



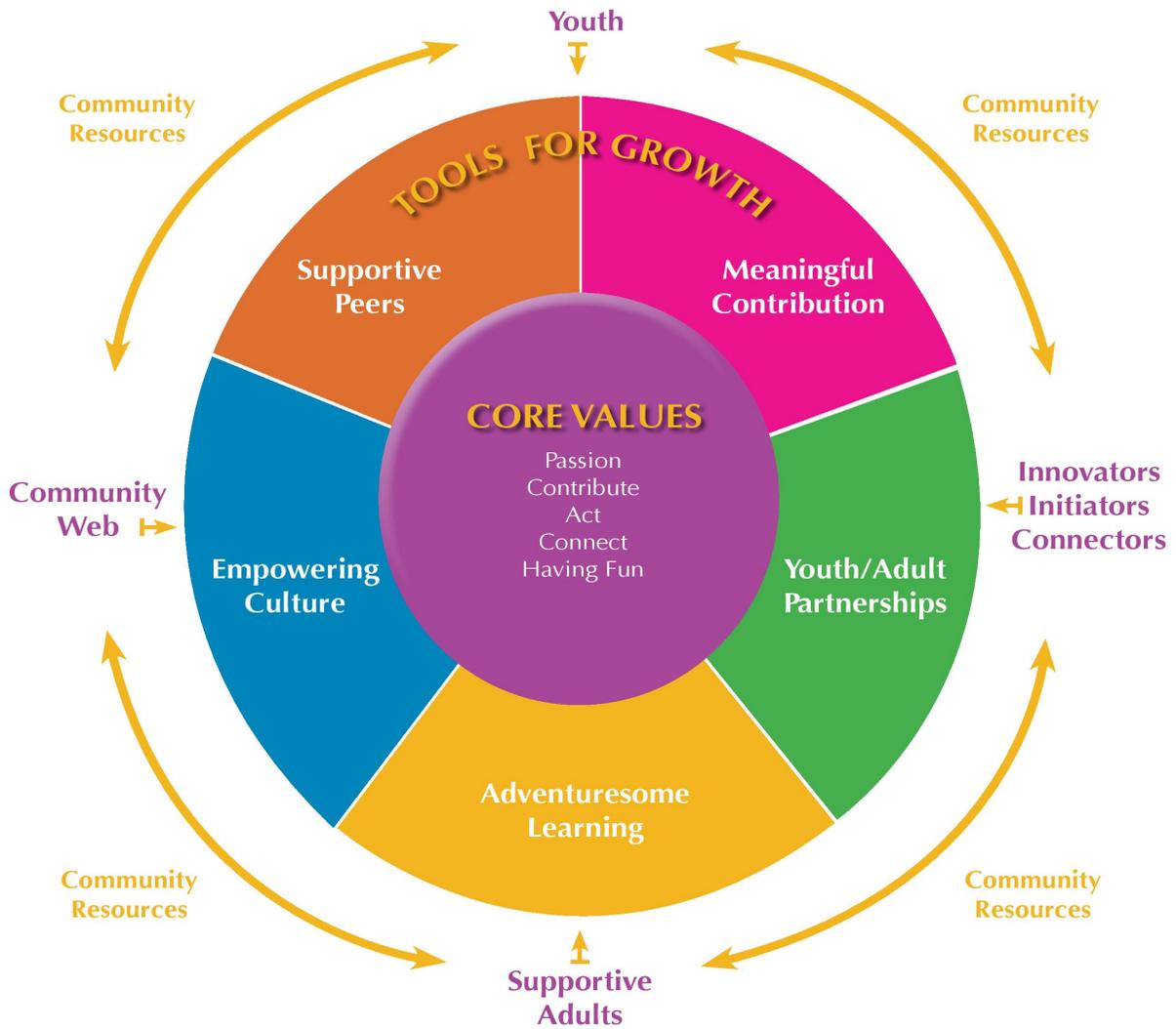
HeartWood's Framework for Community Youth Development: The Circle of Awesomeness

How do I meaningfully engage young people?

HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development developed the *Community Youth Development Framework* to help support community groups and individuals with their own youth engagement efforts. Community Youth Development (CYD) is the process of young people being engaged in meaningful participation through planning, decision-making, and program delivery in governments, organizations, institutions, and communities. While encouraging the gifts and talents of individual young people, CYD places equal focus on the investment of these assets in the community. HeartWood's CYD Framework blends practices of youth development and community development in a deliberate effort to generate both individual and community outcomes.

The foundation of the Framework is based on HeartWood's work with youth and communities in Nova Scotia, Canada since 1988. It was redefined and strengthened through research that reflects the voices of both youth and adults working together in which partnerships are based on mutual learning, teaching, and action. Using the appreciative inquiry approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 54 participants from 12 youth action teams across Nova Scotia. An equal number of male and female youth, mainly from rural areas, were interviewed. Participants included 28 young people, 17 adult support people, and nine community agency representatives who have supported or received service from a team. In addition, the Framework was validated through the *Youth Engagement in Rural Communities* (YERC) research project that HeartWood conducted between 2005-2008.

HEARTWOOD CIRCLE OF AWESOMENESS



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In the Framework, the inner circle describes the *Core Values* young people have identified that encourage their engagement. These core values have proven to be helpful touchstones by which to assess youth programs and services. For more information on the Core Values and how they were determined, see the 2006 article by A. Warner et al at: http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/resources_publications.shtml.

The middle circle, *Tools for Growth*, describes those tools HeartWood has found to be effective in bringing about the *core values* in practice. Like any tools, there are a number of different ways in which to apply them depending on the job at hand, the available material, and skill level and experience of those handling these tools.

The Tools For Growth include:

- Meaningful Contribution: Taking action to meet a genuine need.
- Adventuresome Learning: Engaging, real life experiences that challenge individuals to step outside of their comfort zones to learn and grow.
- Supportive Peers: Creating the atmosphere that fosters a strong peer team where individuals feel connected, appreciated and supported by others.
- Youth-Adult Partnerships: Gaining inspiration, support and guidance through a relationship of mutual caring and respect.
- Empowering Culture: Providing opportunities for youth to initiate, commit, plan and choose paths to work together with peers and the community as active citizens.

The outer circle – *Community Resources* – concerns the organizing of a systems wide approach to foster youth engagement. The *system* may be an organization, institution, government agency, or community.

- Initiator, Innovator, Connector: can be an individual, a group of people (youth and/or adults), or an organization that has a specific interest or motivation and is a bright light or energy source to see increased youth engagement in the defined system.
- Youth: meaningful roles for youth participation in the system.
- Supportive Adults: meaningful roles for supportive adults to help young people navigate the system.
- Community Web: a linking of other youth serving and/or community based organizations, government agencies and individuals who can play a role towards increased youth engagement in the system.

MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION ~ 'I am needed.'

Meaningful contribution is taking action to meet a genuine need. Youth often have fresh, creative approaches to dealing with challenging social and environmental issues. When encouraged to think critically about the root causes of issues they hope to address, young people are challenged to use their gifts to expand acts of service beyond charity in order to act for social change. Young people thrive when they feel needed and define their self-worth in relation to their skills and capacity to make a difference. The quality of their engagement is more important to growth than the frequency or quantity of participation (Checkoway, 1998). The sense that one's work is part of something greater than the individual is the fuel for inspired and impassioned work by young people (Tolman et al, 2001).

Characteristics:

- A sense of accomplishment
- Feeling needed
- Meeting a genuine need
- Appreciation from others
- New personal relationships
- Mutual two-way learning
- A belief that individuals can make a difference
- An increased commitment to organization and community
- New respect for others
- New opportunities growing out of simple acts
- An enriched community

Putting Meaningful Contribution Into Practice:

Meaningful contribution involves serving others, the community, or the planet. Examples of service include painting the community centre, cleaning up the litter in a public park, helping rural seniors stack their winter wood, organizing a "fun day" for children, and so on. Meaningful contribution is a powerful learning tool for the development of life skills, increasing leadership ability, and building contacts/ connections with people in the community.

When young people serve others to meet a genuine need, they are acting on the core value of making a difference. When they take action – individually and as Youth Action Teams - they benefit the whole community and contribute to its wellbeing and vitality.

