



## GUIDE | MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING YOUTH

This guide has been co-developed with youth leaders and representatives from youth-serving organizations to shine a light on the principles and practices that lead to meaningful youth engagement. By sharing these lessons learned, we hope this will help you to figure out your next steps forward to engage youth to work together for community change.

### USING THIS GUIDE WILL HELP YOU:

- To consider principles for meaningfully engaging youth
- Learn insights and best practices for youth engagement
- Understand different ways that youth can be engaged in community change
- Think about how to overcome common challenges

### About Communities Building Youth Futures

Communities Building Youth Futures is a five-year strategy to work with up to 13 communities across Canada to develop Collective Impact and system-wide solutions for a minimum of 5,000 youth as they build and act upon plans for their future. This strategy is funded by the Government of Canada through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy and delivered by Tamarack Institute.

### Acknowledgements

Tamarack thanks the youth and service providers across Canada who shared their stories, experiences and expertise.

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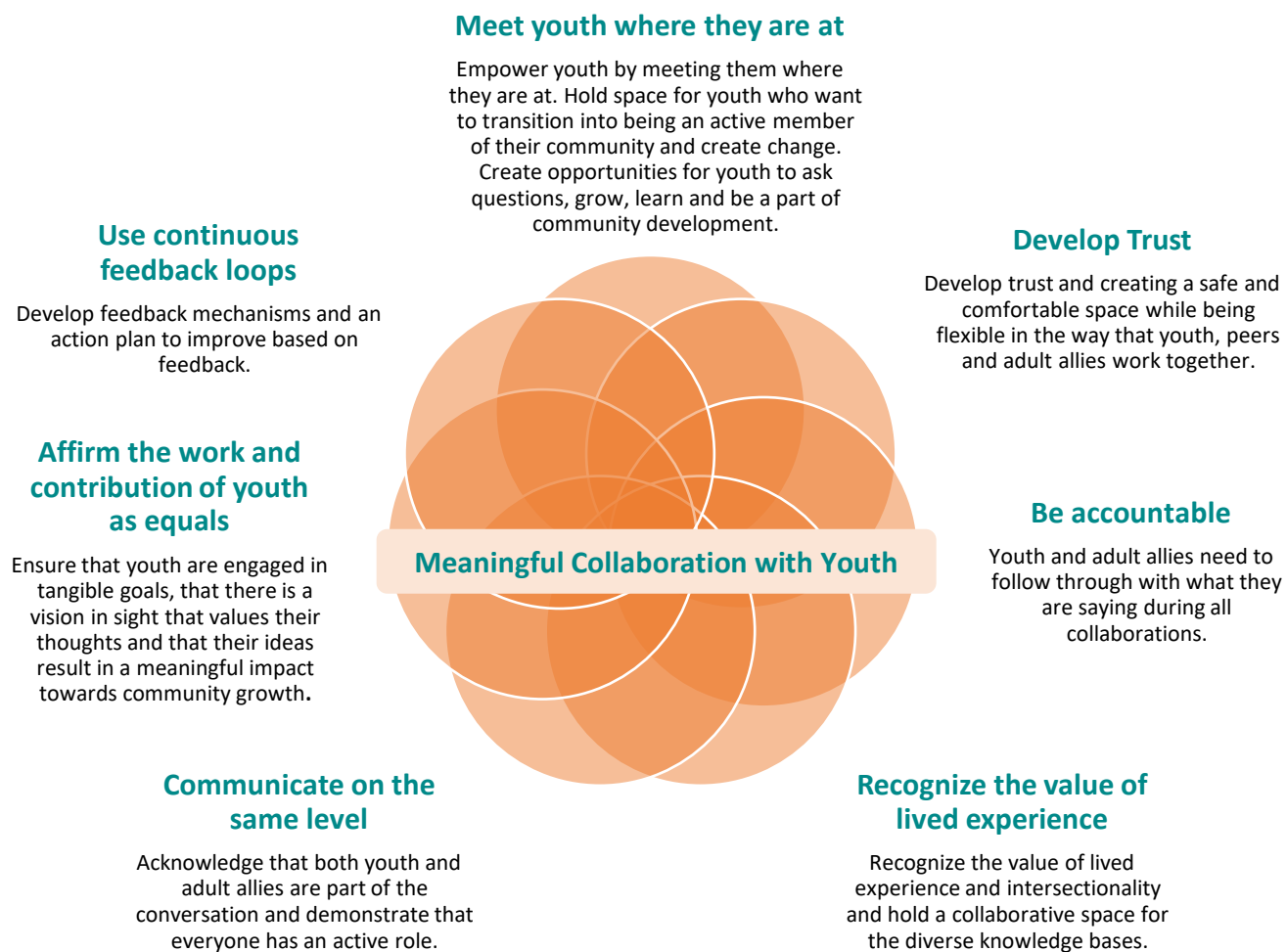
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## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As part of our commitment to youth engagement, Communities Building Youth Futures co-designed these Guiding Principles with youth from six communities across Canada. We'll be prototyping these guiding principles until spring 2021, at which point we will further iterate based on feedback.

