

# YOUNG PEOPLE AS VOLUNTEERS

*a guide to moving beyond traditional practices.*

*make a difference*



**volunteering**  
queensland

# Introduction

In 2010, Volunteering Qld produced the report *Youth Leading Youth*, which provided an 'inside' perspective on practices used by volunteer organisations led by young people. The findings challenged a range of traditional practices in volunteer management and opened up opportunities for organisations to enhance their capacity to engage young volunteers.

The *Youth Leading Youth* report received interest from a wide range of organisations, from other youth-led organisations to larger, more traditional organisations interested in engaging young volunteers. This report, *Young People as Volunteers*, seeks to build on the findings of *Youth Leading Youth* and to offer clear strategies that can be adopted by organisations in their efforts to more effectively work in collaboration with young volunteers aged 18 to 25. While the target demographic is this age group, the definition of 'young' changes across industries and the strategies provided are relevant for a wider range of ages.

The development of this report involved a multi-step process, which included:

- Focus groups with a variety of young people, including international students and university students.
- A focus group with 23 organisations that wish to engage young volunteers.
- A focus group with 8 organisations selected to participate because of their effective engagement of young volunteers.
- A series of one-on-one interviews with representatives from selected organisations across a range of sectors, who demonstrate a high level of effectiveness in engaging young volunteers.

This approach aimed to:

- Test the findings of *Youth Leading Youth* against the experiences of a more diverse range of young people.
- Examine the experiences of traditional organisations, and determine what resources and tools would help them more effectively engage young volunteers.
- Highlight good practice within larger organisations that could be distilled down to transferrable strategies for adoption by other organisations.

Focus groups and interviews followed a similar structure to the *Youth Leading Youth* report. Questions and discussion centered around the five stage model developed by Volunteering Qld and formed the basis of the initial research and report:

1. culture
2. linking
3. engaging
4. belonging
5. leadership

This phase of research was heavily focused on practical outputs and strategies, and aims to provide organisations with tools to implement into their programs. This report sets out the key findings of this phase of research, organised under each of the five stages. Each section gives an overview of that phase, from the perspective of an organisation and their relationship with young volunteers. It then asks a series of questions designed to provide a quick perspective on the current state of the organisation and its ability to engage young volunteers.

Following each set of questions are some ideas, strategies, tools and examples that illustrate how an organisation may enhance their capacity in that area.

Each section concludes with an in-depth case study of an organisation that is effectively working with young volunteers. While every organisation is different, many of the key learnings and processes from these cases are highly transferable.

# Acknowledgments

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This research was undertaken by Volunteering Qld as part of our innovative engagement initiatives. The research was conducted and authored by Erin Gregor and Jenny Geale and supervised by Mark Creyton. The literature review was updated by Isabel Roney.

We wish to thank all the focus group and interview participants who shared their stories, experiences and what they learnt to support the future engagement of young volunteers. Particular thanks go to our case study organisations – Greenslopes Private Hospital, Green Cross, UnitingCare Community, The Pyjama Foundation and Red Cross.



**“YOUNG VOLUNTEERS  
ARE NOT A DRAIN  
ON TIME, THEY ARE  
A RESOURCE...”**

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# Culture

The culture of an organisation is the environment into which new volunteers will be welcomed. Prior to trying to source, engage and work with young volunteers, organisations need to reflect on the internal dynamics of their team and assess how this will suit young volunteers. Having a culture that is conducive to young people is crucial in attracting young volunteers. As they begin to engage young volunteers, it's important to develop a culture that constantly evolves, striving to more and more effectively support young volunteers.

This element of culture requires looking at work practices, attitudes of staff and other volunteers, and the driving forces behind your organisation. It's useful to remember that for young people, a strong culture is often driven by a shared passion of working towards a certain end goal. Young people respond well to an inclusive, flexible and goal oriented organisational culture.

- **Is the culture in your organisation flexible and accommodating to individual needs?**
- **Are the hours and commitments of your volunteers negotiated individually?**

Ensuring flexibility and allowing young people to volunteer around their other commitments was consistently crucial in all research findings. It is important that organisations acknowledge that young volunteers often have other priorities such as study or paid work. This does not make them a 'bad choice' as a volunteer – in fact, it is this type of volunteer who is often outstanding in their volunteer contributions. The key is working with these extra priorities and commitments. Both young people and successful organisations identified flexibility as a key component of a successful volunteer relationship. Young volunteers work best when the organisation's culture is flexible.

## Be flexible

Even more traditional organisations, such as hospitals, are consciously shifting their culture by modifying time commitment requirements and working around events such as university exams, irregular work shifts and time travelling.

- **Does your organisation recognise the benefits of incorporating young people as volunteers?**
- **Is your organisation experienced in working with young volunteers?**

One key finding from the research was that organisations who already had young volunteers tended to attract more young volunteers. Similarly, young volunteers indicated that they enjoyed working with a peer group. Organisations should recognise the potential of any young volunteers or staff currently on board and leverage their presence to expand networks of young volunteers. This could include staff or volunteer profiles on your website or marketing materials, which show that your culture covers a diverse age group. It is also important however, to recognise that young people are very accepting of working with diversity and this includes working across generations. They are interested in learning from others with experience and passion, so don't be afraid to show the diversity of your organisation.

- **Does your organisation have a strong focus on outcomes?**
- **Can volunteers be engaged for projects or short-term engagements?**

Today's young volunteers want to see clear and often tangible outcomes. There are several ways that this can be part of the culture of an organisation.

Firstly, teams and projects can take a goal-oriented approach. This means focusing on outcomes and ensuring the whole team (volunteers included) are on board with those goals and there is a sense that everyone is striving for the same outcomes.

Secondly, an emphasis on time-bound projects (rather than indefinite programs with hard-to-measure outcomes) can be an attractive way of shaping volunteer opportunities.

Finally, it is important to develop a culture where outcomes, successes and the achievement of goals are shared, by volunteers and staff alike.

### **Visible outcome volunteering**

Young volunteers want to commit to the achievement of a particular tangible outcome. This could be organising a successful campaign, a smaller-scale event, or reaching a milestone in your service-provision or cause.