Youth are natural visionaries. They can imagine – i.e., see – how their community can be better, healthier, stronger, more vibrant and inclusive. Adult partners provide the support to help youth put their visions into action.

From the community's perspective, we need to involve young people. We need their input now and we would be wise to start supporting them in leadership roles. The earlier we do that the better. From these initial key experiences, young people often develop an interest in civic involvement that will last a lifetime; i.e., engaged youth will become engaged adults. The young

people will also acquire a real sense of belonging to the community. This may not prevent out-migration (i.e., moving away to find a job, go to school, or to travel) but it dramatically increases the probability of them returning “home” some day – bringing with them all the skills, knowledge, and life experience they picked up along the way.

Unfortunately, communities typically do not include young people in a deeply meaningful way, which can lead to disconnection.

Meaningful Contribution: How did you....

- Connect with people's passions?
- Seek strengths and skills?
- Make acknowledging contributions a norm?
- Support participant leadership?
- Build in opportunities to share skills and experiences?
- Build in service experiences?
- Debrief experiences?
- Use participatory action research to influence policy change?

ADVENTURESOME LEARNING ~ 'Learning is fun.'

Adventuresome learning is about exploration, excitement, challenge, mystery and seeking the unknown. Young people are action-oriented. They enjoy testing new behaviours and exploring the world – and are therefore drawn to experiences that offer adventure and new learning.

Adventuresome learning acknowledges this need for action by engaging participants in real-life experiences that challenge them to step outside their comfort zones in order to learn and grow.

Characteristics:

- Risk taking, uncertainty, going into the unknown
- Engagement, feeling alive
- Fun and play
- Focusing on feelings and values as well as thoughts and actions
- Magic, creativity, zest and inspiration
- Sense of personal safety
- Sense of personal accomplishment
- The freedom to express oneself, experiment and make mistakes
- Finding unexpected and teachable moments
- Action coupled with time and space for reflection

Putting Adventuresome Learning Into Practice:

This is best known as “experiential learning” (HeartWood refers to it as adventuresome learning), or learning that is action-oriented and that happens in a fun, supportive, and challenging environment. When it is the basis for undertaking tasks and initiatives, it always engages young people’s interest and energy. Young people learn best by doing, especially by doing something that challenges them.

Adventuresome Learning: How did you....

- Listen for and notice personal areas of risk for participants?
- Challenge participants to take safe risks?
- Model healthy risk taking?
- Find unusual opportunities for fun, laughter and learning?
- Demonstrate the positive learning opportunities in a difficult situation?
- Take time to debrief experiences to draw out the learnings?

PEER SUPPORT ~ 'I am accepted.'

When supported by peers, individuals feel connected, encouraged, and appreciated. Peer support in the context of the Framework involves helping young people feel a part of a team or community while taking concrete action. Relationships rooted in mutual support and acceptance help group members nurture each other’s strengths and encourage growth. This collective voice and strength inspires them to take on challenges and face risks that they might avoid if acting alone.

Characteristics:

- Feeling connected, appreciated, and understood by others
- Deeper self-understanding gained through team interaction
- Appreciating and celebrating differences
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Freedom to be oneself and express needs
- Meaningful communication and support
- Healthy expectations for each other
- Sense of personal safety and willingness to take risks
- Confidence to take on challenges that seem insurmountable alone

Putting Peer Support Into Practice:

Peer support means feeling a sense of belonging, being part of a group, a team, or the community. An excellent way to foster peer support is through Youth Action Teams (YATs). YATs provide a safe and fun container for young people to develop their personal skills and abilities in the areas of participation, relationship building, being of service, and taking action. Supportive adults become engaged in the activities of the YAT, recognizing its value for

individuals and for the community. Through its service and actions, YAT members meet and connect with community groups and organizations, which typically respond with high appreciation for the contributions of the young people.

Supportive Peers: How did you....

- Model supportive relationships?
- Create connections between participants?
- Create opportunities for the group to hear and manage individual needs?
- Use small group work to increase personal connections and participation?
- Create opportunities for people to serve the group?
- Provide access to other supportive peer networks?

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS ~ 'I am supported.'

