

# IN SERVICE TO YOUTH AND COMMUNITY



*natural lessons for renewal of youth-serving organizations*

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**Draft**

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**Abstract**

*From many corners of public and private life there are calls for more youth involvement in community processes, and within those agencies providing youth service. As a result the role of the youth-serving organization (YSO) in society is undergoing a significant shift. Traditional YSO have a very important role as an anchor in the multi-faceted nature of youth services in Canada. They have been a backbone to the sector; having established many of its traditions, and systems for investing resources. However the current demand for youth-inclusive practices has challenged them to re-tool, or risk a slow decline to the sidelines of the sector.*

*For long established mature organizations, it is a daunting task to develop the competencies to facilitate young people in becoming central agents in building safe, just and vibrant communities. Never before has the youth-serving sector had such an opportunity to contribute to broader community outcomes, nor such a challenge. A fluid mindset is a prerequisite if a YSO is to thrive in this changing environment. In an effort to connect prevailing management theory with practice, this paper has applied the Eco-Cycle Model (C.S. Holling) in its look at YSO as a complex adaptive system. The article will ground the theories in the experiences of HeartWood, a YSO the author led through its own renewal process, as it attempted to link its work more directly to the needs and assets of communities.*

**The call to include youth in communities**

Across Canada there is a new wave of activity focused on including youth in community processes. This trend is visible in a number of initiatives taking place in communities, government agencies, and private organizations across the country, and throughout the world. Terms such as youth engagement, youth inclusion, youth participation, and Community Youth Development appear increasingly in professional literature. A recent literature review for Health Canada found 70 articles on youth engagement, 35 of which shared evidence that youth engagement has significant positive benefits for youth (Pancer 2003).

In 1998, the Canadian Council on Social Development found that an increasing number of cities and towns in Canada were involving young people in civic life initiatives such as roundtables and civic committees (A. Robinson & Associates, 2002). One of the primary strategic options put forth in a senior level 2002 Federal Government report on revitalizing rural communities is 'to increase civic engagement of young people'. Public recognition of young people as key players in social processes has been strengthened by the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It states that, "All

children have a right to express their views and have them taken into account in all matters that affect them” (Robinson & Associates, 2002).

For their part, young people are also calling out for more youth inclusion. However most young people will tell you there is still a very long way to go. In Health Canada's, “Your Voice Matters 2001 Report”, 51% percent of teenagers said they were rarely or never listened to; and 62% percent felt that they were sometimes treated unfairly. In a British Columbia-wide study into youth well-being, youth expressed a strong desire to have input into the operations and decision making processes of different levels of government, especially where policies regarding youth are concerned (Zammit and Goldberg, 1995 as cited in Lui, 2002). Agencies, communities, governments, and the youth who interact with these systems are being caught up in the call for more youth-inclusive systems. In response the search is on for program frameworks, concepts, processes, skills, and knowledge.

The strongest demand seems to be for community-based applications for youth inclusion, but it is having a ripple effect on all youth-serving systems. At the local level, young people struggle to establish a voice on youth town councils, and in school decision-making. These local attempts to hear the youth voice are perhaps where the greatest learning, challenges, and breakthroughs are occurring. In a recent public meeting in our local area a young advocate appealed to those in attendance: “Youth really want to be involved, that's the whole point that we are trying to get to. Let us get involved. Let us be a part of our town.”

A historical look at the youth-development sector provides clues to the origins of the current trend. In the last decade other attempts to respond to youth disenfranchised in their communities have generally failed. A contributing factor is frustration with resources spent nation-wide on duplicate youth programs that predominantly addressed problems and crises. A positive development has been the extension of the search for answers beyond the youth sector. Realizing the benefits for their clients, community associations and NGOs with mandates other than youth services are getting into the picture. Julia Burgess, Director of Special Initiatives at the Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C. adds, “In the past few years more and more community-based organizations that are accountable to their constituencies are beginning to grapple with this issue (youth engagement in community systems)” (2000). At HeartWood new Professional Development modules on youth inclusion were enthusiastically received in their first year with participation from 70 private and public youth serving agencies, a high number in a province with one of the smallest youth sectors in Canada. “Finally, it has been recognized that the only logical strategy is to focus resources on strengthening the way communities, their agencies and their institutions, support the healthy development of our children and young people before there are problems.” (Pitman, 2000)

## **The need for leadership by youth serving organizations**

It is incumbent upon all YSO's to play a role in this deeper engagement of youth. They need to get to the place where they can stand up and loudly advocate for youth inclusion in decision-making processes. The movement needs guidance and ambassadors. The opportunity to make an impact on the lives of young people and communities is unprecedented. For the benefit of both young people and communities the wave of 'how to' questions deserves deliberate and thoughtful response.

People are turning to the youth-serving sector for guidance. Both Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Canada, and Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada recently confirmed this trend (McNight, Burton, e-mail, 2002). YSO's are struggling to respond appropriately, and find their place in more youth-inclusive communities. In various situations they may take positions as trainers, facilitators, conveners, and/or mediators between youth and their communities.

## **The gap**

However, many youth agencies are missing this unprecedented opportunity to deepen their work with young people and the community. Karen Pitman, a leading advocate of community-based youth development speaks to the challenge: "YSO's need to increase their efforts to recognize the full range of youths' needs, thus looking beyond the area of responsibility they have traditionally assumed" (1991). The paradigm shift and change process required of these agencies is not an easy one. Unfortunately the number of agencies in Canada taking up the challenge appears limited.

YSO's are a product of a broader tendency in society. "We have been leaving young people out of important dialogue on broader community and societal issues. When YSO's do address community issues, young people are seldom involved as partners in community creation, maintenance, and change." (Pitman, 1991)

Within a YSO, as in the broader community, decision-making primarily rests with adults. Traditionally youth development agencies have spent years doing things to and for young people rather than with. On a continuum of youth-inclusive practices most agencies can improve. Importantly, if an agency has not learned first-hand from attempts to be youth-inclusive, then is it really in a position to guide the process for others? Many agencies have not even awakened to the point of asking the right fundamental questions about the role of youth in their organization or their program delivery.

Too much of Canada's youth-serving sector (both public and private) is mired in old paradigms and practices, preoccupation with a struggle for survival, and an unwillingness to meet the call to action. The challenge is perhaps most visible in some of the sectors' stalwarts. Facing a continual decline in participant numbers groups such as the Girl Guides, and Scouts are in a desperate search for ways to once again attract young people.

I've witnessed little shift in the way these groups have traditionally run their programs. Dramatic action needs to be taken or based on current membership trends, agencies such as these risk the possibility of disappearing as a significant player in the youth sector within five years.

### **CAS & Eco-Cycle Metaphor**

To facilitate analysis in this article, I turn to the concept of a complex adaptive system (CAS)<sup>1</sup>. To appreciate the term one must pause to consider the meaning held by each of its single words – complex – adaptive – system. CAS has been defined as, “A complex, non-linear, interactive system that has the ability to adapt to a changing environment. Such systems are characterized by the potential for self-organization in a non-equilibrium environment” (Edgeware, 1998).

A good friend of mine practices eco-forestry<sup>2</sup>, in a beautiful and diverse 200-acre forest along the LaHave River on Nova Scotia's south shore. Walking with him through the forest has taught me a great deal about how not to 'manage' a natural system. He goes about his work following a strict practice of 'letting things be', not suppressing, not directing. While keeping his eye on individual trees ready for harvest, his selection is inextricably tied to his knowledge and appreciation of the forest as a whole system. Nature is a classic complex adaptive system. A YSO is a complex adaptive system.

Managing a CAS well necessitates being perceptive of the subtle nuances and interconnections within the organization as it goes about its daily routines, and its place in the domain in which it operates. I would like to introduce a popular theoretical framework for examining CAS, developed from a 5-year collaboration of an international group of ecologists, economists, social scientists, and mathematicians. This group developed an integrative theory they titled 'Panarchy' that had the degree of simplicity necessary for understanding, but also the complexity required to develop policy for sustainability (Holling and Gunderson, 2001). Their theory is grounded in empirical evidence and communicated through metaphor (the eco-cycle) and example.

