

## **Young People in Decision-Making**

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### **Abstract**

Young people in decision-making are about:

- social justice
- recognising and building capacity
- building connections between young people and their communities.

The Foundation for Young Australians is engaging young people in meaningful decision-making within its organisation and, through its grant making activities, is facilitating the growth of young people in leadership and decision-making roles within their community.

In this presentation, Matthew Eckford, Director of The Foundation for Young Australians, will explore the challenges and issues for young people in decision-making roles and the impact these roles have in assisting community connectedness. He will also look at what organisations wanting to engage with young people can do to make this a successful experience for all involved.

As a case study, he will use the experiences of The Foundation for Young Australians, as the organisation developed a structure where young people are the decision-makers on approximately \$3 million of grant funding per annum.

### **Introduction**

There are many reasons to involve young people in organisational decision-making. I would like to cover this issue from a number of perspectives:

- why young people should be decision-makers
- what young people want from their decision-making roles
- how The Foundation for Young Australians works with young people
- my experiences as a young person in decision-making roles.

### **Why young people should be decision-making**

It is not just important to be clear about the motivation for including young people in decision-making roles, it is important to get this clear before an organisation embarks on a strategy for involving young people.

The Foundation for Young Australians puts forward several reasons why an organisation might want to involve young people in decision-making roles. The following points are adapted from *Youth on Board*, a handbook that a partnership of philanthropic foundations, including young Australians, published last year. It is designed to assist organisations wanting to involve young people in decision-making.

### ***Diversity***

Even though they may not have years of formal experience, young people offer intelligence, creative thinking, and a valuable outlook on the world that is seldom introduced into the governance of organisations. While age diversity might not show up on a typical diversity chart, it is a critical element for boards that want to embrace many voices and perspectives.

But it is important to remember that there is no ‘stock’ young person. Our opinions and ideas are as varied as those of any other group. Age is only one shaping force in our lives. Like anyone, young people’s outlooks are deeply affected by our personal experiences; our racial, economic, religious, and sexual identities; and our individual personalities.

### ***Community***

Involving young people in decision-making and program development can model, and make possible, young people’s broader right to full citizenship and participation in Australian life. Active and productive youth participation can challenge negative stereotypes of young people that are otherwise perpetuated in the community.

### ***Bottom line***

Quite simply, young people are uniquely qualified to say what works for young people. By relying on young decision-makers to provide personal insights, talking with friends, and organising youth focus groups, organisations can save time and money by catching decisions that might not work well with young people before they are enacted and fail.

### ***Capacity building***

Being a leader can change the life of a young person. It is through learning to question, to express views and have opinions taken seriously that many young people develop skills, build competencies, acquire confidence and form aspirations. For many young people, a leadership role will be the first time that their ideas have been instrumental in real decision-making.

In addition to fostering confidence, participating as a leader can introduce young people to a range of other skills — public speaking, budgeting, leading projects and committees, and networking to name a few. By creating visible youth decision-making positions, you can enhance the self-esteem of young people in your organisation and throughout your community. It bolsters all young people’s self-confidence to see their peers being taken

seriously, and having young leaders is an important part of generating a positive reputation for your organisation or initiative.

### ***Long-term growth***

Educating young people about the ideals of the not for profit sector and community service can plant the seeds of social responsibility. Young people, in turn, can provide a new generation of leadership. Some organisations realise that everyone on staff and in decision-making positions is getting older. Adding young people to the governance of an ageing organisation can usher in a new generation of leadership.

### ***Organisational culture***

Young people can enliven the atmosphere of your organisation. Young people bring energy and enthusiasm to their work. I certainly believe that work and fun are not mutually exclusive. In addition, most organisations incorporate more interactive work processes when they involve young people. Techniques like small group discussions or brainstorming encourage teamwork and foster better communication by giving people a chance to be heard. Everyone, regardless of age, is at their best and brightest when they are comfortable expressing themselves.

### ***Community outreach***

Young people bring an entirely new community of contacts to your organisation. If young people are out front and vocal about your committee or organisation, other young people will be drawn to find out what you are doing. Young people are able to plug into the world of their peers in ways that adults, as 'outsiders', simply cannot. Keep in mind that word-of-mouth advertising is extremely effective among young people. By adding young people to your decision-making body, you are expanding your circle of clients, constituents, or consumers, and adding to their understanding of your group.

### ***Integrity***

It is important for any organisation to involve its constituents. It would not make sense for COTA, the Council on the Ageing, to be run exclusively by people under 50, neither does it make sense for organisations that support youth empowerment to be run exclusively by adults.

### ***Rights***

The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory, endorses the right of young people to participate as fully as possible in their society. It states "[Countries] shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due

weight in accordance with the maturity of the child.” (Article 12). Providing opportunities for young people supports the individual’s right to participate in decisions that affect them.

### **What young people want from decision-making**

So, if we accept that there are at least nine reasons why young people in decision-making are important, what is it that young people want from their decision-making roles?

Research commissioned by The Foundation for Young Australians — Sharing a New Story — looks at this issue. Through the voices of young people it identifies three key elements that young people see as important. These are meaning, control and connectedness.

#### ***Meaning***

This is about recognising young people as co-creators of their communities and meaningful engagement. It is not about participation for participation’s sake.

#### ***Control***

This is about providing the resources, structures and skills for young people to properly undertake the task they have. It is also about guarding against treating young people as showpieces — without them having a real say in the decision-making process.

#### ***Connectedness***

This about working with others, developing relationships and having access to resources.

### **How The Foundation for Young Australians works with young people**

As an organisation that works in partnership with young people, the Foundation has young people at the centre of our decision-making processes — both in the governance of the organisation and in our day-to-day work.