Youth-adult partnerships engage both youth and adults in mutual growth and learning. As role models, adults provide youth with support and inspiration by sharing interests and experiences in an environment of equality and mutual respect. As mentors and coaches, supportive adults are a resource for young people in connecting them with individuals and organizations. Adults who work with youth in healthy partnerships often find themselves inspired, energized, and increasingly committed to the organizations and communities they serve. Adults also learn from youth and their experiences.

Characteristics:

- Caring what happens to each other, reciprocity
- Mutual respect and listening
- Sharing and exploring together
- Providing personal support
- Being a role model
- Being a resource
- Sharing experience, an interest, or expertise
- Lending a helping hand
- Personal safety and trust

Putting Youth-Adult Partnerships Into Practice:

In addition to the more traditional roles of being a connector, bridge-builder, advocate, coach, mentor, and ally to youth, an adult can also be a partner. Good youth/adult partnerships evolve from good relationships; that is, healthy youth/adult partnerships involve inspiration, support, and guidance through a non-hierarchical relationship of mutual caring and respect, as well as reciprocal learning (i.e., the adult is just as likely to learn from the young person, as the young person from the adult).

As youth start out in their roles as partners with adults, they need more support, and adults can provide this. They can motivate youth, hold youth accountable, and provide opportunities for youth participation, ownership, and skills building. They can orient youth to the workings of organizational or municipal systems, facilitate a healthy team dynamic, and connect youth to community resources (Camille Dumond, HeartWood Associate, 2003).

Youth/adult partnerships exemplify the primary shift that has happened in the evolution of Community Youth Development practice. That is, we have moved from the mentality of developing programs to meet youth needs and to address their “problems,” to one of working with youth – being in relationship with them - and making best use of their skills and knowledge, to create benefits for the whole community, not only for the young person.

It is a matter of staff “finding the time” to get to know these kids, break the ice, and build a relationship with them. This creates a good foundation to deal with whatever comes up. It also increases staff tolerance for teen behavior, which can be trying. Some staff only interacted with the young person when he or she did something wrong. That’s changing. Even if you are not the designated Teen Services staff member, you can still learn the names of the young people you see coming into the library every day. That is huge. (Library staff at a professional development day on youth engagement)

Relationship building is a long process but it all starts simply enough - just make a connection, say hello, find out someone’s name. (Library staff at a professional development day on youth engagement)

Youth-Adult Partnerships: How did you....

- Be yourself and have fun?
- Encourage opportunities for informal connections?
- Clarify roles and expectations?
- Provide tools for action?
- Supportively challenge youth to grow and develop?

EMPOWERING CULTURE ~ ‘My voice counts.’

As young people grow and develop, they want and seek opportunities for leadership and the freedom to exercise real control and power in a culture that practices trust, honesty, and open communication. An empowering culture provides youth with this sense of responsibility and control over what happens, inspiring them to follow their passions and inviting them to become co-authors of the vision of the organization or community.

Characteristics:

- The freedom to express oneself
- Making conscious decisions on how to be together
- Taking initiative
- Having control over planning and decision-making
- The ability and opportunity to challenge others
- Contributing to a vision and direction
- Making choices
- Following through on plans
- Interest in solving problems
- Mutual commitment to the vision
- Holding others accountable

Putting Into Practice: Creating & Contributing To An Empowering Culture

One of the most effective youth engagement strategies that adults can undertake is to create and foster an empowering culture for young people. This means providing an atmosphere, circumstances, and opportunities where individuals feel empowered to initiate, commit, plan and choose paths to work together with peers and the community as active citizens. It could also mean that a facility (like a recreation centre, or a public library) or program feels welcoming to youth and appreciative of their presence. Having fun is a great equalizer – amongst peers who are meeting for the first time and in mixed groups of youth and adults. It's a way of stepping out of roles and cliques to come together. As people loosen up and relax, they feel more comfortable – and confident – to try new experiences, to learn new things, and to take risks.

Empowering Culture: How did you....

- Use and encourage an appreciative approach?
- Learn about and incorporate people's strengths, passions and learning styles?
- Invite people to co-create a welcoming space?
- Create opportunities for choice and responsibility?
- Support the group to set and manage community standards?
- Take an action orientation to community work?
- Participate in the community?