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<sup>1</sup> Complex Adaptive System: A complex, nonlinear interactive system that has the ability to adapt to a changing environment. Such systems are characterized by the potential for self-organization in a nonequilibrium environment. CAS evolve by random mutation, self-organization, the transformation of their internal environment and natural selection. Examples include living organisms, the nervous systems, the economy, corporations, societies and so on. Brenda Zimmerman & Curt Lindberg, Paul Plsek, "Edgeware, insights from complexity science for health care leaders.

<sup>2</sup> Ecoforestry: the science of preserving fully intact forest ecosystems while providing for appropriate levels of commercial timber extraction. It is adaptable to the inclusion of ecological, cultural, heritage, scenic, recreational, wildlife and fisheries objectives within the value set identified for mitigation or maintenance.

C.S. Holling of the University of Florida has done a brilliant job of illuminating Panarchy's theoretical framework that looks at various phases of complex adaptive systems with his Eco-Cycle Model. This model invites the manager to look at what the organization should consider deliberately destroying to begin a renewal process. It also provides a framework for considering what type of interventions, and at what point in the organization's cycling, it might be most receptive or vulnerable to interventions.

Like the forest, an organization has many natural lifecycles. Change is constant. This article looks at YSO as a living natural system. The core messages of this article are those offered to us by nature. The model provides a perspective and reflections on how a YSO might manage the changes required of it to stay vital and relevant in a changing youth sector domain.

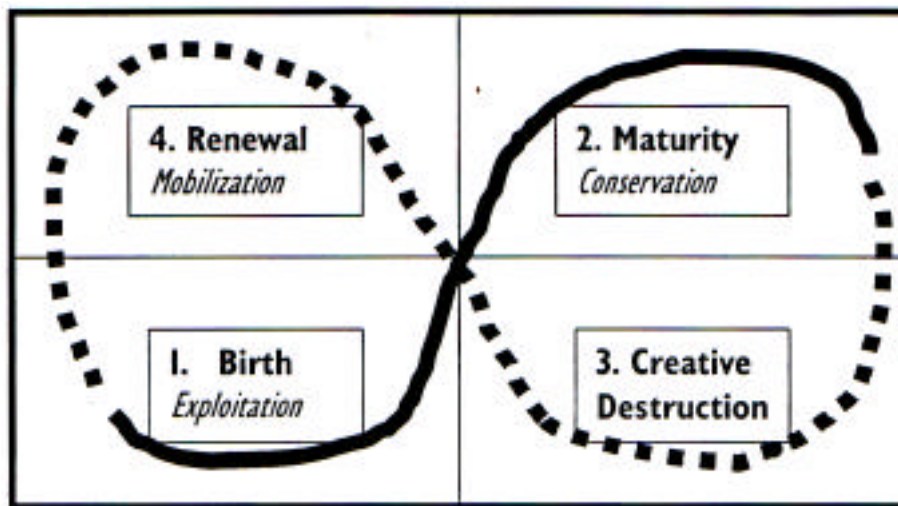


Figure #1, The Eco-cycle Model (diagram, Zimmerman, 2001)

Holling developed the Eco-Cycle Model by categorizing organizational change dynamics in four phases of the eco-cycle: 1) birth (exploitation), 2) maturity (conservation), 3) creative destruction, and 4) renewal (mobilization). Holling argues that as with a forest, a healthy organization needs to have elements that exist in each of the cycles simultaneously, a concept he refers to as "patch dynamics" (2002). As in a forest it is patch dynamics that also makes for a resilient organization.

### **Sharing stories from our back loop journey**

The Creative Destruction and Renewal phases of the cycle are referred to as the 'back loop', shown in the diagram #1 with a perforated line. It is the back loop cycle YSO know the least about, and fear the most. Organizations tend to move through the back loop much quicker than the transitions around and through the front loop (Birth to Maturity). It is characterized by chaos, uncertainty, and anticipation, and can stir emotions that range from fun and excitement to fear and frustration. Because it also

represents a time with the greatest opportunity for positive change, this article will focus on back loop theories and ideas for YSO.

For this article I have drawn on my experience of 15 years as co-founder and Executive Director of HeartWood, a strong and innovative YSO. With a focus on linking youth and community development our work encompass youth leadership training, adult leadership training and professional development, project management, research, consultations, and project development. We work directly with young people, adults serving youth, researchers, YSO, community associations, government agencies, and policy makers.

But what HeartWood does today, is not what it did four years ago. This article draws on my direct experiences at the helm of HeartWood during an intense period of back loop activity. Over that four year period the organization made a transition from offering primarily youth leadership programs – programs that tended to isolate it and young people from communities - to programs vital to a provincial movement of meaningfully involving youth within communities and agencies. Because HeartWood is not a single donor or grant dependent, it was able to remain relatively ‘nimble’ in its back loop movement. This is the period and circumstance from which I have drawn the back loop stories, ideas, and examples incorporated in this article.

It is important to recognize that various organizations are likely to find themselves *primarily* at different points in the cycle. Overall, the Scouts are at a different point than Y’s or newly formed youth-led groups, or the various hockey leagues or youth-in-care networks. Some close observers would say the Scouts (close to 100 years old), have moved through the eco-cycle more than once in their rich life. In fact, a senior Scout staff person shared with me his impression that the HeartWood of today is like what he has read of the early days of the Scouting movement.

Looking at the youth sector as a ‘whole system’, the concept of patch dynamics is again helpful. From the newly emerging youth-led organizations through to the young yet established ones such as HeartWood, to the mature stalwarts such as the Scouts, Guides, Y’s, and Boys and Girls Clubs; we find representative agencies and groups immersed at all stages of the eco-cycle. As in the organizational context, supporting sector wide diversity makes for a resilient sector. With such a rich diversity of agency types and competencies in Canada valuable lessons are available to any agency humble enough to harvest them. Over the years, HeartWood has benefited from many lessons it has learned from agencies at different stages of development than our own. It is with this in mind, that we humbly offer in return our experience, as a lens through which YSO experiencing ‘front loop’ activity might look as they consider their own processes of renewal.

### **The maturity phase – a call to the back-loop**

The mature forest stand is sheltered and quiet; only dapples of light filter through to the sparse understorey where the intricate relationship between plant species follows well-established patterns. The conservation phase is typified by more established species in the forest taking up the majority of the available resources. “In human organization, traveling

up the S curve of the eco-cycle from the lower left quadrant (figure #1) has been the mainstay of business wisdom for the past 50 years. Strategic planning, budgeting and most control systems are designed for this process of consolidation and improving efficiency. Streamlining operations and allocating resources with more predictable returns is good management as you move through the phase” (Zimmerman, 1998).

As in a mature forest grove, the patterns of most mature YSO's are set. Their routines, relationships, and expectations remain familiar. Preoccupation with maintaining large institutional machinery hampers development of new skills and competencies essential to serving the needs of a changing community with purpose and confidence. With little light making it in to nurture new thinking and action, many stay in the dark of the maturity phase, avoiding at all cost the shift to a new way of doing business.

Like a one-species tree plantation, the programs and systems of mature YSO's are not sufficiently diverse or nimble to bounce back from the impact of a large crisis or a continuation of their collective slow and steady decline. “In the case of extreme and growing rigidity, all systems become accidents waiting to happen” (Panarchy, 2002). Basically, they are a sitting target. Panarchy puts it this way: “The trigger might be entirely random and external - a transient drying spell for the forest, a new critic appointed to the board of directors...”. It is difficult to achieve clarity on how to escape long established patterns and ways of doing.

Consider the case of Scouts Canada, and the Girl Guides; both organizations suffering a decline. Organizational systems that have been growing since the turn of century are now rigid and tightly interconnected. Under these circumstances, management practices tend to be tied to the past, with a focus on what is missing, rather than leveraging what is, and what could be. With risk aversion prevalent, willingness to make decisions that impact many interconnected parts of an organization seem at best, difficult. Holling explains the downside this way, “the accumulating nutrient and biomass resources become more and more tightly bound within existing vegetation, preventing other competitors from utilizing them” (Panarchy 2002).