This was started in 2002 and we have been taking bigger and more meaningful steps since then.

Our first step in 2002 was to appoint young people as the majority decision-makers for \$800,000 of our grants and to support them with the training and resources to undertake this task. We also appointed a number of young people to our board and to some other key governance committees within the organisation.

The evaluation of this ‘regeneration’ of our grant-making showed that there were many different perspectives on the experience, with universal agreement from the ‘Youth Grant Makers’ that they had benefited personally from the experience, that they had made a positive

impact on the Foundation's grant-making, that they were satisfied with their involvement and believed they had added capacity and value to the achievements of the Foundation.

It was a good result and one that led to the extension of the role of young people throughout the organisation. Young people are now at least 50 per cent of the members of all our grant-making committees, making the decisions on approximately \$3 million worth of grant investments each year, and there are six young people on the 13-member board.

Of course, working in partnership with young people is about much more than decision-making. We aim to involve young people at many levels including requiring grant partners to demonstrate youth participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of their initiatives, creating grants and processes that are 'youth friendly' and supporting leadership development among our grant partners.

### **My experiences as a young decision-maker**

I have been fortunate enough over a number of years to have had opportunities to be a young person in a decision-making role. A large part of that has been with my involvement in the business sector — starting my own business, my involvement in a medium-sized family business and now junior partner in a service industry business. I would like to share my experiences in the community sector a little more, particularly with young people and youth organisations.

Due to launching my first business in 2001 at the age of 21, I first began travelling and speaking on the topic of 'young people in rural and regional Australia' to the Queensland Government, rural and regional companies and corporations, industry groups, associations and panels. I also contributed several reports and articles to various rural and regional newspapers and association yearbooks, and was regularly interviewed by local radio on issues surrounding young people in the bush.

As we move into the 21st century, the topic of young people in rural and regional Australia continues to be debated. Government organisations, various associations and groups realise the future of rural and regional Australia rests in the hands of youth, and with the constant rise of topics, issues and concerns it is a scary thought. Young people today are involved in such things as succession planning, employment, education, political influence and most importantly developing strategies to continue, maintain and grow our rural and regional communities.

From this work, I was involved with the 2003 National Youth Roundtable and presented a report to the federal government on rural traineeships and apprenticeships. Rather than emphasising the interesting, challenging, outdoor, being your own boss occupation

advantages, the report focussed on promoting financially rewarding and secure career opportunities. In doing so, the report aimed to attract young Australians with business focus, new ideas and strategies, financial and economic skills, who would normally consider a career in urban Australia as being more rewarding.

I then became involved in The Foundation for Young Australians, first as a Youth Grant Maker — assessing and deciding on grant applications from young people and youth organisations to implement a range of youth and community initiatives. Over a year ago I joined the board of directors of the Foundation to oversee the direction, strategy and operation of the Foundation's work. And just recently I joined the Foundation's Investment Committee to oversee the investment of the Foundation's corpus that provides the funding for the grants and what's required for the Foundation to operate.

On a final and more personal level, I recently had my first literary work published. It is titled *A Teenager's Guide to Parents*. While you can walk into any book store and find shelves upon shelves of books on how to understand and handle the 'woes of teens', rarely do you see a book that explores the behaviours of a parent written without using heavy psychological language and weighty case studies.

*A Teenager's Guide to Parents* grew from interviews I conducted with parents from various backgrounds, cultures and environments. I had not planned a series of questions; what started as an informal attempt to get parents to talk about their feelings towards guiding their teenagers triggered in them an overwhelming eagerness to express themselves.

The idea of turning these interviews into a guide occurred to me when I thought of the demand there must be for a book that accurately explained why parents say and do the things they do.

What makes this book special is that it is a guide from a young person for other young people. Furthermore, it is different from many other books about teenager–parent relationships as it reveals accurately the views of parents today, while giving real attention to the problems they face.

Teenagers may or may not make different choices after reading the book, but hopefully they will be more interested in finding out and understanding where their parents are coming from.

## **Conclusion**

As we are probably all aware, the voices of young people are increasingly being heard in our community in a wide variety of roles. Some of the time young people struggle to be heard but

they are, sometimes, invited to be part of the process. In an increasing number of cases, young people are creating their own decision-making roles.

However, as one young contributor to a recent research report said “so often, it is still about what adults do for young people — missing the point of working with and alongside young people”.

Research and our own experience tells us that when young people have meaningful decision-making roles we can build stronger communities. Following is a short checklist for any organisation that is considering how they can engage young people in decision-making roles.

1. Know why you want to involve young people
2. Assess your readiness
3. Determine your model for youth participation
4. Identify organisational barriers
5. Overcome attitudinal barriers — adults
6. Overcome attitudinal barriers — young people
7. Address legal issues
8. Recruit young people
9. Create a strong orientation process
10. Train young people for their roles
11. Conduct intergenerational trainings
12. Make meetings work
13. Develop a mentoring plan
14. Strengthen youth/adult relationships
15. Create support networks.

My experiences as a young decision-maker have built the passion I feel about the things young people are doing. I think there are so many amazing and talented young people that we have never heard of or are just around the corner from doing big things.

But young people do need to ask where we see ourselves in ten years' time? How serious are we about making positive changes and from where we each sit today is that both possible and viable? Will we be the major decision-makers of tomorrow and if so, do we have the desire to be part of the decision-making process today? We risk only efficiently managing what organisations and businesses have already established. We need to constantly reinvent ourselves with new ideas and concepts and take organisations and businesses in new directions.

We hear so often young people saying ‘Step aside and let us have a go’. We need to take on responsibility for the right and respect to demand this, as we may have little experience

outside the influence of the older generation on how to make decisions. It is not just about managing what has already been started or doing the old things better — it is about making new decisions in new directions.