Attracting and Keeping Youth Volunteers

Creating a Governance Culture that Nurtures and Values Youth

**Rising Tide Co-operative Ltd. on behalf of
the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation and
the Regional Co-operative Development Centre**

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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support of youth participants in the Atlantic
Co-operative Youth Leadership Seminar program and camps, Carole Findlay,
and the many people who participated in our focus groups and our online and
telephone surveys. Your co-operation made this research possible.

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1. Introduction

The volunteer base in charitable and nonprofit organizations is aging.[1] According to the 2000 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 28% of Canadians aged 55 – 64 years volunteered, while 18% of those 65 years and over did some kind of volunteer work.[2] The median age of volunteers is well over 55, and numbers of volunteers are declining. Consequently, there is growing recognition on the part of volunteer organizations of the importance in attracting youth to revitalize their pool of volunteers.

Hence, these organizations would be wise in their planning for the future to consider strategies for encouraging more young people to join in implementing their programmes. Youth volunteers (i.e. volunteers between the ages of 15 and 30) have the potential to develop into leaders and to serve on nonprofit boards of directors where they can play an active role in shaping the future of the voluntary sector. Board candidates are usually chosen or encouraged to run from among an organization's

most active members. Therefore, getting more young people onto boards of directors depends on getting more youth involved in the life of the organization. However, there are many barriers to youth involvement that need to be overcome.

To address these barriers, we conducted a research project in Atlantic Canada between March and October 2004 to determine what charitable and nonprofit organizations could do to *create a governance culture that nurtures and values youth*. Our research team was a partnership between the Regional Co-operative Development Centre's Atlantic Co-operative Youth-Leadership Seminar program; the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation; and Rising Tide Co-operative Ltd.

More than 350 individuals, including youth between the ages of 16 and 30, and 40 organizations in Atlantic Canada were involved in the research. Participants were from a variety of organizations including the Canadian Cancer Society; the Canadian Red Cross; AIDS PEI (Prince Edward Island); local co-operatives and credit unions; environmental organizations; faith communities, women's organizations; the Atlantic Co-operative Youth Leadership seminars; Big Brothers Big Sisters; family resource centres; the Air Cadets; Girl Guides; Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada; provincial advisory councils on youth; student unions at universities; regional

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1 Information from website of *The New Economy Programme* (INE) of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. http://nre.concordia.ca/nre2.htm (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

2 Hall, M, L. McKeown and K. Roberts (2001), *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, Statistics Canada and Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 83p. www.givingandvolunteering.ca/pdf/n-2000-hr-ca.pdf (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

development associations; hospital volunteers; youth leadership associations; United Way; Canada World Youth; and youth health committees in schools. The project was funded through the Canada Volunteerism Initiative's Knowledge Development Centre at Imagine Canada.

We gathered information through telephone and e-mail interviews, a written survey, and 14 focus groups. The youth who participated in the research were all volunteers, either as part of their school activities or in community events and organizations. In most cases, they were not in leadership positions. We asked them about their successful volunteer experiences, what barriers to volunteering they had encountered, and how they thought these barriers could be overcome.

The representatives of nonprofit and charitable organizations who participated in our research were all grappling with how to design effective plans to attract youth and provide them with the skills to become effective leaders. We asked these representatives about their successes and failures in attracting youth volunteers and about what changes might be needed to increase youth involvement in their programs.

We also asked youth and representatives of organizations to identify organizations that did a good job in attracting youth volunteers. We used this information to select two organizations: the Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op, and the Women's Network of Prince Edward Island, as case studies. We hope that these case studies, and the lessons we learned from them, will help more organizations involve young people in leadership roles and become more accommodating to the needs of youth.

2. Methodology

We set out to be as inclusive as possible. As there were four provinces involved (Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador), each province was approached separately with consideration given to populations, languages, demographics, and current youth volunteer initiatives.

A Project Advisory Committee composed of youth from the Regional Co-operative Development Centre's (RCDC) Atlantic Co-operative Youth Leadership Seminar program was set up to provide input into the research methodology, the timelines, and the research questions.

We gathered information through focus groups, interviews, and a written survey.