Within Scouts Canada, the struggle is easy to witness. A debate on whether to keep their traditional British style military berets, started in the early 80's! In a recent visit to one of their provincial headquarters, I was struck by the cavernous and mostly empty building that the organization had clung on to for years, in denial of their declining need for the space. Since the building held fond memories for many provincial members, the debate on selling was ripe with emotion. Even though it was tying up back valuable capital and draining operational funds, it was only through diligent persistence on the part of the Executive Director that the decision nudged forward.

As one of a number of mature YSO's in Canada, the Scouts are not alone in the tendency to suppress progress and avoid ‘rocking the boat’. Unfortunately, “The constant disturbances that managers fight contain important creative opportunities, which can be harnessed to generate learning that transcends established ways of strategic thinking. Suppression in an organization is analogous to a suppression of forest fires locally, which



cause an accumulation of fuel on the forest floor. Several studies have demonstrated that suppression of disturbance will diminish the ability of the eco-system to re-new itself” (Panarchy 2002).

Though at 15 years old HeartWood is a relatively young organization, it too began to sink into established patterns and ways of doing things. Using summer camps facilities and wilderness settings, we had spent ten good years of running programs for youth as far away from ‘communities’ as we could get. This practice is standard to over 650 summer camps in Canada. By most standards we had been quite successful, with an enviable service reputation and having provided leadership training and environmental education programs to over 24,000 children and young people. As with most YSO’s our program responsibilities started and ended at the gates, door, and trailheads’s of our program sites. Though I was tired after a ten year stint as founder and leader of this organization, I found the agitation of a greater calling undeniable.

Our work seemed honorable enough: to teach youth about leadership, to believe in their dreams, and encourage them to contribute to their communities. Though doing a commendable job at the latter, as with most youth leadership programs, we took no responsibility for helping our constituents keep the flame alive in their communities. This was both the deficit and opportunity of our work. The sad thing was that all too often youth from our leadership programs returned to communities and institutions that were either not prepared, or not interested in young people demonstrating leadership. Regardless of how empowered a young person might feel once they leave the safe confines of a leadership program, without peer support and adult guidance back home, the motivation and sense of direction often dissipates. We were asking a lot of young people to act as change agents in their communities, yet providing them no direct training or ongoing support to take action.

As champions of youth leadership our program approach began to feel at the minimum exploitive, and arguably even hypocritical. Outcomes standard to *youth development* were just not sufficient anymore. Young people live and experience community every day; it is in communities, whatever form that might take in their lives, that they will have the real opportunities to learn about and practice leadership. It became abundantly clear that HeartWood needed to apply our competencies to facilitate meaningful engagement of young people in community activity. This was our cross roads: either suppress the call to deeper work, or start a journey that would take the organization in unknown directions. This was the beginning of our departure from the maturity phase and into a time of creative destruction – the back loop.

### **Strategies to navigating the back loop**

There are two strategies that are primary above all else to assist a YSO to move into and then through the back loop. The first, is *including young people in meaningful roles within youth serving organizations*. The second is *including youth in community building processes*. Relating to the first strategy, the impact for an organization can be profound.

Amnesty International Canada in 1989 began a deliberate attempt to embrace the role of youth volunteers in their organization. One coordinator shared this observation: “There has been a fundamental change in Amnesty culture that is being felt throughout the organization. The level of youth involvement in leadership levels within our Branch has grown exponentially.” Recognition of the uniqueness and value of the Canadian program has stretched to the international Amnesty movement.

HeartWood’s own back loop transition period was fueled with energy, inspiration, and creativity from young people. Generally I have found young people more at ease than adults with the chaos and uncertainty common to back-loop activity. The tendency of HeartWood’s young staff to want more ‘doing’, and less ‘planning’ continues to be instrumental in nudging us deeper into community work. It is in ‘doing’ that real learning occurs.

Not only does the inclusion of youth in decision making roles improve operational effectiveness, inevitably the agency’s services will be more closely grounded to its youth clients. Whatever the service or mandate, the majority of YSO’s have an ultimate objective related to the empowerment of young people - to feel needed, worthy, and able to contribute in society. Regardless if the agency focus is child welfare, youth justice, homelessness, education or any number of other possibilities, the opportunities to provide empowering experiences within the agency are many. Robert Greenleaf a celebrated writer on the concepts of ‘servant leadership’ is instructive here. In describing the ideal exchange between agency and client, Greenleaf advocates: “That no individual will feel lesser for their exchange with the agency and in fact that they feel better for who they are”, a worthy aim for any YSO. Unfortunately more common are relationships that leave youth feeling disempowered by the very agencies that are attempting to empower them.

Ironically, there is seldom any real input from young people into the delivery of programs and services meant to serve them. This is at best a missed opportunity, but more accurately hypocritical and unjust. Here are the words of one young person who after 9 1/2 years moved out of the ‘care’ of a child welfare system: “Its like I was in a box with boundaries all around me. I stopped thinking for myself and I lost touch with what is important to me...it becomes about what other people needed or wanted from me. I started to feel powerless, like I could do nothing right anymore. When I did speak up to express my needs and wants nobody heard me. I find it so ironic that this service existed to support me yet I was the one that had to accommodate their needs, constraints, polices, etc.!”

Involving young people in meaningful roles in an agency is the first primary strategy to effectively navigating the back loop. If an agency has not learned first-hand from being youth-inclusive, then it is ill equipped to engage the second primary strategy. YSO’s need to get to a place where they can effectively advocate for *youth inclusion in community building processes*.

Not only can youth provide much wisdom on methods to enliven an agency, but the same thinking can be carried forward in efforts to sustain communities. My friend the eco-

forester, watches over ‘individual’ trees, but with an appreciation of the forest as a ‘whole’ system. This practice and principle can be likened to the means for successfully including youth in community building. To harvest trees indiscriminately, without regard for the forest can be likened to traditional youth programming and its general isolation from the heart of community events, politics, issues, and assets.

The means to engage youth in community building, exist in the fact that these same communities are searching for fresh support and creativity. Young people have what Alec Dickson, the visionary founder of Britain’s Voluntary Service Overseas, described as a ‘biological need to be needed’. When a community calls on a young person for leadership there is a ripple of energy that stirs from deep in the soul of the young person and extends outward into the community. Young people bring forward a rich diversity, and a difference from adults in approaches and priorities to community development. As collaboration expert Barbara Gray (1989) states, “These differences are often the sources of immense creative potential.”

This phenomena was captured in an article by the National Network for Youth when they conceptualized the term Community Youth Development (CYD)<sup>3</sup>. (Hughes, Curran, 2000). The essence of CYD is described as encouraging the gifts and talents of individual young people, while placing equal focus on the investment of these in the community. The power and potential of CYD is in creating communities that are “just and compassionate, where young people are valued and engaged in full and healthy development” (Hughes and Curran, 2000). By necessity the youth services practitioner adopting CYD practices, becomes an active part of the community fabric, aware of both its assets and needs, and how with adult guidance, young people can strengthen the weave. “It holds the promise of instilling civic responsibility in adolescents and young adults, and bringing new energy and optimism to community problem solving” (Hughes and Curran, 2000).

At HeartWood, CYD has become the overriding principle guiding its work and sparking the organization’s most challenging and rewarding transition since its beginning in 1989. After eleven years of primarily providing leadership programs for youth, the organization has expanded our core services and philosophy to embrace a vision of *meaningful participation in building healthy communities*. Adopting the practice of CYD as a means to facilitate that vision in communities; and the principle of including youth in YSO’s, are essential survival gear for the back loop journey.

### **Creative destruction (release)**

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Community Youth Development - 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. Community Youth Development assumes the involvement of young people in their own development and that of the community - in partnership with adults - to make use of their talents and increase their investment in the community (Hughes & Curnan, 2000).

Natural eco-systems have taught us that regardless of attempts to suppress disturbances destruction will eventually occur. Creative destruction occurs when “[previously] tightly bound accumulation of biomass and nutrients becomes increasingly fragile (over-connected, in systems terms) until suddenly released by agents such as forest fires, drought, insect pests, or intense pulses of grazing”. Regardless of the agency, adopting the principles of CYD, and youth inclusion initiates a process of ‘letting go’ and ‘making room’. Young people are known to provide new perspectives and creative problem solving, characteristics Holling associates with the creative destruction phase, “a time to question assumptions and make room for innovation and new insights” (Panarchy, 1989).

