

The Heartwood Institute
www.heartwood.ns.ca
Halifax, Nova Scotia

WHO THEY ARE

Heartwood is an organization that aims to build healthy communities with a focus on youth development. Working closely with the Halifax Regional Municipality, they provide youth with opportunities in leadership development, service learning, adventure-based wilderness programs, environmental education, and various tools to help young people grow and learn about themselves.

HOW DO THEY ENGAGE YOUTH?

Heartwood initially had to propose to the municipality that youth can play a meaningful role in community development. Youth engagement isn't about simply bringing in one young person and hiring them so it looks as if youth have been incorporated in the organization:

“Youth engagement is a multi-splendored wonder, it's not just about one thing. Youth should be helping to design and carry out programs. At one end of the spectrum there is simply youth presence, but as you proceed along that spectrum, youth can and will take on a more active leadership role, to a point where they're not just participating in programs, but they're able to design them and help carry out their implementation. Along the spectrum, they're coming up with ideas and initiating those ideas themselves.”

John Ure, Professional Development

WHAT DOES THE YOUTH FRIENDLY GUIDE SAY

This runs parallel to the Ladder of Participation, which is discussed in the Youth Friendly Guide. Look at the Ladder from bottom to top; from Manipulation (where youth don't have an understanding of the issues or choices facing the organization, but act as if they do) to Decoration, Tokenism, and Partial Tokenism to Adult Lead Projects (adult initiated partnership, but decision-making is shared with youth), Shared Decision-Making (mutual decision-making) and finally, to Strong Partnerships (where youth can initiate and share decisions with adults). Heartwood has moved to the youth friendly realm of the spectrum (top of the Ladder of Participation).

As a further example, consider Heartwood's program: "Destination Up", which is directed toward youth in the care of Nova Scotia's child welfare system. Just recently, they hired two young adults, who were program staff from Youth In Care, and asked them to evaluate their current program by talking to parents, social workers, and community agencies. After performing these surveys and evaluations, and seeing as they had become quite knowledgeable about what the community wanted regarding reforms in the programming, they were given the opportunity to design a program for next year. They were later given permission to promote it using their own networks, to agencies and alumni youth.

WHAT ADVICE DO THEY GIVE?

It helps tremendously to have youth to engage more youth. Youth naturally gravitate to areas where they see others their age doing interesting things.

“A while ago, we (the adults) tried to organize a dance for the community. We set it up and promoted it, yet nobody came. We tried again later, but this time we turned it over to the youth we had on-board, and those they were connected with. They got to set it up and promote it, and guess what, the place was packed.”

John Ure, Professional Development

Heartwood recommends that you ask yourself the following questions before engaging youth: What does youth engagement mean? What does it mean to you? What would it entail? What would be the benefits? What are the risks and challenges? These are questions you must clarify before beginning to attract youth.

“If you want to get youth involved, you’ll have to change the way you do business. A lot of young people aren’t going to sit around in a board room for three hours talking about stuff and listening to jargon and not getting to the point. It’s boring for adults, and it’s going drive youth to drop off. You have to move from talk to action. Listen to youth and their ideas. Youth are interested in new innovation and ways of running business. If you have a trendy, new and interesting way of running your organization, youth will head your way.”

John Ure, Professional Development

“At one of our yearly fundraisers, one alumnus told us that he’d like to tell us his story. He’s probably around 23 or 24 now. He told us that when he originally came to Heartwood, he was about 14 to 15 years old and having a hard time. He wasn’t doing well in school, and he was hanging around with the wrong crowd. He told us about how he got involved with one of our programs, and how he started hanging out with our youth action team in the Halifax area. Our staff worked with him on long-term relationship building and doing many things with him like boating, leadership, camps, etc. He found his experience to be life-altering, and he explained to the crowd that he became more aware of his own gifts, his possibilities and his ability to help make a difference in the world. He emphasized the value he now places on peer support, and being connected to positive adults who were willing to be in a relationship with him. Those things, he said, really turned his life around.”

John Ure, Professional Development