Focus groups with an average of 10 participants each were held in 14 communities. We decided on focus group locations after consultation with various voluntary organizations and with RCDC's Youth Leadership Seminar program manager. We made contact with people in specific geographic areas who were working with youth, either formally or informally, to request a list of potential, focus group participants. The lists were then narrowed down with an eye to achieving diversity in gender, age, geographical region, and language. Some focus groups had gender balance, while others had more women. Ages ranged from 15 to 60, depending on whether they were focus groups conducted with youth specifically, or with leaders of organizations that were trying to attract young volunteers.

We conducted more than 30 telephone and e-mail interviews and completed 30 written surveys. We chose these research tools for areas where focus groups were not held and with young people who had participated in leadership seminars given throughout the co-operative sector. The questions were the same as those used in the focus groups.

3. Research Questions

The research questions used in the focus groups, the telephone and e-mail interviews, and the written survey, were designed in consultation with the Project Advisory Committee. The questions were tested, and revised after the first focus group, to ensure that the forthcoming data would reflect of the purpose of the study.

The research questions were:

For youth

- What obstacles have you encountered as a volunteer? What successes have you had as a volunteer?

- Could the obstacles you encountered been overcome by changes in the policies, by-laws, and/or governance structure of organizations?

- Are you aware of any organizations or community groups that do a good job of involving youth volunteers?

For organizations

- Has your organization tried to get youth involved as volunteers? Have you been successful? Describe your successes and failures.

- In your own organization or community group, what changes would be necessary to your policies, by-laws, and/or governance structure to allow you to involve youth volunteers in a meaningful way?

- Are you aware of any organizations or community groups that do a good job of involving youth volunteers?

4. Findings

4.1 Summary of Findings from Focus Groups, Interviews, and the Survey

Youth bring enthusiasm, talents, skills, and a fresh perspective to organizations with which they volunteer. Some organizations do an excellent job attracting and keeping young volunteers, but many do not.

The key findings from the focus groups, interviews and the written survey are:

1) Overall, the organizations that participated in the research were committed to change and recognized that meaningful youth involvement would require them to make changes to their governance structure and/or to how they conduct meetings.

2) Overall, organizations were aware that youth need to be truly integrated into nonprofit and charitable organizations, not just consulted or included sporadically.

3) The youth who participated in the research reported that an excellent way to attract youth volunteers is to invite youth to information sessions or make presentations to them and then follow up by contacting those who indicated an interest.

4) Youth said that to stay involved, they need to feel like equals and to be included as partners on committees, boards of directors, and in the organization in general.

5) Youth said they prefer a more informal structure but need well-defined roles and responsibilities.

One youth advised organizations to: *"Recognize our skills, our enthusiasm, and our diversity, and let us use them to accomplish the organization's goals."*

Another youth said: *"All we want in most cases is a 'thank you,' and some recognition that we have contributed and that you value what we did."*

6) Nonprofit and charitable organizations that want to involve youth as volunteers must be clear about what they require from volunteers (i.e. when, where, how much time).

4.2 The Case Studies

In interviews and at the focus groups, participants in this research project were asked to identify organizations that did a good job involving youth as volunteers. We contacted representatives of the organizations named by participants, and then interviewed staff or board members of these organizations, to determine if they would be suitable as case studies.

Two organizations were chosen: the Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op and the Women's Network of Prince Edward Island, both of which have successfully involved youth. The case studies are presented below, followed by lessons drawn from these case studies that can help organizations create a governance culture that nurtures and values youth.

Case Study 1: Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op

Founded in 1973, the Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op is the most successful co-operative in Atlantic Canada.[3] It has grown to a membership of more than 6,000 and is the largest single-branch co-operative retail store in the region. It has more than 220 employees and is governed by a volunteer board of directors. The 12-member board of directors is elected on a rotating basis; four new board members are elected each January at its annual general meeting to replace four out-going board members. Since the late 1990s, three of the seats on the board have been designated as staff seats. Youth are encouraged to participate, and there are many opportunities for them to do so.

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3 To learn more about Fredericton Direct Charge Co-operative, go to: www.frederictoncoop.nb.ca (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op supports the community in many ways. It raises funds for local charities, makes donations to youth groups, and awards scholarships.