“Several studies have demonstrated that suppression of disturbance will diminish the ability of the eco-system to re-new itself” (Panarchy, 2002). A clear case of suppression is demonstrated by a widely distributed memo sent recently by a senior staff person in a field office to the Scouts Canada’s CEO. In the memo the author, a life-time Scouter, was critical of the practices and plans of the national office. Though the memo was critical, the author backed up his concerns with examples and suggestions for alternative strategies. Three and half weeks later the author was dismissed, to the shock and disgust of the volunteer board to which he reported to. For the organization that continues to suppress hot spot fires, larger all consuming flames are not far away; and the opportunity for renewal lost for good. In his research of great companies author Jim Collins states, “...leadership is about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted”(2001). As in the mature forest where little new life can compete and survive, Scouts Canada appears to be choking out new life forms even when the opportunity for creative destruction is offered up by a respected senior staff member.

Efforts at organizational renewal need to go beyond clearing at the edge of the forest, when it is deep in the interior that requires more light. “It is a culture's very deeply held beliefs and tacit assumptions that act as barriers to fundamental change” (cited in Mintzberg et al, 1989). At Scouts Canada, ‘Scouts About’ an attempt at program reform has been described by some staff as “Scouts without uniforms” and the organization’s youth inclusion efforts, “window dressing not being taken seriously by those for whom it really matters”.

Sustainable renewal of what a youth serving agency *does* will only follow from a renewal of what it *is*. Perhaps Karl Weick put it best when he said, “A corporation doesn't have a culture, a corporation is a culture. That is why they're so horribly difficult to change” (as cited in Mintzberg et al, 1989). In a report completed by HeartWood on how to strengthen for a provincial youth employment service the author made this observation, “Real long term change can only take root in the Department by coming from within, from the commitment of staff to take a new approach to serving youth clients” (Lavers, 2004). Though the intent of the report was to increase the validity of the employment program for youth participants, the recommendations clearly point to changes required with-in the Department to embrace youth voice in a new way.

It is a fascinating challenge of leadership to consider the concept of creative destruction in a complex adaptive system. It is in interpretation of the *creative* part of the destruction,

that the real challenge lies. This is a time to look at what the organization might stop doing, in order to embrace new life. In the ecologically managed forest the choice to harvest a tree is based on its health and maturity, what is its future, is it thriving or declining, and what new life will its removal bring to the grove.

In my own process of leading HeartWood into the work of CYD, I found myself assessing which of our programs were associated with the soul of the organization, who in the organization had passion and skill to unleash, was anything blocking a compelling idea from moving forward, and what funding expectations or cost blocked renewal. One needs to be aware though that *creative destruction* is not an easy 'quick fix' for an agency, where if one gets rid of the 'right' program, all else will immediately flourish. There is work to *creative destruction* that requires tenacity and patience. At HeartWood it was only through an ongoing process of reflection on the 'whole system' that adjustments were made to structure, finances, and strategy.

The following are some practical ideas an organization might consider to stimulate *creative destruction*.

#### Nesting youth action teams

Youth action teams (YAT) combine a partnership approach and youth-driven philosophy towards youth engagement (NS Rural Strategy, 2002). YAT comprise youth and adults who have come together to take actions on things they care about in their communities. Although each team is unique, some common characteristics they share include: youth adult partnerships, unstructured meetings and activities, and a commitment to serve for the benefit of their communities and themselves. A group of young people trained, and supported by a caring adults can make a significant impact for an agency interested in back loop work. In her report to a youth serving government agency, Becky Lavers supports this notion: "The best way to gain curiosity in the 'Department's' services and programs is to have youth involvement at every level possible. Their first hand experience and knowledge is what will help the Department gain the greatest insight on how to address youth needs and wants" (2004).

#### Deficiets or Assets

The stimulants capable of advancing an organization into creative destruction generally lie dormant within the bowels of an organization for years. While the accumulated capital is sequestered for the growing maturing ecosystems, it also represents a gradual increase in the potential for other kinds of ecosystems and futures" (Panarchy, 2002). The greatest opportunities for change for most YSO lie within the heart and minds of its volunteers and youth constituents. In the 'constructionist leadership' theory writer Howard Gardner states, "Let the people and their truths lead and direct the process and outcomes" (1996).

Many consider the abundance of volunteers at Scout Canada over the age 55 to be an obstacle to reform. They are generally associated with a desire to keep things the way they have been in the past. If looked at as 'assets' however, one could consider if these

volunteers were honored for their roles as elders in the organization, responsible for modeling Baden Powell's original values and intent for the organization. If their potential is used effectively these committed leaders could be a valuable asset in anchoring the change process within the organization, and carrying it forward into their communities. It remains only for a gifted leader to create the environment and circumstances for these passions to surface.

### Type of Leadership

Unfortunately when one is on the edge of the creative destruction precipice, a common default reaction is to hire a technocrat leader to hold things together and to rein in the chaos: a move that more likely than not will begin nailing the coffin. Referring to this ill-conceived move Jim Collins relates in his book Good to Great, "the cancer of mediocrity sets in" (2001). The most important role of the CEO is to establish a pattern of actions that unleashes grassroots energy, and frames up and directs it towards contributions that build new possibilities. Mintzberg in his latest book Strategic Safari supports this idea stating: "... top managers can exercise critical influences on these activities by setting up the structural context..." (1998). Critical for creative destruction is an organizational leader who knows to embrace change with a forward focus, even when all seems lost during the fast pace and uncertainty.

### Re-visit values and vision

If the organization can suspend intellectual analysis of 'problems' associated with the creative destruction phase, time could be well spent re-visiting organizational values and vision. "Enduring great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. This is the magical combination of 'preserve the core and stimulate progress' (Collins, 2001). At HeartWood, it was a strong sense of organizational values that anchored us through times of chaos on the back loop journey. What really made the difference though was the influence of young staff holding us to task on these core values. Without analyzing at this time why this was, let me say that the frequency of young people demonstrating value-based leadership is refreshing.

### Money

Money, with all its accompanying fears and attractions, plays out as a significant factor in creative destruction. Uncertainty with financial security keeps most voluntary sector organizations from taking the risk of letting go of old and tired components of their operations. Even now, with significant government cutbacks and re-direction of social programs in the last half of the 90's, many agencies have lost what they once considered essential services. Though a number of programs and agencies never recover from such challenges, for yet others it becomes a fortuitous beginning of letting go, and renewal.

Securing new resources for an innovation or new program can provide the nudge an agency needs to let go of old and not entirely effective services. Certainly at HeartWood,

securing a foundation grant for a new program direction accelerated and eased our risk-taking through the creative destruction phase. Whatever the size of the grant, seeking funding to replace worn out services with innovative new directions is an effective method to ease the 'pain' of creative destruction.

### Collaborations

Government's current focus on partnerships and community-based decision-making has caused many private agencies to re-think their delivery services. An upside of this development is the opening of the landscape for collaborative ventures. There is a broad spectrum in forms of collaborations. If selected wisely, a collaboration could nudge a YSO into Creative Destruction, and assist it with navigation of the back loop. Ideally a collaboration contains an element of reciprocal learning between partners. A collaborating partner could guide as YSO venture down unfamiliar paths on the back loop journey.

It has been my experience that YSO's are not strong collaborators amongst themselves. This has been a deterrent to the sector. Collaborative opportunities are often more readily accessible than we first realize. I was privy to plans for a potential collaboration between Scouts Canada and Kids Help Phone (KHP) which I thought showed great promise. The initiative was discussed with great enthusiasm at a senior level in both organizations and the reciprocal benefits were obvious. When I later asked about the status of the collaborative idea, a senior Scout staff person shared this: "There are some pretty big issues on the table right now and that the collaboration was not seen as a big priority". Because of ongoing organizational difficulties, it was understandably difficult for the Scouts to see the benefits clearly at the time. The collaboration however, had the potential to be far more helpful than not in their organizational struggles.

Collaborations are also a way to download a program or service that though holding you back, might be attractive to another agency. Passing a program over to another agency, would accelerate the free of the financial and emotional energy tied up by the activity, breathing life into the programs new home and its original.