- **Do young people 'fit in' to your organisation?**
- **Are employees and existing volunteers welcoming of young volunteers?**

One of the biggest barriers to creating a culture that accepts young volunteers can be the host of preconceived ideas that exist within the minds of your staff. Young people are often labelled as 'lazy' or 'unreliable', which can cause staff to see them as an inconvenience or unnecessary inclusion in the team. It's important to see young volunteers as a source of new ideas, fresh energy and commitment. As highlighted above, there needs to be flexibility (especially around time commitments) with young volunteers, but this does not render them lazy or unreliable. It is important to actively challenge negative perceptions within your organisation, otherwise it will be very difficult to maximise the contribution of young volunteers.

*"Young volunteers are not a drain on time, they are a resource."*

**Focus group participant**

- **Do you actively create space for new young volunteers?**

Shifting the culture of an organisation needs to link to the greater outcome. A more welcoming culture and space facilitates greater youth engagement, which leads to a vibrant volunteer force, new ideas and innovation. By making youth involvement a priority area, a concerted effort to shift company culture can be made. This means going beyond the volunteer team in your organisation and working with the organisation as a whole – staff, management and other volunteers.

**“GREENSLOPES PRIVATE HOSPITAL  
HAS MADE AN ACTIVE EFFORT  
TO SHIFT THEIR VOLUNTEERING  
CULTURE...”**



## **Case study** *Greenslopes Private Hospital*

Hospitals are often viewed as a very traditional volunteer setting. Despite this preconception, Greenslopes Private Hospital (GPH) has made an active effort to shift their volunteering culture to become more welcoming of young volunteers. Young volunteer numbers at GPH have been increasing over the past five years and now comprise 30% of the total volunteer cohort.

GPH have made a concerted effort to change the perceptions of volunteers, particularly amongst hospital staff. One deliberate strategy was to tackle staff perceptions of volunteers from day one – during staff induction. At one session, 20 new volunteers were also invited to attend the staff induction. When the new staff were asked to visualise a hospital volunteer, their suggestions revealed an assumption that hospital volunteers were elderly ladies with a penchant for knitting. The new volunteers were then asked to stand, showing that 19 of the 20 present that day were under 25.

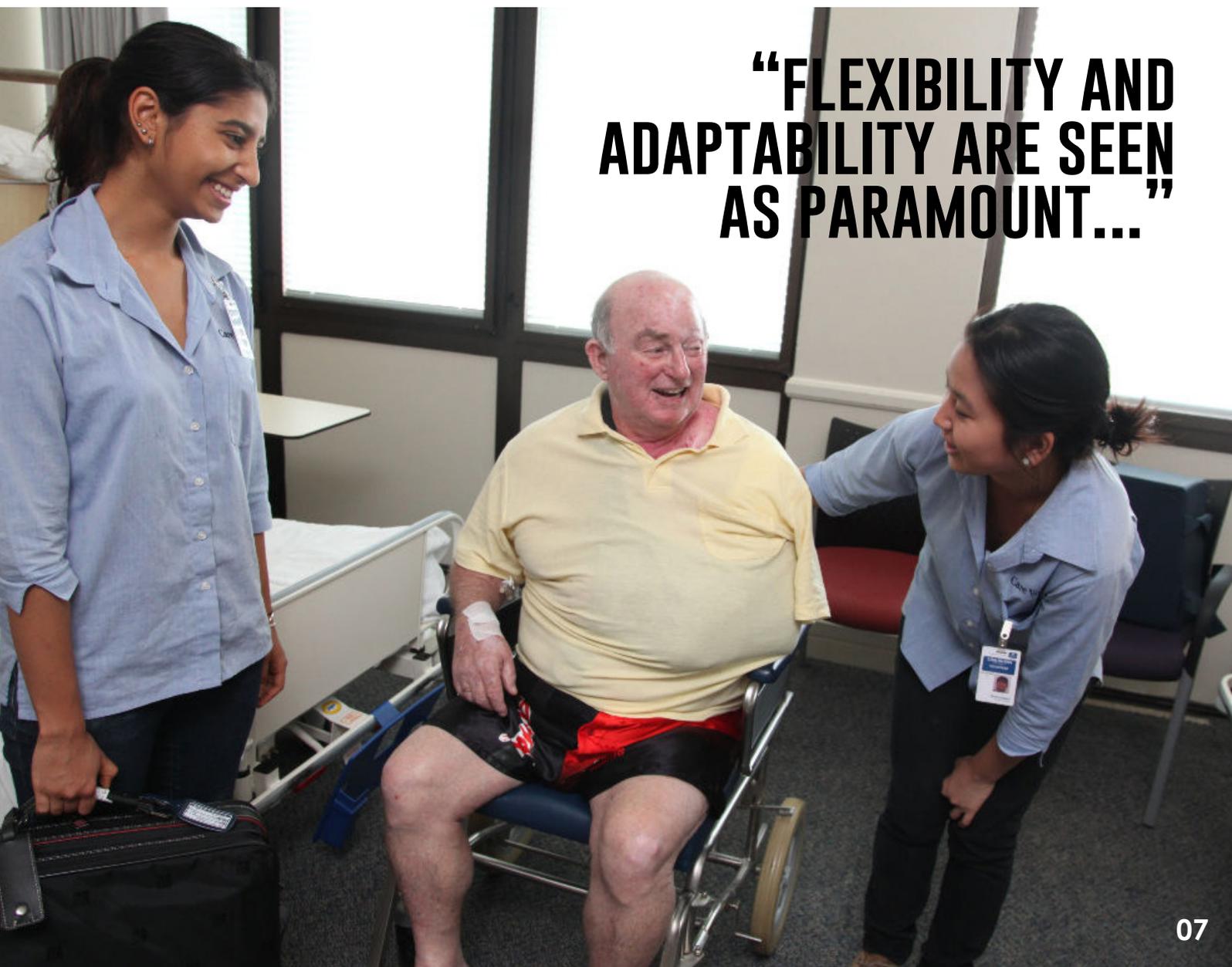
GPH has recognised the advantage of being a training Health Profession school, with university offices on site. Rather than resenting the fact that many volunteers are seeking a career-building experience, they embrace this and have worked to develop volunteer experiences that are mutually beneficial. The tasks undertaken by volunteers have shifted away from the 'traditional' tasks (giving flowers, selling lollies or administrative tasks) to ward visits and assisting in patient programs such as encouragement with walking and exercises and diversional therapy activities. This specifically appeals to medical and nursing students who can develop bedside manner for example, through volunteering. International students have also been noted to improve their English and contribute significantly through visiting patients.