"*We also recognize that for the co-operative to be successful, we need to ensure that our leadership — our board — is representative of the community at large and of our own membership,*" says the co-operative's general manager, Sheldon Palk.

The board tries to ensure that directors have a good mix of skills and that the board is representative of the co-operative's members. The nominating committee has taken steps to attract board nominees who can represent the young people and young families who are co-operative members.

"*We also want people who are interested and who have the time to give, so the board sets up an information table in the store to recruit nominees. We post signs and talk to people. Then, we invite them to an information session. They can see what it's all about,*" says Palk.

Ivan Corbett and Michelle Dougherty, two former board members, were recruited in this way. Both say it was a good experience.

Ivan Corbett had volunteered in other organizations but never with a co-operative. Then, when he was in his mid-20s, he recalls,

> "*I was in the store one day, and I stopped at the information table and felt the enthusiasm among the current directors…They made me want to learn more, so I went to the information session, and filled in an*

application form, and the nominating committee put my name forward. I was elected to a three-year term. I enjoyed every minute of it, even the long meetings where tough decisions had to be made…There were a couple of other board members in my age group. I would say we were considered to be equals, a part of the team."

Corbett says that he learned so much that, "*I would have let my name stand again [the by-laws allow two three-year terms] but I started a new job and it was very time consuming.*" In his new capacity as executive director of the New Brunswick Advisory Council on Youth, he says, "*I see every day the challenges and barriers youth face.*" Young people must learn to understand their roles as leaders and seek out mentors or champions who will nurture their involvement. Often, they struggle to balance volunteering with other commitments.

Corbett thinks that in addition to an active recruitment and nomination committee, and detailed information sessions, board member mentoring would be an excellent avenue to overcome a lot of these barriers.

"If you pair up a current and a new board member for about six months, the comfort level, and therefore the functionality of a new member, is greatly increased," he says. *"They [new board members] now have some one to call, to ask, even to sit beside. Some people, especially youth, never considered what they were doing — helping a neighbour, selling tickets at an event, collecting for a charity — as volunteering. It's a whole new concept to them and much more structured."*

When young people begin volunteering as members of a board of directors that has collective responsibility for the future of an organization they gain a very different perspective on the role of volunteers. They begin to work as a team and to focus on "*the big picture.*"

One day when Michelle Dougherty, an employee of Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op, was in her late 20s, she saw a sign in the staff room of the co-operative explaining about the co-operative's board and encouraging staff to sign up for an information session.

There are three staff seats on the board, designated as follows: one staff member at large; one staff member from the staff liaison committee; and one staff member representing the management group.

"Just like the members [of the co-op], we [as staff] have to attend the information session, be nominated by the committee, and stand for election by the more than 300 members who usually attend the AGM. There is always an election because the committee is mandated to nominate at least two more candidates than there are seats," Dougherty says.

"At least one of these, and often two, are young [people] because we have a big staff of 220 and many of them are under 30," she says. *"Every staff person I talked to who had been on the board said, 'Go ahead, it's a good experience.' So I jumped in with both feet, serving on committees and being secretary for three years. I learned so much about the co-op, and how boards and committees work. Management is very supportive. If I have to take a couple*

of hours off to attend a board meeting on a Wednesday night, it's not a problem."

Within the co-operative system in Atlantic Canada, Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op is a leader in bringing younger people into governance through a well-defined and organized process. General manager Sheldon Palk says,

"The regulations and by-laws, of course, set down the rules around the age of majority and the election process. We put all the other pieces in place to ensure that the candidates are diverse and representative of our stakeholders and members. It's worked well and it's going to work even better as we have created a new position — marketing and education manager."

Rob Boyle has been selected from the staff to fill the new position and is currently sitting on the board, so there will be good integration.

"I think we will see a lot more youth involvement in the co-op because as we educate people about what we are about, as we find out what they want as consumers, we will increase our membership," he says. "If we attract young families, there will be more and more young people exposed to the co-op and our governance model, and we hope they will become involved as leaders."