We hope that following these Guiding Principles will result in meaningful collaboration with youth, peers and adult allies.



## INSIGHTS & BEST PRACTICES

These insights and best practices emerged from sharing stories about the things that have gone well, and the things that haven't gone so well. These are the lessons learned along the way:

### Ask don't assume

- Ask youth what they need and involve them in making decisions.

### Create conditions for youth to succeed

- Be aware that youth may be new to your system/protocols/structures.
- Give opportunities for youth to build hard and soft skills (ex: social media marketing, self-confidence).
- Ask what skills are valuable to youth. For example, do they want a workshop on writing grant proposals, or opportunities for public speaking?
- Be patient and open-minded.

### Consider who is being heard and who is being excluded from the conversation

- Don't just have one youth participate and expect them to speak on behalf of all youth. This is incredibly common in youth engagement and overlaps with tokenism. Youth experiences are unique, and while it is valuable to have a youth perspective, having many perspectives is much more meaningful. If resources are limited, one way to navigate this situation is to strategically engage with youth who have existing networks with other youth who may be able/comfortable to speak to their own experiences in addition to others (with permission).
- It is crucial to seek out youth who do not feel actively engaged and youth who do not feel like the space is for them.
- Consider how youth are being impacted by systemic inequality, barriers, and how adult allies and organizations are contributing to this.
- Youth are engaged in social issues, but they may not trust the system.
- Understand that youth are exploring their intersectional identities and developing a sense of self.



Seek out youth  
who do not feel  
actively  
engaged

**Consider youth as partners, peers and leaders**

- Remember that most often, when youth are engaged in any type of work, power dynamics will impact interactions and outcomes. As an adult ally or organization, it is important to be self-aware and understand that authentic youth engagement is about relinquishing that power and sharing the power with youth.
- What does sharing power actually look like? It could mean having youth lead a meeting rather than doing it yourself. It could be as simply sitting down and saying, "You're the expert, I'm here to listen and learn". Empowering youth is key to authentic engagement.
- Be supportive and show genuine interest in learning from, and sharing the leadership role with youth.
- Like you would with a potential partner, consider how you can amplify what youth are already doing and creating. Provide support and collaborate.

**Provide compensation**

- Being in a situation where you can volunteer is a privilege. Always provide some form of compensation.
- Get feedback from youth on what is valuable to them (ex: it could be a meal or a safe place to be).
- Use a trauma-informed approach. Depending on the context of the activity or what they are providing input on, support may be required to provide a safe space for youth to share their experiences.

**Ensure accountability**

- Don't ask youth to contribute their time if it's not going to shape anything (ie: don't tokenize).
- Follow up with youth after a consultation or event. Instead of just saying, "What you contributed is valuable", show them. This means a follow-up call, email, or meeting to show them how their input was implemented (for ex. showing how their feedback was used to change wording in a document, strategic priorities, etc.).

*Engage youth in real work with tangible outcomes.*

**Make communication inviting and accessible**

- Use the platforms that youth are already accessing and modes that they are comfortable with.
- Think about the language that they use and are familiar with. If you don't know what it is, then ask!
- Ask youth how they prefer to be communicated with. Some are open to video calls on zoom, some may prefer a phone call or providing feedback by email.

**Be thoughtful in selecting spaces to meet**

- Choose locations of meetings to be spaces where youth are comfortable. Some spaces where adults may be comfortable—like City Hall—may be daunting for youth. If you're not sure, ask.