### Youth Control on Spending the Youth Dollar

If cursed with the indecision of dropping a marginal service, a YSO could empower a group of youth to make the decision. Entrusting a group with decisions on how to expend resources designated for service to the youth community is a surprisingly new thought.

Acting on this idea is a growing number of 'youth philanthropy' programs in North America. I personally got excited by this concept of young people entrusted with grant decisions, during two days spent recently with a number of youth and philanthropy groups in Ontario, Canada. These programs engage groups of young people in grant giving for youth-related services in the community. With training and adult guidance, there have been very positive results from a number of these programs affiliated with community foundations ([www.mcfyp.org](http://www.mcfyp.org) and [www.irvine.org](http://www.irvine.org)). A recent delegate at a

conference on youth philanthropy in Michigan - a hotbed of best practices - shared this: "It made me realize the impact that youth are having on the state of Michigan, the U.S. and the world at large."

The rigour and right intent I have witnessed when youth are entrusted with decision making on expending dollars to serve others, would be an inspiration to anyone. A YSO could adopt the principles of this concept with a focus on a particular client issue, or by committing a percentage of the agencies' annual budget. A public or private agency responsible for youth services in the community might also establish a small grants program for its constituents, with decisions on granting the funds made by a youth team.

### Let Some Giants Fall

In a recent trip to a rain forest in Costa Rica, I was fascinated by the large sunspots created where one of the giants of the forest had fallen. Conditions created by the fall encouraged a wide variety of pioneer plant species in an oasis of fresh green and light, sharply contrasting their dense and dark surroundings. YSO in the maturity phase need to take a hard look at what 'giants' of their programs or practices may be blocking fresh ideas.

With close to 100 years of programming traditions at Scouts Canada certain taboos develop; selling summer camp facilities may be one of these. In one provincial riding alone a camps operation loses the agency \$250,000 annually. There are opinions amongst senior staff members that the organization is so risk-adverse that it is not prepared to make the unpopular decision of closing at least some of these properties, even when it is clear the capital and operational finances could use the boost. As a summer camp advocate, I respect the decision from a personal value perspective, but avoiding the issue closes the possibility of alternate options emerging.

### Appreciative Inquiry Uncovers the Organizational Core

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)<sup>4</sup> is a process that can provide a rich source of valuable information and have very positive organizational impact. Conducting an appreciative inquiry process with youth and adults on the front lines of the organization, would be a singularly powerful means to begin a change process. A leading proponent and author of AI, David Cooperrider states, "It is recognized that inquiry and change are not truly separate moments, but are simultaneous" (1999). Conducting AI interviews throughout the organization could be the most effective means of determining what truly are an organization's core competencies and core business. The answers to these questions are

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<sup>4</sup> Appreciative Inquiry - - is an approach to organizational analysis and learning that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social organizational arrangements and processes. Appreciative Inquiry refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action which are designed to evolve the vision and will of a group, organization or society as a whole. (David Cooperrider)



essential to the task of stripping away the fat and getting down to the core of who and what constitutes the organization.

Margaret Wheatley confirms the importance of this step, “It would appear that managing in such systems [complex adaptive cycles] is about self-reference (understanding and maintaining commitment to core values or competencies); emergent pattern recognition; and openness to diversity and change, and new information” (Panarchy, 2002). “You do not know what you are going to hear until you ask the question” (Cooperider 1999).

#### Create A Learning Laboratory

A new future will never be generated out of head office alone. “It would be difficult to imagine much real innovation occurring in large businesses that had to rely on those changes being foreseen and preordained by prescient plans made by top management” (Mintzberg, et. al, 1989).

For YSO’s with a structure of regional, provincial, or branch offices there is an alternate approach to managing creative destruction. Within multi-branch organizations there may be at least one branch with volunteer or professional staff that innovate and engage beyond the status quo. Imagine for a moment, releasing this one branch of its ties to the established policy structure out of the head office. Inevitably some chaos would ensue, but the mother organization will have established a ‘laboratory’ for experimentation. “The interaction between established routines and novel situations is an important source of learning” (Westley, Panarchy, 2002).

This form of creative release with measured ongoing support could initiate a phase of creative destruction in the national agency , without immediately compromising the integrity of the larger body. Crisis and learning precipitated at the branch level would provide the larger body a ‘heads up’ on what to anticipate as the “inevitable change, extends to a broader level” (Mintzberg, et al, 1998). An ecological version of this situation occurs, “when conditions in a forest allow a local ignition to create a small ground fire that spreads first to the crown of a tree, then to a patch in the forest, and then to a whole stand of trees. Each step of that cascade moves the transformation to a larger and slower level” (Panarchy, 2001).

A related context at HeartWood was our first experience of being in service to a youth action team (a community-based group of youth and adult mentors wanting to contribute to their community) in a distant community. This work was instrumental in our adoption of CYD principles. After two years of watching, responding, and learning from an engaged team of youth and adults, we had valuable direction and experience to bring to bear on a larger change process at HeartWood. There was a reciprocal relationship of meaningful service between HeartWood and the youth action team, each providing guidance to the other. To arrive at the most valuable lessons required that we respond to the needs of the team - varying from training to liability questions - as best we could as these needs arose. Our responses were not based on any preconceived policies or plan of engagement; adaptability was the order of the day. The circumstances for us were new and the situation complex. We were on our ‘learning edge’ where learning is at its

richest. Our learning from that experience informed our method of engagement with many more community-based groups during the ensuing years.

### **Renewal - seeing the trees in the forest**

The move from the creative destruction phase to renewal is a time of high chaos and uncertainty. The excitement of changes afoot is sometimes tempered and sometimes fed, by an accompanying sense of fear. “This shift represents a time of explosive increase in uncertainty...conditions might arise for formal chaotic behavior” (Panarchy, 2001). Latent ideas, human resources, opportunities and capital surface as pieces of a puzzle, without a cover photo to provide a view of the final product. Though organizational potential in this phase seems high, the manager needs to keep all his senses about him to see it, pull it down, and direct it. Panarchy describes the phase further, “Soil processes minimize nutrient loss and reorganize nutrients so that they become available for the next phase of exploitation. The re-organization phase is essentially equivalent to one of innovation and restructuring in an industry or in a society...” (2001).

A certain mindset is required for YSO if they want to thrive in this fast-changing environment. Characteristics such as humility, adaptability, and willingness to connect with the community, will aid the agency to embrace the uncertainty, and to seek the 'learning edge' where an organization does its best work. Whether an individual or an organization, learning is heightened if there is some level of self-control over the risk and supportive peers nearby. Adventure educators would refer to this time of risk taking as 'stepping out of a comfort zone'. Robert Stacey in his work with complex adaptive systems refers to a time in an organization of high uncertainty and little agreement, as the 'zone of complexity' (1996). Stacey argues that traditional approaches to solving problems will not be very effective here, but it is a time of high creativity, innovation and breaking from the old ways of doing things. Attempts at including youth in organizational processes are illustrative of these conditions.

Amnesty International Canada has enjoyed good success with their youth inclusion effort, but not without plenty of doubts and uncertainty in the early stages. The episodic activism of youth with a lack of continuity was considered by many in Amnesty as a barrier to their involvement in the organization. Referring to a youth friendly planning meeting the Amnesty staff organizer shared this, “For an organization that is characterized by its ability to produce tons of paper and analytical planning frameworks, which is used to following the Robert’s Rules of Order at meetings, the idea of holding a meeting with just a one-line statement of objectives, not pre-set agenda or assigned meeting facilitator was seen as downright crazy” (Mah-Sen, 2003).

Ironically, though most managers expend much time and worry on carefully articulated strategic planning documents, most action taken by organizations are in response to emergent stimuli. If in tune with the living nature of its external and internal systems, a manager will continuously adjust the 'plan', re-directing resources in an effort to sustain action towards desired outcomes. Walter Kichel, a long time writer for Fortune Magazine, once reported from a study that “only ten percent of formulated strategies

actually gets formulated” (a figure Tom Peters called “wildly inflated”) (cited in Strategy Safari, 2001). The objective is to assure inputs (ideas, questions, or proposals) that emerge are aligned with the overall mission of the organization, and have the greatest possibility of being sustained.