Flexibility and adaptability are seen as paramount at GPH. Their recruitment scheduling is a good example. If a volunteer approaches the hospital soon after an induction day, the hospital will still bring them onboard as soon as possible and pair them with an experienced volunteer. This is based on the understanding that young people's availability changes rapidly and if they aren't brought on as soon as possible, they will find another volunteer opportunity or another way to fill their time.

All volunteers are provided with feedback and informal debriefs after each shift. The lockers provided for volunteers are deliberately positioned near the office of the volunteer coordinators so, when volunteers arrive and leave, they are greeted by a member of the volunteer team. This provides an opportunity to reflect, cover off on any issues and generally 'check in'. Upon request or completion, all volunteers are provided with a letter of acknowledgement and recommendation, a key document that rewards volunteers and provides an outcome for them. GPH believe it is important to appreciate why people volunteer and that career motivation is completely acceptable.

Most importantly, it is not a 'match and keep' system. GPH have acknowledged and embraced the fact that long-term retention of young volunteers is difficult. While they actively try to treat young volunteers the same as all other volunteers, they understand that due to other commitments and fluctuating availability, some volunteers will volunteer intensively at some points and need a break at others. GPH have found that young volunteers tend to average a couple of months, then leave and return during holidays or lull periods. The hospital doesn't see this as a major barrier due to the nature of patient movement that allows constant change and flexibility.

**“FLEXIBILITY AND  
ADAPTABILITY ARE SEEN  
AS PARAMOUNT...”**



# Linking

Linking is more than advertising volunteer jobs. It is the art of connecting with the right young volunteers for your organisation. It is about reaching young people, sharing your organisation with them, building interest and making a connection.

- **Do you have a way to determine the interests and motivations of volunteers?**
- **Do the volunteers shape the work they do?**

Often when creating and filling volunteer positions, a cookie cutter analogy is appropriate. The organisation has a particular shape that they need and, through the selection process, all the extra parts of a volunteer are shaved away to leave the shape that the organisation requires. While this makes matters simple for the organisation that can fill their needs directly, often applicants have a lot of complementary skills and background experience that can be highly useful to the organisation. This is particularly applicable in areas of research, projects, design and marketing. Therefore, where possible, allow the volunteer or a team of volunteers to take the lead on their work and they may end up producing even more than expected.

## Know your volunteers

Understanding the interests, reasons and motivations of volunteers is crucial to linking. Multicultural Development Association have a very personal approach and sit down with each volunteer to work out what people want to do and what they wish to gain from volunteering.

- **Do you conduct any events where you can connect with young people?**
- **Do you use events as a low-commitment opportunity for volunteers to become involved with your organisation?**
- **Are event volunteers encouraged to become more involved?**

Connecting through events allows young people to get a taste for the organisation through a short-term commitment while making a difference. Often this can become a new source of volunteers for organisations. The annual Lifeline Bookfest (run by UnitingCare Community) is the major volunteer recruitment event for the organisation each year. Volunteers have the flexibility to volunteer prior to the Bookfest, sorting books or setting up. Alternately, they have a variety of time commitment options during the Bookfest, ensuring volunteers can become involved at a level that suits the individual.

## Events as a linking tool

Events can be an excellent source of volunteers. Your organisation may be able to meet new individuals who can then funnel into the organisation.

- **Does your organisation have links to young people?**
- **Do you utilise existing youth networks to link with young volunteers?**

Young people are very interconnected, both online and in real life. They appreciate the opinions of their peers and are influenced by word of mouth and peer recommendation. Ensuring your young volunteers have a positive experience may encourage them to recommend your organisation to their friends and networks. You can also actively encourage referrals and equip existing staff and volunteers with resources to give to friends and put through networks (for example, a well-maintained website with information on volunteer opportunities).

### **Mates volunteer with mates**

Greenslopes Private Hospital realised that friends often wanted to volunteer together, so they enabled friends to work the same shifts.

- **Do you engage university students who join your organisation for compulsory practical units?**
- **Are these university students being encouraged to maintain a commitment to the organisation?**

While tertiary students who undertake compulsory placement for their practical units are highly skilled and motivated for their allocated hours, these young people may limit their commitment to the required time period. Some organisations may find this off-putting and feel it's 'not worth the effort'. However, some organisations report that university students doing their placement are often very competent and motivated. While they may or may not continue with the organisation immediately (as university and work commitments kick in) they form a link with that organisation, and many come back later down the track, or become an advocate for the organisation amongst their networks.

- **Does your organisation have a strategic partnership with tertiary institutions?**
- **Do you actively seek higher education students?**

Organisations that primarily engage young volunteers have found strategic partnerships with tertiary institutions become an important source of volunteers. Particularly in the tertiary sector, this is the stage where young people want to have a positive impact and volunteering is often an attractive option. Therefore, engaging young volunteers through tertiary institutions can be highly beneficial to your organisation.

### **Get them while they're keen**

Many young people at the study stage in their life are seeking volunteer opportunities to make a difference.

- **Is your organisation active in the digital space?**
- **Does social media help to link with young volunteers?**

Social networks are undoubtedly an important aspect of the life of a young volunteer. Having an active Facebook and Twitter presence can enable you to take your message, passion and vision to a huge pool of potential young volunteers. It provides a platform for young volunteers to quickly find and respond to opportunities to contribute. It is also important to maintain a digital presence outside of social media, through an up-to-date and accessible website.

### **Be upfront online**

Conservation Volunteers Australia outlines all their projects on their website so volunteers can be selective.

## Case study *Green Cross*

International humanitarian environmental organisation, Green Cross, has an excellent reputation for linking with young volunteers through a variety of highly effective strategies. The organisation empowers people to respond to difficult environmental situations and builds community resilience.

