

TEN WAYS

to make your organization Youth-Friendly



1 Check your expectations



Youth have to deal with stricter rules than most adults, whether this involves school, parents, or even the law—and this on top of the things we want to do. Make tasks and timelines for young volunteers realistic by recognizing these sometimes-unpredictable demands on our time. Don't overburden us, build in plenty of time for trial and error, and don't expect us to have bottomless stores of time and energy. We're not superheroes, but if you're reasonable in the projects youth undertake when entering your organization, we're definitely going to surprise you.

2 Use the buddy system



Entering a new environment can be confusing and isolating at any age. To ease the transition, provide young volunteers with an experienced "buddy" as a point person to welcome and introduce them to staff and office culture. And don't forget that some of the best mentors can be youth as well, or even long-time volunteers. Taking on more than one young person can make us feel like we have someone to share the experience with and help avoid the feeling being the token office youth.

3 Help us get places



It's pretty rare that we'll have access to a car whenever you need us, so it's important to ask yourself if your location is accessible by transit or bicycle. Consider subsidizing

transit passes and tickets or setting up work-from-home arrangements. Similarly, are you scheduling important meetings at times when youth might be obliged to be elsewhere (like school) or at locations that may exclude us (like bars)? It's easy to forget about these kinds of restrictions, but if you don't spend time working them out, it won't matter how great your program is—we'll have to miss out.

4 Include our parents



If including youth in your organization has been a challenge, adding our parents to the mix may seem like even more of an undertaking. However, youth with parental support are often better equipped to participate in volunteer efforts. A parent's example and encouragement can be decisive in a youth's involvement in the first place. Feel free to reach out to a young volunteer's parents—just remember that youth have our own ideas, so the conversation should always involve both generations.

5 Cut out the jargon



Always define acronyms and terms that might be obscure to any newcomers, since most youth respond to adults who are straightforward and plainspoken. Use stories and examples to clarify technical and conceptual points and, when working with documents, highlight the main ideas and clarify the content with graphics, tables, and illustrations—it makes it easier for everyone to follow.





6 Keep things moving



Youth like to see tangible results fairly quickly, as this validates us for getting involved and encourages us to keep at it. Start your meetings with icebreakers to ensure that everybody knows each other and feels comfortable asking for clarification. Try to maintain momentum throughout the day—inject some humour when it's appropriate and avoid unnecessary repetition of activities. To relieve tension and restlessness, schedule regular breaks and include recreational activities when possible. Most importantly, respect the timeframe we have agreed to: letting meetings run longer than planned is a sure sign to us that you're not taking our other time commitments very seriously.

7 Get flexible



Youth recognize that most work environments involve certain rules and structures—we get a lot of this at school and at home. But a vital part of being a young volunteer is exploring new social situations, testing attitudes, and renewing social and organizational practices. Surprise us by letting us surprise you! Let a volunteer work while listening to their MP3 player, or come to the office in their everyday clothes. Understand that social media play new roles in collaborative and innovative work; let us work together to come up with unconventional and creative ideas for producing results. Recognize the changing nature of work—from a “facetime” to a “flextime” model—and see how what may seem like casual presence in the office may in fact be the most efficient way of getting the job done.

8 If you feed them...



All that youthful energy has to come from somewhere. For long working days, provide us with some real sustenance other than coffee and danishes. If you usually eat lunch out of the office, either invite youth with you or contribute to the cost of their meals—fancy panini in office districts can really break the bank. Honoraria, per diems, and other forms of remuneration can help make it easier for us to devote our time to your work.

9 Don't be a control freak



Support is indispensable to youth, but don't be heavy-handed. Micromanagement can make anyone feel like they are considered untrustworthy or incapable. Give us room to breathe! Be respectful and provide the same information and support mechanisms for youth as you do for more senior employees. If you match this support with clear and realistic expectations, we'll tend to work things out just fine.

10 Celebrate!

Everyone likes to be flattered, and youth are no exception. Recognize our roles, validate our efforts, and reward our contributions to your organization. Small gifts, days off, or write-ups on your website can all make us feel like you're taking the work we do seriously. Sometimes it can be as simple as a heartfelt, direct thank you: you'll find the return on investment, like in engaging youth in the first place, to be huge.

If you prepare your workplace for us, you'll start reaping the rewards of meaningful youth infusion. Now that your organization has begun preparing to offer youth meaningful positions at the table, you should strategize how you'll use technology as a tool to reach us and meaningful relationships to engage us in the long term.



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