At HeartWood we had our own learning from emergent activity in the early periods of our CYD work. Our first two years of community-based work with youth action teams produced mixed results. In one community we discovered too late, that the youth disagreed with our endorsement of an agency sponsor and volunteer mentors; in another, we initiated activity without having adult mentors in place, and soon regretted it; and in yet another, a sponsoring agency expected the youth to provide service only to their agency, much to the chagrin of the youth. Those youth action teams and others ended short of their potential. Those early days of adjusting, planning, and evaluating on the fly taught us much that is now guiding our work and strategies.

CYD and youth inclusion are ideal central organizing strategies for the renewal phase. Youth provide new perspectives and encourage creative problem solving, characteristics Holling associates with the renewal phase – a time to question assumptions and make room for innovation and new insights. In one study of youth-led evaluation projects from across the United States, participants reported that, “youths’ lack of cynicism and altruistic motivations were an inspiration to the adults around them”(Smith, 2001).

Based on an assessment of relevance to the broader community, CYD can serve as a screening mechanism to guide a managers’ actions in selecting from amongst many ideas and actions juggling about in the organization. When 54 members of youth action teams were asked why they engage, they cited core values of having fun, following passions, connecting with others, making a difference, and taking action (Dummond, Warner, Langlois, 2003). With CYD everyone wins, the agency with increased youth inclusion and community relevance, youth with experiences reflective of their reasons for participating, and the community with increased citizen involvement.

The following are some practical strategies to assist a manager of a YSO during the renewal phase.

### Embrace New Forms of Participation

Participation in many traditional YSO’s drops off dramatically at the age of 13 and/14 yrs. More often than not over the age 13 young people are avoiding structured programs offered by YSO’s. At the early stages of a youth inclusion initiative at Amnesty International young people were saying these things to the organization: “The message I get is that Amnesty is for adults only. All the materials, opportunities for involvement are all directed at adults.” “Only adult community groups can take on long term human rights work.” You want us to get involved but really, what you want us to do is to put up posters and do all sort of “joe jobs” (Mah-Sen, 2003). To Amnesty International’s credit they embraced the opportunity for new forms of participation by youth noting, “there was such a loss of potential – AI adults were not able to benefit from the enthusiasm and fresh

ideas from youth; and AI youth were not able to benefit from the insights and experience of the adults” (Mah-Sen, 2003).

With the push to experiment and shed the old in the renewal phase, it becomes increasingly difficult for YSO's to hold tight to old practices of adult controlled and directed programming. Accepting less than the usual structured approach for an agency, is more likely to resonate with young people and the community. Amnesty now speaks about the results of their new youth engagement practices in these terms “There has been a fundamental change in Amnesty culture that is being felt throughout the organization. The International movement is recognizing the uniqueness and value of our program.”

CYD fuels and facilitate the emergence of new forms of youth participation in an organization. Given the opportunity and support, young people and the community will conspire to present options for the organizations' engagement. It remains only for the YSO's to be adaptable, willing, and ready with encouragement, coaching, and whatever others forms of support the situation calls for.

#### YSO as a Community Activist

“An approach to CYD that has been particularly effective is the engagement of a group of young people taking action or contributing service towards a cause they consider unjust” (Cervone, 2002). There is a contagious energy connected to social action for meaningful causes that sends ripples. For YSO, facilitating action and service for a “cause” has the potential to stimulate renewal, and connect it more directly with the community. From her work on Panarchy, Frances Westley writes, "...to manage adaptively is a question of creating the right links, at the right time, around the right issues to create a responsive system"(Panarchy, 2002). Even for an organization as staid as Scouts Canada, adopting a national issue such as the environment, poverty, or child abuse could leverage their 'good guy' image and stimulate the moral imagination of society.

In these circumstances the function of a YSO is to be a ‘bridge builder’ between groups of young people and the systems within the community. The YSO may provide some legitimacy to the activities of youth; and in various circumstances function as a convenor mediator, and oftentimes, trainer. Whether a hot community issue, an inspired group of youth that have self-identified around a shared interest, or an adult(s) with a desire to get involved with youth in the community, each distinct circumstance presents its own qualities and opportunities to move towards engaging young people in community activity. To choose wisely is to consider: service and action initiatives with the potential to impact the community, the skills and resources of the organization, and the opportunity for their young constituents to shine as leaders of the cause.

#### YSO as Trainer & Convenor

The need for training on CYD in the youth and community development sectors is clear. In its first year of offering workshops on CYD in Nova Scotia, HeartWood had participation by over 90 different youth serving and youth involved agencies a large

number for a province with a population of under 1,000,000. Many organizations, though quite involved with young people or with interest in involving youth, have nowhere to turn for training. Organizations as diverse as Fire Departments, Food Banks, and Town Councils require support with their youth inclusion efforts. Interestingly, civil servants too are consistent participants in HeartWood's Professional Development workshops. Though the ultimate goal of many government youth programs is to empower those for whom they serve, they provide little 'training' for youth or adults on youth engagement.

The real loss of limited community training and support is the missed opportunity to broaden what we traditionally consider the 'youth sector'. Involving young people in meaningful ways in community associations and non-youth serving NGOs increases the impact of CYD exponentially. YSO need to act as ambassadors for youth engagement in *all sectors* of the community. YSO's could consider a role in filling this training and support void. Many established YSO's already offer their own particular form of pre-packaged training modules for *their* volunteers. The manager interested in organizational renewal should assess her agency's standard training service and assess it based on the competency to train, versus the ability to deliver only the agency's particular training modules. If the agency has the competency to train with good design and facilitation, this could be an invaluable link to the community.

YSO's could take this a step further by convening forums for shared learning in the youth sector on youth inclusion and CYD. Barbara Gray confirms the need and benefit of this type of collaborative effort, "We need institutional commitments to construct forums within and outside existing institutions to encourage experimentation's with collaborative solutions" (1989). The agency need not be an 'expert' on youth inclusion or CYD, it simply needs to take on the act of leadership it requires to bring the stakeholders around a shared table.

Responding to the real needs for training and support of citizens and agencies engaged with youth will assist the managers of YSO in assessing the strategic priorities in the otherwise chaotic renewal phase. There is no better way to deepen an agency's learning of a particular concept or philosophy about youth involvement than to teach it to others. There is also no better way to deepen the pride staff and volunteers feel for their YSO than the knowledge that they are serving well the broader community in their effort to deepen the engagement of young people.

### Leader as Listener

The role of the CEO becomes vital during the renewal phase. It becomes important that rather than resist the chaos, she excels in listening, watching, connecting and directing all of the various pieces toward a common end. Mintzberg's book *Strategy Safari* describes the role as, "...not to preconceive deliberate strategies, but to manage the process of strategic learning, where novel strategies can emerge" (1998). The renewal phase requires an organization to excel in reflective learning, pausing to look around, listen and act on immediate information, and respond to crisis as opportunity. "The constant disturbances that managers fight contain important creative opportunities which can be

harnessed to produce learning that transcends established ways of strategic thinking” (Mintzberg, **1989???date**).

To unearth opportunities for innovation and change in a YSO it is important for the CEO to keep ‘ear to the ground’. She will need to maintain a good source of personal data to assist in determining the receptivity to change of various pockets (areas) within the organization. “Because capabilities are cross-functional, the change process [associated with building them] can't be left to middle managers. It requires the hands-on guidance of the CEO and the active involvement of top line managers” (Stalk, cited in Strategy Safari 1992).

If the CEO listens well and empowers her staff - characteristics author Robert Greenleaf associates with being a servant leader - she will unearth a wealth of opportunities backed with passion and determination. With the vision, and knowledge of the organization's core competencies in hand, the primary job of the CEO becomes to listen and coach.

#### Leveraging the broad outcomes of CYD

During the renewal phase many ideas and passions may surface that the manager of a YSO may not normally give a second thought. However, the potential of uncovering non-traditional sources of funding, and involvement in research partnerships to uncover new understanding, may be the encouragement necessary to give some well deserving ideas and initiatives a second glance.