Green Cross has a number of different projects that link them with potential young volunteers, including the Extreme Weather Heroes. The program has its own website where a number of young volunteers share their stories. The team also keeps Twitter feeds the public can follow and interact with. Content on the website encourages young people to be skilled and prepared for extreme weather while also educating the community about climate change science. This program not only provides an opportunity for their volunteers but the potential for other young people to link into the organisation.

The Extreme Weather Heroes program is playing an important role in bridging the potential gap between ages of volunteers. According to Green Cross, the average extreme weather volunteer through the SES or other emergency services is 60+ years of age. Green Cross is actively working to shift this average and link with younger volunteers. Young volunteers are also being attracted to the organisation through Green Cross' social media presence that aligns directly with the most popular communication mediums for young people.

In the initial linking stages of volunteering, Green Cross ensures that a discussion takes place to:

- Identify the values, expectations and availability of the volunteer.
- Communicate the mission and purpose of Green Cross.
- Ensure that a mutually beneficial relationship can be formed.

By approaching linking with specific outcomes in mind, Green Cross is able to ensure the right volunteers are given the right responsibilities and enjoy their time at the organisation. The individuality and one-on-one personal discussion makes young volunteers feel valued and part of the team.

Green Cross understands that each volunteer is different. Some can only commit to a short-term project and will then return to the organisation at a later date when they are again available. Rather than a long-term, standard hours commitment, volunteers become a part of the Green Cross family. Volunteers at Green Cross are free to return when they have the time and are able to commit to the organisation. Providing the possibility to re-link in the future opens up the possibilities for engaging young volunteers who are passionate, eager and flexible.

**“THE INDIVIDUALITY  
AND ONE-ON-ONE  
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# Engaging

Engagement is about involvement and contribution. Young volunteers want to be involved in the organisation and be part of something that matters. Engagement is not only about having young volunteers, but ensuring their contributions are meaningful and mutually beneficial. When considering barriers to engagement, your organisation should look specifically at the controllable factors such as organisational flexibility, and engagement through different methods such as online.

- **Does your organisation encourage activity based volunteering?**
- **Do you determine the interests, reasons and motivations for volunteers wishing to become involved?**

Through activity or program volunteering, your organisation can attract volunteers with particular skill sets. Many have highly specialised skills in particular disciplines such as marketing or design and these talents can be put to use in your organisation. The Inspire Foundation's ReachOut.com identified a need for more online content. To fulfil this requirement, they created a program specifically for budding journalists called ReachOut.com Reporters. These reporters have access to a platform to build content for ReachOut.com on a flexible basis. While the reporting is done remotely, these volunteers have become an integral part of the organisation.

## Fulfil the needs of volunteers

Activity based volunteering is ideal for young people keen to experience volunteering, build their resume and utilise their skills.

- **Is lack of physical space hampering further engagement?**
- **Can volunteers be engaged through online means?**

Thanks to technology, volunteering is increasingly taking place through the virtual world. While certain roles still require volunteers to be physically present, there are more opportunities to engage volunteers online. Whether they're writing online content, participating in discussion forums or interacting and advocating on social networks, there are a myriad of possibilities for engaging virtual volunteers.

## Online and remote options

ReachOut.com primarily engages virtual volunteers who complete tasks and projects online.

- **Do you effectively enhance their involvement and more effectively engage young people in the following months?**

Young volunteers are not only driven by end goals, they are also motivated by incremental steps towards greater engagement and by the experience – the journey. Volunteering can be an experience often marked by key milestones, celebrations and building relationships. One simple action is to identify volunteers who may make good ambassadors, and equipping them relatively early on to speak at organisation or community events. Ensuring their engagement continues to evolve allows volunteers to see how their contribution is increasing. Finding ways for the organisation or the volunteer to document their journey can make the progression more tangible, for example, through a photo diary or volunteer blog.

- **Do you get to know your volunteers individually?**
- **Are there ways you can demonstrate more of an interest in your volunteers as people?**

Getting to know your volunteers and having conversations about their life demonstrates you're interested in them as people. By noting their personal interests like what they're studying, things about their family, or their other passions and interests, volunteer coordinators and staff can engage with volunteers on their level about topics that matter to them. Having an open door policy and taking the time to discuss non-organisation related topics with volunteers is one of those small things that can make a world of difference in engaging volunteers (of all ages!)

### **Take an interest**

The volunteer coordinators at Multicultural Development Association make a point of learning the names of new volunteers, and at least one fact about them and their life.

- **Does your organisation create meaningful engagement?**
- **Are volunteer's values, priorities and goals aligning with those of the organisation?**

Meaningful engagement is about aligning values, priorities and outcomes so that the organisation and volunteers are both getting what they need. Meaningful engagement also links to those intrinsic benefits young volunteers seek. Creating meaningful engagement is about identifying the core values of volunteers, ensuring these align with the organisation's values and monitoring the continued alignment of these values. In constantly monitoring the volunteers' relationship with the organisation, the best and most meaningful engagement can be achieved.

### **Meaningful engagement in practice**

1. Identify the volunteer's values, interests and skills.
2. See where these can be utilised in your organisation.
3. Put outcomes and timeframes in place.
4. Continue to monitor and adapt as required.