Case Study 2: Women's Network of Prince Edward Island

Accepting a challenge is not new for the Women's Network of Prince Edward Island.[4] Since 1996, it has been involved in many projects, such as one aimed at increasing women's involvement in municipal politics and provincial policy issues. It is also involved in issues that require perseverance and commitment, such as family law and legal aid, parental benefits, the provincial education system, and employment equity. So when the organization began work on the Youth Healthy Sexuality and Reproductive Health caucus, it was relentless in its efforts to have youth take a meaningful role in the project.

Project coordinator Kele Redmond says, "*It was very difficult at first to bring youth to the table — to determine how to relate to them.*" Youth organizations were represented on the caucus, but they were not represented by youth. The Women's Network of Prince Edward Island set out to change that.

"We went out and met them [youth]," Redmond says, "told them about our new mindset and how we were prioritizing youth. We changed how meetings were held — the time, the process. We made them fun and made sure the language was plain."

Redmond was responsible for developing orientation materials. Because she had been working with youth, she knew where to look for resources. She viewed orientation as an opportunity to plant the seeds that would blossom into committed volunteers.

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4 You can learn more about the Women's Network of Prince Edward Island at: www.wnpei.org (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

The project set a goal: youth would make up 25 percent of its 20-member caucus. At first, it was hard to maintain that percentage, she said. Youth members would leave for a variety of valid reasons (e.g., time, location, interest, school-work, recreational activities, etc.), and Redmond would have to recruit again and again.

"It would have been easy to let it go, to say there was no interest, but we targeted more youth, brought them in. It also would have been easy to say well, just set up a youth committee or appoint a 'youth advisor' and that will show we have youth involved," says Redmond. "It's a long process and we are still working at getting youth involved and keeping them active."

"*We learned as we went along*," she says. "*[We learned] things such as [the importance of] having a meeting space that is not formal and stuffy. We learned a boardroom intimidates youth, so we went to cottages, restaurants, or outdoors. We had everyone take turns sharing the leadership and activities, so the adults had to learn to play games, and the youth had to learn to take minutes*."

The organization had the attitude that everyone has skills and that everyone is a leader, but that not all leaders excel in the same areas. Some excel aca-demically, while others excel in the arts or in organizing community fundraisers. The caucus made room for all kinds of leaders.

The organization understood that the role of the adult leaders is very important in integrating youth into lead-ership. Adult leaders must constantly remind everyone

why the organization is spending time recruiting and mentoring youth, why it may have to make changes to how it operates in order to accommodate youth and make them feel welcome, and why developing young leaders is important to the future of the organization.

"We lost some good participants along the way and, in our case, they were mostly male," Redmond says. *"We looked at it and recognized that some of the reasons were about culture. Males don't like to do process [the social side]. They like activities and tasks, and often committees and caucuses are only about process."* As well, she says, *"We were trying for gender balance but the project itself, Healthy Sexuality and Reproductive Health, was not an easy topic for males. Youth will not speak up and say 'I'm not comfortable.' They just don't show up the next time. Eventually this was overcome when word of what we were doing got out and around and we were seen as genuinely welcoming youth."*

Redmond notes that the type of adults who are recruited to boards, caucuses, or committees that are moving toward the full integration of youth is important. These adults must be willing to be mentors to youth members, to coach them, and to be open to new ways of doing things.

One last thing Redmond added is that the young people she has met and worked with as volun–teers are passionate about the same things as their parents. Often, if they come from a household where volunteering is the norm they really want to participate.

What We Learned from the Case Studies

Integrating youth into an organization is a two-stage process:

1) The organization must encourage youth to participate in the organization, and must nurture and develop youth leaders.

2) The organization must work with these youth to identify what changes, if any, need to be made to its governance structure to enable youth to fulfill a meaningful role. This could include making changes to policies and by-laws that will ensure a commitment to youth participation, regardless of any changes in the adult leadership, or management of the organization. The organization may need to amend its by-laws and policies to allow members to vote and hold office at age 18. In some jurisdictions, legislation-governing societies, corporations, and co-operatives prevent youth under the age of 21 from serving on boards of directors. Lobbying may be required to change this legislation. The organization may also have to revise its governance structure to incorporate youth seats on the board or institute a youth caucus or committee.

Lessons learned from the case studies can help organizations in this two-stage process:

1) Serving on the board of a nonprofit or charitable organization isn't for everyone. Board members must be team players and must be able to respect a diversity of views.