A recent McMaster University study of a YMCA (YM) child-care program clearly demonstrated the value of recreation programming to the community on the basis of financial and social impacts for low income families (Brown, 2000). The study and a dissemination strategy by the YM to communicate the results allowed the Hamilton YM to expand the child-care service by attracting additional public and private funding from new sources. Scott Haldane (then CEO of the Hamilton YM) reported, “It is evident that a YMCA case for kids can be significantly strengthened through academic research. Measurable outcomes open the door for philanthropic support of YMCA programs and services for children at risk” (1999).

There are two significant learnings to be drawn from the YM example related to how we resource CYD. The YM attracted private and public funding that would not have traditionally been directed to early childhood care. With research in hand, they ‘crossed over’ from traditional sources of funds for child care programming, to new sources for social programming for families. With the promise of CYD work generating outcomes related to health, employment, education, economic development, recreation, and justice, a similar funding strategy could be instituted for CYD activity.

The other significant learning from the Y study is the importance for the youth sector to support and encourage research to measure impacts of youth involvement on agencies and community. The YM made the case that recreation programming in a child-care program produces positive impacts on families’ social and economic circumstances.

Unfortunately the case for CYD has not yet been convincingly made. A literature review by the Centre of Excellence on Youth Engagement summarized the gap, “ while we know a considerable amount about the impact of youth engagement on the youth themselves, there is relatively little information on how youth engagement affects things on a systems level” (Pancer 2001). In partnerships with academic institutions YSO need to pick up the research cause to broaden the dialogue on youth engagement.

### Be Bold and Public With a New Vision

The rich history and traditions of organizations such as the Scouts, Girl Guides, and the Y's, if skillfully framed could be a source of new vision and possibilities for the organizations. In his book "Leading Minds", Howard Gardner states, “The innovative leader takes a story that has been latent in the population or among the members of his or her chosen domain, and brings new attention or a fresh twist to that story”. These mature organizations are in the enviable position of being capable of surprising everyone. If communicated simply and with passion, a brave new vision backed by bold actions may attract valuable new sources of human and financial resources to the organization. Imagine if the Scouts with their attempt to re-ignite their spirit and update their image, had organized a large group of Scouts to stage a peaceful sit-in at the Quebec City FTAA talks in solidarity with their brother organizations in developing countries around the world. Most would dismiss the idea as radical and risky. However, in the current state of decline at the Scout organization, the greater risk is to do nothing radical at all. Carefully framed and managed, a public action could deliver a clear message that the organization will stand up and get involved in support of a cause for just society. Focusing on what ‘could be’ versus ‘what is’ or ‘is not’, would begin the process of projecting a new future.

One of our first steps in HeartWood's transition to CYD and youth inclusion, was to write and share a program concept paper with a private foundation to solicit its interest. As the author of that paper, I found that simply getting to the writing stage involved a great deal of internalizing. Having founded and then developed HeartWood over a ten year period I was tired. But once the new possibilities were down on paper and circulated, the vision had a life of its own. Four years after those first steps, HeartWood was in a very new place. A new approach had attracted a rich, diverse, and much broader array of human and financial resources than we had previously enjoyed. People often share with us that a large part of their attraction to HeartWood is the energy with which the vision is communicated, not only by myself as Executive Director, but by all the primary staff and volunteers who are an integral part of carrying the vision forward.

A compelling vision communicated through action can move an organization through the renewal phase with a new source of energy and promise. Decisions that might otherwise seem difficult, complex, or too risky become manageable and life giving.

### **Assessing opportunities for community youth development *a decision making tool for the renewal phase***

The newly released nutrients, budding trees, and abundant plant life of the renewal phase makes knowing which plant, which idea, or which approach to embrace particularly difficult. Conditions common to CYD are also common in the renewal phase – many ideas and opportunities, high chaos, many stimuli. The community is a wide open landscape with a plethora of possibilities to involve youth. But how does a YSO decide which way to turn, where to invest energy, which need is most important, which community service will make a difference? Why do certain initiatives to give youth a voice in a community or agency succeed and others fail?

A form of decision-making is required which helps make sense in the complex environment of CYD. Managers are faced with decisions on committing resources, based on many complementary and competing variables, and constant emergence. At HeartWood our variable success in communities caused us to ask ourselves the question, "What indicators at the outset of a CYD initiative lead to a higher probability of sustainability?" We created the simple tool in (figure #2) based on our answers to that question.

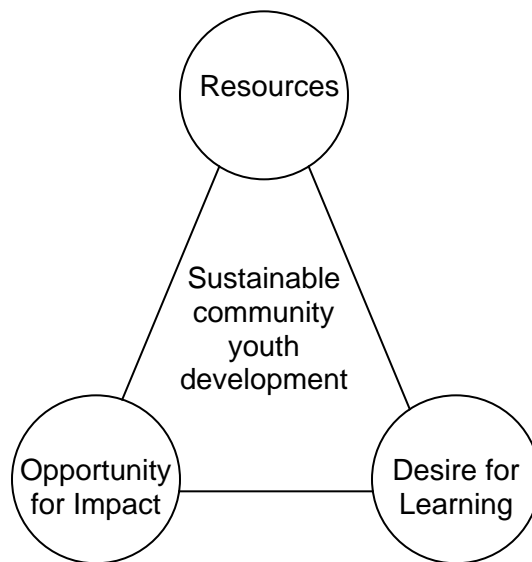


Figure #2. A tool for decision making on opportunities for community youth development initiatives.

The tool reminds us to consider key environmental factors when assessing the sustainability potential of community-based youth activity. The tool identifies three environmental factors that require the manager's assessment: source of energy, strength of intent, and resources. The objective of the assessment is to determine the degree of impact each may have on sustaining or interrupting CYD activity. The tool's three-point axis can be compared to a wheelbarrow. On my own aging wheelbarrow rusting supports have compromised its stability, causing me more than once to topple my load. Though compromised, the wheelbarrow still works, but not well. Until I reclaim three solid points of support I will continue to pick up and re-start. One axis may dominate and serve 'well enough' to keep activity moving. However at those inevitable times of system overload, a



solid platform permits time for rest and reflection. Then, with resources gathered and a renewed sense of direction, the leader can again move ahead. Likewise, CYD initiatives can move ahead in the community without a strong showing at all three axis, but much energy will be consumed and sustainability compromised. In our own jurisdiction the constant start up and closures of youth centres are a case in point.

#### **a) A sustainable source of energy**

As earlier discussed in this article, the successful manager of a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) watches for ways to “support the natural energy of the system rather than to fight against it” (Zimmerman, Lindberg, Plsek, 1998). The same is true of the manager of CYD since a community can be considered a CAS. I have enjoyed years of presiding over group camp fires, and have come to know the simple but enjoyable task of how and when to add a new log, what intervention may slow the flame, and what would fuel it. I have learned to read the flames and work with what the fire gives me. Equally, the manager of a CYD initiative must read the flames of intent, passion, and inertia in the community or agency concerned. Besides a YSO, a CYD initiative requires an ‘energy source’ that may include a supportive adult, a group of youth, a community leader, a hot community issue, etc.

Recently in my hometown of Lunenburg, a Canadian Heritage Church was burnt to the ground by what appeared to be an act of arson. Youth in the town were blamed for the fire, though the culprit has yet to be found. Taking advantage of the media and community attention on the fire and young people, HeartWood orchestrated a community peace vigil. Young people and supportive adults marched to the church in a sign of solidarity with the broader community as they grieved for the loss of the church. Aided by coverage of the vigil on the evening news and in local papers, the respect for young people in the community advanced beyond where it had been over the last number of years. Prompted by the fire and vigil, within a four-month period the town council hosted a successful youth forum, confirmed plans for a skate park, and is in the process of forming a youth town council. Communication between community decision-makers and youth have improved. By leveraging the natural energy that emerged in the community, HeartWood was able with a relatively small amount of effort, to generate a great deal of activity and learning in the community about youth engagement.

This axis of the tool is perhaps the most important to have in place before you act on about the other two – decision makers, and resources. I have witnessed an exceptional group of young people with great energy and motivation change a school environment. Though a powerful change unit, I think this group’s success hinged on having the school principal open to their ideas, and the resources for training for the youth and a supportive adults. But without the inspiration of the young change-makers as the initial ‘energy source’, nothing would have changed.