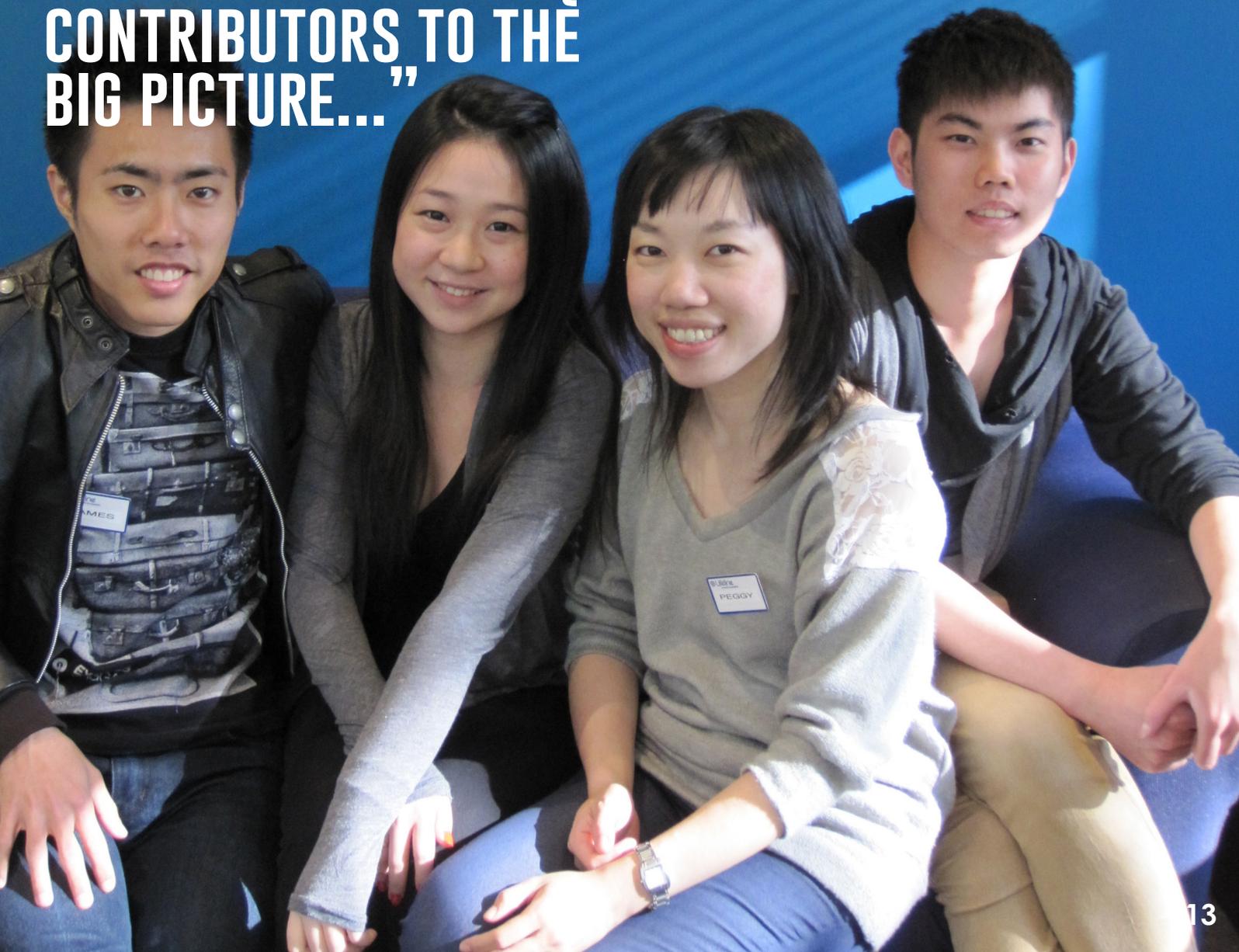
## Case study *UnitingCare Community (formerly Lifeline)*

UnitingCare Community have emphasised engagement in all areas of their work with young volunteers. This may seem a lofty goal in an organisation with 5,700 volunteers and 160 programs, but by treating volunteers in a similar way to staff, UnitingCare Community believe they have been able to facilitate excellent volunteer experiences and outcomes.

The recent decentralisation of the organisation marked a time of challenge, change and opportunity. It has helped to open staff up to diversity amongst volunteers. The organisation has been actively reinforcing the message that all volunteers are valuable. Volunteers receive the same communications as staff, and are invited to the same meetings and events as paid employees. By ensuring there is no division between staff and volunteers, everyone can be equal contributors to the big picture. With this, young volunteers can be given more important and impactful work.

One important aspect of engagement for UnitingCare Community is keeping volunteers in the loop on what's happening throughout the organisation. Through consultations, a common finding was that volunteers wanted to know what was happening at an organisational level. This connects to younger volunteers' desire to be a part of something and make a difference to the organisation as a whole.

**“EVERYONE CAN BE EQUAL  
CONTRIBUTORS TO THE  
BIG PICTURE...”**



# Belonging

Creating a sense of belonging for young volunteers is about creating a space for them to be 'part of the team'. Young people find personal satisfaction in belonging within social, educational, work and volunteering contexts. When they 'belong' in your organisation, they no longer just 'volunteer' for you, but they see their involvement with your organisation as an important aspect of their life. Their contributions are often greater and the volunteers begin to operate at a higher level themselves. They take personal responsibility for tasks, projects and programs, and it is important to recognise these contributions.

- **Does your organisation encourage a sense of ownership?**
- **Are volunteers given greater responsibility and accountability?**

Allowing young volunteers to take responsibility for their position and their tasks can generate a significant sense of belonging. The empowerment that comes with entrusting volunteers to coordinate projects or programs, or to see a task through from start to finish, is a powerful connector. It is important to remember not to throw volunteers in the deep end and to recognise that all young volunteers are different. Some may not want this level of responsibility, while others will thrive on it. It is a matter of getting to know each individual and exploring the possibilities with them. The act of giving an individual more responsibility can also be a way of recognising their prior contributions and achievements.

## Giving ownership

Volunteers who feel their contribution is a reflection of their own capabilities will go the extra mile in producing high quality work.

- **Is there a specific title given to your volunteers (apart from volunteer)?**
- **Does this name identify the organisation and their role?**

Giving volunteers their own title, like The Pyjama Foundation's Pyjama Angels, creates an instant sense of belonging. Rather than being a volunteer at an organisation they become an integral part of the team and represent what it stands for. This also helps to break down the staff/volunteer divide that can erode a positive working culture. Titles are best when role-specific, such as the ReachOut.com Reporters (volunteer journalists, bloggers and online content creators). And they should not need to be specifically for young volunteers, as young volunteers generally do not like to be singled out because of their age.

## What's in a name?

While it might sound trivial, the creation and integration of a volunteer title makes young people feel like a part of the group from the word go.