2) A well-structured and informative recruitment process brings in good candidates. Having a young person involved in the nominating and recruitment committee can help to identify and attract other youth.

3) Remember that whether volunteers are young, old or middle-aged, they will be juggling more than their volunteer commitments. Make allowances.

4) Young board members will feel more comfortable if they are not the only youth involved. Try to recruit at least two young people to any committee or board.

5) If, as in the case of Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op, youth representatives are solicited from among the staff of the organization, they should still go through the process of being nominated and elected. This is so they feel that they have the same role, and responsibility, as any member of the board (i.e., that they have been elected by the members of the organization to lead and govern).

6) Choose meeting dates and times so you are not excluding participation. If you schedule meetings during school hours, youth will be unable to attend. Similarly, do not schedule meetings and activities at exam times. If youth participants have children, do not schedule lunch or supper committee/board meetings when it may be difficult for them to get babysitters. Consult with all board members to find a meeting time and date suitable to as many people as possible.

7) Youth are more comfortable in less formal settings. Evaluate how and where you hold your meetings. How could you make the setting and the meeting format more informal?

8) Young people do not always know where to find detailed material about an organization, (i.e., what the organization does and what role they can play in it). Prepare an information package on your organization and on its board and committees.

9) Build awareness in the community that your organization wants to include youth and is committed to integrating youth into its governance structures.

10) Assign adult board members to be mentors to younger board members. Mentors can play a big role in increasing the effectiveness of youth volunteers and improving their comfort level.

11) Educate the members of your organization about what a board is and what it does. Demystify the role of a director. Tell young people that serving on a board is a learning experience, and that the new skills they will learn are transferable to other aspects of life.

12) Hold an information session in advance of the annual meeting so that anyone who is thinking about volunteering can find out about board roles and responsibilities.

13) Invite interested youth to attend a board meeting once a year.

14) Becoming a team does not happen over night. It takes time and understanding. Start small. Celebrate your success in building a team that is rich in diversity. Remember: everyone wants to belong and to be liked. Be inclusive and work toward board unity, not divisiveness.

15) Be patient with each other, and value and recognize the contribution that each board member makes. Set a goal of two or three years for the new board to achieve a level of cohesiveness. Consider how the board as a whole can participate in team-building activities and exercises.

16) Be realistic about what is achievable. For example, although gender balance is ideal, it is not always possible. Set realistic goals for achieving gender balance on your board and establish policies to help you achieve these goals.

17) Recruit adults who are receptive to youth involvement, who are prepared to help mentor youth, and who are open to new ways of doing things.

18) Because the composition of any board changes over time, revisit your commitment to youth involvement regularly, and make sure that new board members understand why youth involvement is important to the organization.

19) Youth should be thoroughly integrated into the leadership of the organization. They should not be limited to serving on youth committees that may not receive the same level of support as a regular board committee.

20) Recruit youth where they are active. For example, in a community with an agricultural base, consider recruiting from among 4-H Club members.[5] Make presentations at youth events or write letters inviting youth to an information session about your organization.

21) Allow youth to determine their own level of participation.

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[5] 4-H in Canada had its beginnings in Roland, Manitoba in 1913 as a community-based organization dedicated to the growth and development of rural youth. 4-H is open to both boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 21 (varies in each province). 4-H focuses on developing well-rounded, responsible, and independent citizens. http://www.4-h-canada.ca/what_is_4-h.html (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

5. Conclusion

Organizations that want to attract youth as volunteers must allocate time and resources to the task. Older volunteers must be prepared to serve as mentors for youth and as the liaison between older volunteers and young people until young people have been truly integrated into the day-to-day working of the organization.

The three most important things that organizations can do to help retain youth volunteers are educate them about the organization, provide training for the tasks they are assigned, and mentor them.

This report contains suggestions that can help organizations involve youth volunteers, especially in leadership positions. However, every nonprofit or charitable organization is unique, and some may operate under municipal, provincial, or federal laws that prohibit youth participation in certain areas of the organization. Despite these limitations, we believe that organizations that are interested can use the findings of this research to involve youth in a meaningful way.

Notes

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