. Recruitment took many forms, from school presentations to team videos. The important aspect of youth recruiting youth is that it needs a conscious and enthusiastic commitment on the part of the team. Youth mentoring younger youth provides room for older youth to move into new coaching roles and is often a very fulfilling aspect of their participation on the team. Buddy systems and orientations for new team members are some ways teams can achieve this. Adult support people and/or more experienced teams may have a role here in helping the team listen non-judgementally to each other's concerns and help them resolve any conflicts that might arise.

Once a strong positive youth culture is established, it attracts new youth and generally thrives over time as long as the adult participation in the partnership is sustainable or is able to effectively transition to new adults; a challenge not to be taken lightly.

### **Conclusion**

Young people and adults, partnering through YATs, 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 (Figure 1) that is greater than each part. The successful YAT 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 YATs 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!*”

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<sup>1</sup> Youth and adults agreed about many aspects of what makes an ideal team for community youth development. Where their perspectives diverged, the results are reported separately.