- **Does the sense of belonging extend after volunteering has finished?**
- **Do you encourage loyalty to the organisation?**

While keeping young volunteers for a long, continuous period can be difficult, generating an affinity for your organisation is definitely achievable. Young volunteers who are involved and belong to an organisation are likely to be supporters, advocates and donors to the cause for years to come. While time and commitments can change over the years and a volunteer's ability to contribute may fluctuate, these people often remain loyal to the organisation and what it stands for. Therefore, having young volunteers that feel they belong is critical for future community relations and support. And don't forget that young people have large networks (including through social media) and can get your message out to a wide audience.

- **Do you use a variety of communication mediums to interact with your volunteers?**
- **Are the channels of communication (email, phone, social media) open and accessible?**

Using mediums young volunteers use is an easy and effective way to create an awareness and understanding of your organisation and achieve communication between the organisation and volunteers. You may find having a presence on social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, beneficial in communicating and staying connected with young volunteers (perhaps even more so than finding new volunteers).

Platforms such as Twitter can be utilised to keep volunteers in the loop on what's happening at the organisation. During the research phase of this report, the focus group representative from the Inspire Foundation, behind ReachOut.com, tweeted that she was in Brisbane for an event on youth volunteering. A simple but effective way to give volunteers a look at the bigger picture.

### **Why not get a young volunteer to oversee your social media strategy?**

You can also encourage volunteers to utilise Facebook groups to stay in touch and informed.

- **Is interactivity encouraged amongst volunteers?**
- **Does the organisation interact with volunteers beyond the office?**

Interactivity provides a good mechanism to capture and maintain young volunteers' attention. Using social media to share pictures, videos, funny anecdotes and stories of success enable you to keep your volunteers informed and engaged. It also stimulates a conversation and embeds your organisation in the lives of your volunteers.

Social events are also very important – picnics, barbeques and other get-togethers that allow volunteers and staff to get to know one another and develop a sense of camaraderie. It is important to maintain face-to-face communication to develop a good rapport and add personal value.

- **Do you ensure that the volunteers are enjoying their time?**
- **Is volunteer satisfaction a consideration for your organisation?**

Within any volunteering opportunity it is very important to make it an enjoyable and rewarding experience. When volunteers enjoy their time and feel they are gaining something whether it be through enjoyable experiences or a new friend, they are willing to belong to the organisation. This can be achieved through providing opportunities to socialise as well as offering an easy going environment. Being flexible and offering variety in tasks keeps young volunteers interested.

### **Space to change**

The Multicultural Development Association keeps in regular contact with volunteers, and is happy to facilitate a 'no-hassles' change into another volunteer role, if that becomes more suitable for the volunteer.

## Case study *The Pyjama Foundation*

The Pyjama Foundation provides support for children in care through a learning-based mentoring program, implemented by volunteers known as Pyjama Angels. These volunteers read, play and spend time with the children to provide companionship and support.

The foundation fosters a sense of belonging for its young volunteers that starts with the title Pyjama Angels. Giving volunteers a title that both encompasses their role in the organisation and gives some indication of the important work they are doing (being an 'angel' in the lives of these children), helps volunteers feel valued and gives them a title they can wear with pride.

Honest, spontaneous quotes and stories from Pyjama Angels are used throughout promotional material and publications. Monthly feedback is used to make improvements to the program, and volunteers can see the impact they are having not just in the lives of the children they are working with, but in the program as a whole.

Beyond the information that the Pyjama Angels give to the organisation, The Pyjama Foundation also distributes emails of inspirational stories and information to their volunteers to keep the communication channels open and ensure everyone feels a part of the organisation.

Ultimately, the sense of belonging present amongst the Pyjama Angels stems directly from their common goal – to help and support children in care. When everyone understands why they are there and what they are working towards, the sense of belonging can grow organically.

**“WHEN EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS WHY THEY ARE THERE AND WHAT THEY ARE WORKING TOWARDS, THE SENSE OF BELONGING CAN GROW ORGANICALLY...”**



# Leadership

Leadership adds the next element to volunteering. By recognising their value and the significant contribution they can make, young volunteers in positions of leadership can be highly beneficial and put your organisation in a favourable position. The most effective are integrated systems of leadership where processes and progress towards leadership is standardised, supported and mutually beneficial.

- **Is your organisation offering young people leadership positions?**
- **Do you have specific strategies for encouraging and supporting young people into positions of leadership?**

Young volunteers are inspired to work harder, be more committed and increase their involvement when they are working towards an end goal. For young people in particular, leadership is a strong motivator. Through this phase of volunteering, the end goal could become leadership within the organisation as an ambassador, mentor, committee or board members. It is also highly beneficial to the organisation. Beyond rewarding the individual volunteers for their commitment, the organisation is able to leverage off the skills and abilities of these leaders.

## Leadership happens at all levels

It's not just managers that are leaders – working with a team, running a project, being involved in a committee – are all leadership opportunities.

- **Do you encourage young people to take leadership roles in teams?**
- **How do you support young volunteers when they take a leadership role?**

Creating teams of volunteers where young people have the opportunity to lead projects is one of the easiest and most effective ways to facilitate leadership. This not only recognises the commitment of individuals or groups of volunteers but also gives newer volunteers something to aspire towards.

You (or your organisation) may also be pleasantly surprised at the exciting, innovative ideas that are generated and executed by a group of passionate, capable young people.

## Set up official positions

Providing established positions that young volunteers can aspire towards allows leadership to become a tangible outcome.

- **Are volunteers involved in promotion and attracting new volunteers?**
- **Is there an ambassador program for volunteers?**

Ambassador programs allow young volunteers to be recognised for their work while promoting the role of volunteers to the public. This method of leadership positions particularly committed and inspiring young volunteers as role models for what potential volunteers could become. Ambassador programs relate well to the linking phase because young volunteers attract other young volunteers. Giving these ambassadors a particular title also helps to verify their responsibilities.

- **Are volunteers utilised internally to support new volunteers?**
- **Is there an official mentor scheme in place?**

Experienced young volunteers can be given positions as mentors. This allows committed volunteers to be recognised as valuable and important to the organisation, while also providing an important contact for newer volunteers. Effective mentor schemes can relieve a lot of the pressure on volunteer coordinators as a method of delegation. By giving the new volunteers a mentor they can look to, ask for help and use as a buddy, mentor schemes can significantly improve the efficiency and personalisation of volunteer support.