**Build capacity**

- Always look for teaching and learning opportunities throughout the engagement (ex: expose youth to behind the scenes processes, involve youth in sensemaking)

## WAYS OF ENGAGING YOUTH IN COMMUNITY CHANGE

Explore different ways of engaging youth, start a conversation to learn from youth how they want to be involved, and ask what would make it a valuable experience for them.

<b>Youth-led projects</b>	<p>It is key to involve youth as early as possible in the process. Have a project in mind? Ask youth how they feel about it before starting.</p> <p>Provide youth with ownership of the project. This means that they are leading and making decisions and the role of the organization is to support them by mentoring, sharing resources, and using their influence to remove barriers.</p>
<b>Youth at leadership/decision making tables</b>	<p>Designate seats at the leadership table for youth.</p> <p>It is important to not just have one youth representative. Having multiple people provides a broader range of perspectives and ensures youth leaders are supported by peers too.</p> <p>Ensure youth are supported so that they can contribute meaningfully.</p> <p>Ask what support they need and consider providing mentorship from an adult ally, training, pre-briefings and debriefings to build capacity and comfort.</p> <p>Ensure there are meaningful benefits for youth to sit at the table. Ensure they will have influence.</p> <p>Provide equivalent compensation for their time.</p>
<b>Youth involvement in key program / project areas</b>	<p>Engage youth in specific program or project areas such as data collection, communications, or coordination.</p> <p>Always ask youth what skills or interests they have so that they can contribute in meaningful ways.</p> <p>Program areas may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection - peer interviews, survey creation, dissemination, analysis, etc.</li> <li>• Communications – managing newsletters and subscriber lists, graphic design, social media, photography, video</li> <li>• Coordination – event support and logistics, administrative support, scheduling</li> </ul>
<b>Mentoring</b>	<p>Match youth with peer or adult allies based on interest and need.</p> <p>Invite youth to set their own terms for how, when, and frequency of meeting.</p> <p>Consider connecting youth with different mentors for different purposes (ex: personal, school, employment).</p>
<b>Youth Advisory</b>	<p>Set up a youth advisory function whereby you can connect with youth for their thoughts and feedback on initiatives.</p> <p>This can be formal or informal.</p> <p>The key to this being successful is to build relationships and ensure the exchange is mutually beneficial.</p>

## SHARED CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

The following challenges are common for organizations wanting to engage youth, along with suggested solutions from youth and youth-serving organizations.

### How can we maintain the engagement?

- Consider putting in place consultation processes and an ecosystem that continues to develop so that youth can be engaged on an ongoing basis (at the beginning, during and after).
- You have to be intentional and meeting youth where they are.
- Offer employment opportunities to transition youth from a volunteer into a staff.
- Show the professional benefits that their involvement can have. It's a great way to attract, engage, and support youth and can lead to longer and better engagement.

### How can we know if the engagement is meaningful or successful?

- Unless you ask, you can't know.
- Create anonymous surveys for youth about their experiences, clearly state that it's okay for youth to say "this wasn't successful/meaningful to me".
- There shouldn't be pressure on youth to tell you you did a good job. Instead, you should be thankful when youth tell you you didn't - because this offers an opportunity for you to learn, improve, and grow.
- Clearly define your goals in advance. Move beyond vanity metrics (like # of people) and move to indicators of impact.

### What happens if I get stuck? I don't know how to start.

- Partner with and learn from organizations that already engage youth
- You need to be flexible, for example: sticking to the standard of 9-5 hours may not be conducive for youth to be engaged

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There is a skewed value for young people's time and experience during the transition from being a student to an employee

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## DIVING DEEPER

Check out the following resources to continue to deepen your youth engagement practices:

- [Re:Action4Inclusion's Toolkit for Community Building](#) shares insights and resources for youth advisors that have been co-designed with youth
- [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#), designed by the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, this toolkit highlights the importance of youth engagement as key approach to healthy schools
- [Youth Engagement Traffic Light](#) is a visual aide to help understand the continuum of youth engagement and guide conversations between adults and youth who are planning for organizational, community and system-level youth engagement.
- [Including All Voices](#) - The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions' 21 Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund communities have made youth engagement a central pillar of their work with a strong commitment to the concept of "nothing about us without us" and an abiding belief that youth have the right to represent their own interests, identify their challenges and design their own solutions.

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