In speaking about why the popular ‘Youth Build’ program in the United States was able to expand, senior staff claim it was because the participants were “unbelievably passionate about how the YouthBuild experience has transformed their lives,” and were

able to ignite the support among... legislators (Schoor, 1998). An energy source - with the resilience to withstand the inevitable challenges along the way - needs to be identified above all else. When money is available, or a single minded leader takes control, all too often community development initiatives push forward without a community ambassador committed to the long term vision of the initiative. These ideas more often than not prematurely die out.

### **b) Strength of intent of decision makers**

CYD initiatives have their greatest impact on all concerned when the 'community or agency' in which the initiative is placed is prepared to adapt in response to the actions and ideas of the youth and adults involved. A community or an agency's *Strength of Intent* provides an indication of the level of challenge one might face to accomplish meaningful youth inclusion in that system. With meaningful youth involvement comes inevitable change. Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. of the University of Chicago articulated that, "Those who would spread interventions of 'true significance' must be prepared to undertake or make room for a 'disruptive', and fundamental transformation in the host organization or system".

With the many new ideas and possibilities that surface during the renewal phase, there is great value in assessing the level of conviction of key decision makers. The level of conviction can determine the potential for innovation, and problem solving as a new initiative takes its natural course through an organization. The measure can be determined in any number of ways including a subjective determination based on conversations, newspaper articles, first-hand experience in the system, etc. But perhaps most importantly the manager should look for an indication of strong support from key decision-makers in the community, or agency.

The involvement of primary decision-makers is key to removing barriers to innovative actions that have the potential for positive community impacts. In the case of CYD the decision maker might be a school principal, town mayor, or director of a department championing policy changes.

### **Resources:**

When considering what resources might be available to a CYD initiative, the manager should consider both the internal and external environment. Resources may consist of cash, skills, physical assets, and passion. Whatever the resource needs, it is important to be clear about what they are, and when they are needed. John McKnight of Northwestern University picks up on the idea of a communities diversity of resources (assets). McKnight and associates promote the recognition of community assets (social, physical, and economic) that exist in the associational life (community associations as opposed to institutions) of a community (Kretzman, McKnight, 1993). Communities that have adopted an assets-based approach to their development are on the right path toward bringing young people into the heart of community building activity. These will be the communities where CYD will flourish.

The importance of having financial resources available to initiate community development activity initiatives is over-emphasized. Though important, financial resources is only *one* element of the equation. Many are the programs and initiatives that were grand while the money lasted, but fell off sharply and short of expectations once the funding period ended. All too often I've observed over-resourced initiatives complaining that they need more money, all the while remaining blinded to the assets of the citizenry. I've also observed great ideas lie dormant in organizations as managers passively waited for the day when the money miraculously appears. A careful look at 'what is' rather than 'what is not' can often uncover ample resources within grasp of an organization adequate to initiate an activity. Once the 'snow ball is rolling down the hill' it has been my experience that a good idea may well attract broader attention, and additional resources. Waiting for the money is a convenient excuse for inactivity.

If Scouts Canada or other similar organizations were to encourage their adult and youth members to articulate their own, and their communities' assets, it would immediately surface new resources for CYD, and build new bridges to the community. A community would look favorably upon most any agency that leads through modeling meaningful youth involvement. What is more, if any traditional YSO were to act on a bold vision of youth inclusion in their organization and the community, it could attract new channels of private and public funding.

An agency that survives on grants with little discretionary resources faces greater challenges in accommodating the lateral movement necessary for back loop activity. It is important to find at least some level of discretionary funds within the operational budget and/or from outside sources and then to leverage. To pickup on opportunities and ideas that surface during the renewal phase, the Executive Director requires a certain level of flexibility in applying organizational resources. No matter what the amount, if discretionary funds are invested in activity that 'feeds' the agency's learning edge, the organization and the community will benefit from the results.

Though not grant-dependent for its early years, HeartWood was limited in its programming options by revenue tied to contract work. Nine years into our operation we received our first discretionary grant for \$24,000. This was a chance for the organization to be proactive in designing a program in a very new way - in our own way. We initiated our first CYD program for youth action teams in four communities. That initial \$24,000 opened a door that gave us room to experiment and learn. The youth action team program has since grown to be an extensive leading edge program working with over 20 communities and many new sponsors. Also as a result of the program, HeartWood has attracted a number of new contracts and grants that have been consistent with the principles of CYD.

## **Notes For The Manager**

Following are some of the key points for a manager of a YSO to consider as they experience the “back loop”.

### Cultivate a culture of humility and service

A mature YSO must learn humility and openness in their work if they are to excel in the changing youth sector. Letting go of what is no longer working to make room for what will, is a process requiring trust and risk. A team culture that encourages open discussion, innovation, and risk, establishes the conditions to develop a resilient organization. I have also experienced these as the conditions into which young people can integrate well and contribute valuably.

The eco-cycle model helps us see that change is inevitable. The managers commonly struggle to maintain balance by resisting change; it is in ‘change’ that ‘balance’ (resilience) can be found. What an organization is today is not what it will be tomorrow.

### Give responsible decision-making roles to youth within the organization

The involvement of youth in the organization will keep the mature organization from becoming so rigid that it becomes irrelevant and ‘crashes’. Youth offer new insights and refreshing energy in periods of chaos and uncertainty.

A YSO that has had first-hand experience including young people in their organization can build on that experience to service communities and other agencies searching for their own answers on youth inclusion.

### Embrace the principles of community youth development

When a community calls on a young person for leadership, there is a ripple of energy that stirs from deep in the soul of the young person and the community. YSO’s concerned with remaining vital to their youth population and society are positioning themselves as a bridge - at times a facilitator, conveyer, and/or mediator - between youth and their communities. Young people bring forward a great deal of differences in approaches and priorities to community development.

### Be action-oriented

In the highly charged circumstance of the renewal phase and a framework of CYD, the words of Karl Weick are helpful: “How do I know what to do until I see what I’ve done?” Action agitates and stimulates. Empowering change for youth, the agency, and the community occurs from taking meaningful action in service to the community. Stated simply here by a youth professional, “CYD has re-kindled my spirit” (Curran, Hughes, 2002).

### Facilitate change in policy structures

Though youth inclusion practices and CYD has made some impressive headway, we cannot afford to lose sight of the importance of facilitating change in youth-serving government agencies and their policy structures. Karen Pitman notes, this will be a challenge, "...the idea that youth participation is critical to community change has not been firmly embraced. Without constant vigilance, youth participation will be promoted as a community program rather than a community principle" (Pitman, 2000). The problem is underlined well by Hughes and Curran, "In general our youth-serving systems tend to be based on a deficit-driven model that is not equipped to create space for healthy development and relationships". It will require a concerted effort by the youth sector to guide government through a paradigm to more youth-inclusive practices and CYD philosophies.

In an extensive review of successful community-based YSO'S, Milbrey McLaughlin states, "Effective community-based youth organizations provide introductions to community leaders, tips on jobs, meetings with local business people, and contacts in policy and service systems". Popular youth advocate Rakesh Rajani adds, "In order to have a wider and more sustainable impact, the promotion of young people's participation needs to move away from ad hoc, activity-based approaches and become mainstreamed in the central aspects of social structures, institutions and processes" (cited in IYF's What Works, 2002).

## **Summary**

The role of the YSO has long been considered an important element of community life. Their role in helping to prepare young people for healthy futures has been relied on to complement the work of schools and family life. Though the youth sector is most often associated with young people considered 'at-risk', the reality is very different, with the sector serving an extensive array of programs for young people from all walks of life. YSO however, are experiencing significant challenges. From many corners there are calls to have young people more involved in community process and in the agencies providing youth services.

The eco-cycle has provided us with a theoretical framework for consideration of how an established agency might step out of its comfort zone and begin a process of renewal. This article has applied the eco-cycle metaphor to describe cycles in an organization's life that indicate times of destruction, chaos, vulnerability, adaptability, and building. Management interventions have been suggested that could be applied at different points of the eco-cycle in an effort to move an agency towards a sustainable and resilient future.

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