### **Mentors can be official or unofficial**

You might use an official buddy system, or you may simply work out shifts and other arrangements so that newer volunteers are 'placed with' an experienced volunteer.

- **Is there a collective feedback process within your organisations?**
- **Does your organisation have a volunteer committee?**

Creating a committee of young volunteers can be an effective means of leadership. Committees can generate ideas, discuss improvements and effect change to provide an excellent resource in moving your organisation forward. Committees need to meet on a regular basis, have an agenda and come away with action items. The most effective committees have a standardised application process to ensure all members are equally qualified to be involved. Committee members can also take on ambassadorial or mentor style responsibilities within their role.

An even more effective approach can be to integrate young volunteers into existing committees (which include other volunteers and/or staff). These young people can inject a whole host of new ideas and energy.

- **Does there need to be a greater organisational shift towards welcoming and appreciating youth?**
- **Could volunteers become a part of your organisation's board?**

Non-profit organisation boards are notorious for having a huge age imbalance. Providing the opportunity for a few positions on your board to be filled by young, committed volunteers can provide an excellent leadership opportunity while also opening up the possibilities for your organisation to cater better to the needs of young people. This strategy also bridges potential discords between older board members who don't recognise the value of young volunteers. Putting highly skilled and impressive young volunteers on your board can initiate a shift away from those prejudices and demonstrates the capabilities of young volunteers.



**“YOUNG VOLUNTEERS ARE  
ALLOCATED RESPONSIBILITY  
QUITE QUICKLY...”**

## Case study *Red Cross*

Red Cross is one of the most well recognised humanitarian organisations both nationally and internationally. Their journey to now is a fascinating one that has been heavily influenced by the involvement of young volunteers over the years. Today, young volunteers are allocated responsibility quite quickly. This allows their skills to develop and gives them the opportunity to discover which of the many areas of Red Cross suit their values and interests. Furthermore, it allows young people to set goals and have a sense of self-achievement.

The organisation has created a very effective leadership program through their Youth Advisory Committee. Created as a way to give a direct voice to the young volunteers, the committee is comprised of representatives from all around Australia. It also provides other young volunteers with a connection to young leaders and the potential to achieve a similar leadership position.

Committee members encourage other members to get further involved, especially if they show an interest in doing so. Current Queensland Youth Advisory Committee representatives are supported by their predecessors.

The committee not only provides leadership opportunities for young volunteers but provides new ideas, feedback and constructive outcomes that contribute to the success of Red Cross. The ongoing process of taking the information and ideas that result from the committee and putting them into action is highly beneficial for Red Cross, but also recognises and rewards the young volunteers by having their opinions matter.

The Red Cross' Youth Advisory Committee is a very successful example of young volunteers moving into leadership positions through a standardised, formal and well-structured system. This ensures consistency and makes leadership an attainable opportunity for everyone involved with the organisation. It also results in tangible benefits for the organisation through feedback, ideas and the fostering of passionate ambassadors and mentors for other young volunteers.

# Summary of main findings

## *Culture*

- Flexibility is crucial to engaging young volunteers who already have a variety of commitments and priorities.
- Promoting existing youth involvement is an effective way to engage more young volunteers.
- Young volunteers are looking for visible outcomes so ensure your culture allows for the achievement of clearly defined end goals.
- The benefits achieved through incorporating young people needs to be recognised by all staff whose perceptions towards young people may need to be changed/re-educated.
- Opportunities for young volunteers needs to be a priority area for your organisation.

## *Linking*

- It is crucial to determine the interests, reasons and motivations of young volunteers.
- Events are an excellent means to link with new volunteers and involve them in the longer term.
- Utilise existing youth networks to link young volunteers to your organisation.
- University practical students can offer highly developed skills and knowledge.
- A strategic partnership with tertiary students engages young volunteers who are passionate about making a difference.
- Effective use of online platforms can create a greater presence and awareness.

## *Engagement*

- Activity based volunteering engages volunteers based on interests, reasons and motivations.
- The barrier of physical space can be overcome through online or remote volunteer engagement.
- Progressive enhancement of volunteer roles and responsibilities ensure their contributions continue to evolve.
- Getting to know your volunteers and showing an interest in their life, studies and interests creates greater engagement.
- Meaningful engagement is about aligning the needs of your volunteers with the needs of your organisation.

## Belonging

- Encouraging a sense of ownership and accountability results in more committed young volunteers.
- Giving volunteers a title or name (other than volunteer) provides an instant sense of belonging.
- Maintaining the loyalty of volunteers beyond the term of their volunteering can result in long-term affinity for your organisation.
- Using a variety of communication channels is an effective way to ensure openness and accessibility.
- Online and social interactivity amongst volunteers creates camaraderie.
- Satisfaction should be monitored and controlled to ensure young volunteers are enjoying their experience at your organisation.

## Leadership

- Establishing leadership positions encourages young volunteers to aspire towards greater responsibility.
- Young volunteers should be encouraged to take on leadership roles.
- An ambassador program is an effective way for existing volunteers to promote your organisation to potential volunteers.
- Mentor schemes are a method to utilise volunteers to support each other internally.
- Committees can provide a collective feedback process from volunteers to your organisation.
- Involving young volunteers on your board can initiate an organisational shift towards involvement of youth.

Welcome to Greenslopes  
Private Hospital Volunteer  
Recognition Day 2011

Celebrating The Inspiring  
Volunteers at Greenslopes  
Private Hospital

GREENSLOPES  
PRIVATE HOSPITAL

**“YOUNG VOLUNTEERS SHOULD  
BE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE ON  
LEADERSHIP ROLES...”**

## Where to from here?

By using *Young People as Volunteers* as a guide to identify areas for improvement, your organisation can make a conscious shift towards addressing these areas. Many organisations identify there are key issues in not having enough young volunteers or not utilising them effectively, however most fail to look at the phases of volunteering and identify specific stages in the process that require improvement.

It is hoped that the strategies provided assist in identifying how young people can become more involved in your organisation. It may also inspire other ideas to help your organisation better work with young volunteers. Each organisation is different and while a couple of the strategies might not apply, most provided can be modified to suit your organisation.

The case studies were specifically selected because of each organisation's demonstrated success. Use these stories as a benchmark. Look at what the leaders in that particular area of volunteering are doing and see how your organisation might replicate the beneficial outcomes for your young volunteers.

Ultimately, these strategies, case studies and findings are an excellent first step; however, actions speak louder than words. It's now time to create some actionable items, whether it is more flexibility, event or activity based volunteering, getting to know your volunteers, giving volunteers a new name in your organisation or creating an ambassador/mentor/committee/board program. Make a real difference to more effectively work with young volunteers, make positive changes and reap the mutually beneficial rewards.



**“YOUNG PEOPLE CAN  
BECOME MORE INVOLVED  
IN YOUR ORGANISATION...”**

## Appendix one *Literature review*

The following literature review is an updated version of part of the *Youth Leading Youth* literature review. It looks specifically at key research surrounding how traditional organisations should shift the focus of their young volunteers.

### **What organisations should and should not do to attract, retain and motivate young people**

To recruit and retain young volunteers, organisations need to 'make-over' the image of volunteering from outdated to a more modern representation (Hankinson & Rochester, 2005). Kosutic (2010) identifies that one of the difficulties in attracting young people to leadership positions flows from differing interpretations in the discourse of youth leadership, ranging from the elitist view to the view that anyone can be a leader. These reflect the broader social-cultural context and power dynamics within the organisation of young versus old, the powerful versus the vulnerable.

For youth programs to be successful, the profile of volunteering needs to become relevant and meaningful to young people (Smith, 1999). Youth involvement skyrockets when participation is seen as a principle and not just a program (Pittman, 2000). Today's younger generations need an environment where they are led by positive role models with honesty and integrity, are challenged through learning opportunities and allowed flexibility in their activities (Raines 2002). They need a mix of services, supports and opportunities to stay engaged (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Too many organisations do not practice youth empowerment and so fail to address the need for young people's participation, input and power in the decision-making process. However Mohamed and Wheeler (2001) argue that organisations that involve them as integral participants can expand the capacities and outcomes of their efforts. Community organisations should take responsibility and be held accountable for developing effective youth leadership training so as to grow, retain and internalise lifelong skills for future leaders (Seevers, Dormody & Clason, 2010).

Young people must be seen as an asset and investment and not as problems to be fixed. By including this demographic and taking on their valuable ideas, it encourages and expands idea generation within the organisation (Devayani & Turkay, 2010). Oates (2004) suggests that this approach requires an attitude of inclusivity, flexibility and the ability to view the organisation through a youth lens. Genuine youth engagement requires the creation of a field of interest relevant to young people, real decision-making responsibility, supportive adults and room for new ideas. Stolle and Cruz (2005) argue that promoting youth engagement is as simple as offering young people a seat at the table while effective youth engagement combines mentoring, skill development, support and training (Oates, 2004).

There is a growing role for youth as "change-agents" and leaders for the future in both global and local communities and organisations (Seevers, Dormody & Clason, 2010). In creating 'space' for young people organisations should recognise that young people will have different ideas and skills to bring to the table, ensure organisational culture is youth-friendly by providing staff with information, training and support about what effective youth engagement looks like and how it can be supported, and integrate young people into the organisation by including them in events, meetings and projects (Kirlin, 2002). They also need to utilise technology effectively through innovative campaigns that make use of different media outlets to ensure information is reaching the target audiences (Boessler & Ding, 2010). Rigid approaches limit the space available for young people to contribute their talents and skills that are meaningful for them (Williams, 2010). Newman (2008) found that the biggest challenge in youth participation was keeping the lines of communication open between young people and adults. Barber (2009) encourages the 'engagement zone' where adults engage and interact with young people and allows for compromise, insight, possibility and positive change. Devayani & Turkey (2010) argue that organisational team work involving youth allows sharing of interests, skills and passions, thereby encouraging further self-development and self-actualisation of all team members.

Moreover, affiliation is important to young people so it may be prudent for organisations to recruit collectively. Haski-Levinthal et al (2007) suggest working toward building, working with groups and initiating more social contact between volunteers as joining in a group can overcome social obstacles and fears which may hold them back from volunteering such as the anxiety associated with being new and the need to be accepted. According to Roker, Player & Coleman (1999) peers serve to legitimate and encourage volunteering.

Brown (2000) suggests asking young people to volunteer conveys confidence in their abilities and makes them aware of specific opportunities, making volunteering fun and exciting and encouraging volunteering at an early age. Torres (2003) argues that volunteering at a young age will solidify and ground the value of giving within a child's emerging self-concept. Kosutic (2010) argues that for individuals, volunteer youth leadership programs facilitate an increase in social self-efficacy, self-confidence, greater personal responsibility, better problem solving, clearer career goals, promotes the value of diversity and a sense of support from the community. From that, the community receives greater youth involvement, a higher percentage of successful youth and the advantage of interpersonal spaces with shared and collective contributions of young people in the organisation. In Australia many young people engage in activities they do not consider as volunteering so are more likely to downplay their involvement as they do not see themselves fitting the image of a volunteer making it less likely to hear about their voluntary acts (Boessler & Ding, 2010).

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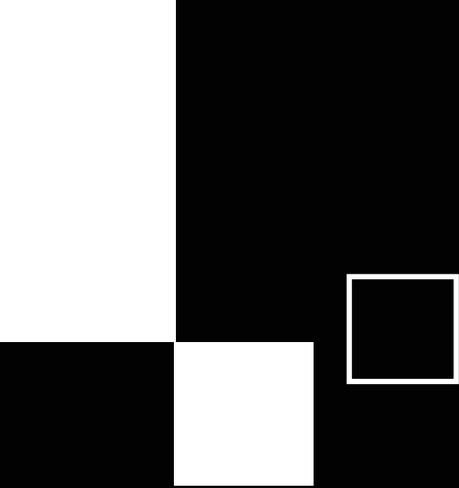
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