

Best Practice

Kindersley Youth Committee

CONTACT

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THE PRACTICE

The Kindersley Youth Council was a program facilitated by the Town of Kindersley from 2009-2015 encouraging students between the ages of 13-16 years of age to participate in municipal government. The program was established to encourage youth participation, nurture leadership development, engage future leaders and provide a mechanism for youth to communicate with Town Council and administration. The structure of the program mirrored Town Council by adhering to Robert's Rules of Order for meetings and making decisions, as well as membership (six councilors/one mayor, and in later years two senior administrators). Further supporting the program was an annual operational grant, enabling members to host events, programs and contribute back to the community.

From 2013-2015, membership suffered. While students applied and were accepted into the program, many would fade out of the program over the year. Further to this, students would lose interest in completing projects and hosting events they once had. In preparation for the annual October classroom visits to present the program to students and invite them to apply, the standing members of Youth Council began voicing their concerns to the program coordinator about low program enrolment, program structure limitations, and Council mentorship. The recruitment process was immediately paused to support further discussions and have the program assessed by the current members.

As a result of discussion and assessment, members of the Youth Council and the program coordinator worked together to design a new program that the Youth Council could evolve into. They sorted through the feedback from each session and together drafted a Terms of Reference for a program that would meet the needs of interested students, provide an opportunity to be involved in the community, and provide solutions to challenges with the current program structure. The 2015 Youth Council Mayor drafted a letter to Town Council expressing the concerns of the membership, sharing the assessment experience and requesting that Town Council dissolve the Youth Council program and adopt the Youth Committee program presented in its place.

THE PROCESS

The program coordinator (Manager of Community Culture & Relations) developed a set of questions for the Youth Council members to respond to and complete an assessment of the current program. This approach enabled the students to share their honest feelings about the program and how they would improve the structure to attract more participants and community awareness.

The overall results of the assessment recognized the following issues with the program:

- Council mentorship – difficult for students to attend Town Council meetings (afterschool commitments), did not feel heard by Council or that interest was present, Councillors were not as engaged with the program as members thought they would be, and the Youth Council was not being consulted by Town Council for a 'youth perspective'.
- Youth Council Meeting/Program structure – More formal than necessary given what they were responsible for, paperwork and process (resolutions) consumed most of lunch hour and left less time for discussion, felt less engaged with community and not contributing enough of an impact.
- Experience – the program seemed too much of an educational experience and was perceived by potential members to require a greater time commitment than it did, thus deterring new membership.

Youth Council members attended a Town Council meeting to present their story – how they determined there was a challenge with membership, completed an assessment of the program and developed a creative solution to maintain the program yet improve it for the target audience. An administrative report supporting the Youth Council and administration in this effort was presented to Council at the same meeting along with a prepared resolution to initiate the Youth Committee program in place of the Youth Council program. A Terms of Reference document had been prepared to outline the new program. Town Council adopted the new program and supported the effort taken to encourage youth engagement in the process.

No external agencies or groups were involved in this process. The most important group to engage and gather input from was the current youth membership who wished to develop a program that their fellow students would be interested in becoming a part of.

The effort of transitioning from Youth Council to Youth Committee was completed in-house with support from Town administration and program members. The process was designed to ensure that all contributions from the participating students were heard and considered in the solution.

The following five questions were used to engage the members and encourage a healthy discussion:

1. What do you like about the program?
2. What do you dislike about the program?
3. What would you change?
4. What did/do you want to learn from the program?
5. New structure Wishlist

Additional members of administration were invited to join the session based on their roles in the municipality and connection to youth services. Upon the completion of the discussion, the members met again to develop a new proposed program that they would present to Town Council, and if successful, their fellow peers. This initiative and the resulting impact was based less on resources and more on values of listening to youth, guiding youth to achieve their vision, and mentoring them in avenues to move their visions from a concept into reality.

It was important for the Youth Council members that they felt they could accomplish something that would impact the community in a positive way and increase youth engagement. Their second overall goal was to develop a program that would be sustainable based on annual enrolment and goals. As students who were involved in many other extracurricular activities, they hoped to create an opportunity that would not solely appeal to students in similar activities but also to those who are less engaged yet open to trying new things.

The new program was titled, *Youth Committee*, to reflect the revised program structure moving forward. Students felt that they were more likely to participate in community committees later in their lives and this experience would familiarize them with the process. The Committee was designed to feature a membership maximum of 10 students (previously seven), five executive roles (Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and Communications Coordinator responsible for social media and promotion), committee meeting format (adopt agenda, approve minutes and pass motions), and focus more on engagement with municipal services as opposed to learning Council processes. Another addition to the program developed by the program coordinator; member platforms. For these, each committee member was required to select a subject of personal interest to them for which they could spearhead their own project or initiative. This led to students thinking on a broader scale of the community and considering their interests at a more global level as well. Platforms for the 2017 committee included Community Culture, Greener Community, Bullying, Arts & Culture, Drug Awareness, Sustainable Happiness, Physical Activity, Poverty and Mental Health.

THE RESULTS

The development and establishment of the new Youth Committee program had a positive impact on the community with regards to public engagement, awareness of youth, motivation of members, youth mentorship and the most importantly, youth participation. The final year of Youth Council featured a membership of three students. Membership for Youth Committee has significantly climbed compared to the previous program, five students in 2016 and nine students in 2017. An additional improvement is the level of commitment to the program. Students previously dropped out over the year or became disengaged from the projects they began. The Youth Committee program has not experienced this yet. Inspiration has continued to build amongst the members with every success they have due to teamwork and constructive thinking.

Their contributions to the community over the past two years have included volunteer work at large community events and donating more than \$5,500 of fundraised and remaining budget funds to local projects such as the new Fire Hall, West Central Family Crisis Centre, Kindersley Foodbank, West Central Abilities Inc. and the new Aquatic Centre. Additional support for the community has been contributed by creating opportunities for other youth organizations to fundraise. The local Interact club and high school football team received assistance from Youth Committee to accomplish their own fundraising goals. Members of the program have a greater awareness of the community, how the community operates, needs of organizations and how they can contribute to building a better Kindersley. For Youth Committee, no impact is too small.

An evaluation of the program is conducted at the beginning and end of each year. This was incorporated to ensure that the students have a continual say in the direction and structure of the program. The evaluation in January is intended to introduce new members to what took place the year prior and to gather ideas as a team for goals, solutions and initiatives. The evaluation in December is intended for the team to review what was accomplished, and to identify if the program structure is still serving them and how what could be improved upon. This process has enabled an open forum and constructive discussions amongst the youth members - another aspect of the program that has helped to develop skills in members.

Since the establishment of the new program, challenges have been largely non-existent. The program operates within a basic structure that enables it to evolve as generations and society evolves (ex. Increase media use, new types of fundraising, shifts in local priorities, etc.). Any concerns brought forward to date have been addressed by the membership at the time and a solution put in place.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following were lessons learned from this experience:

1. Youth are not window dressings – Involve youth on a personal level

Get to know the students that you engage. Youth know when they are being used for propaganda, they feel insignificant to the process/project, and although their name may be used, they know they will not have an opportunity to contribute. Engaging youth can be a powerful tool for organizations and a community as a whole. The intention is to include young individuals in the community to seek input from a generation that will eventually take on leadership roles over time. It is an educational cycle that supports an intergenerational connect. When engaging youth, listen to what they say, incorporate their perspective, consider the impact on their generation and lifestyle, and let them contribute to actions. By respecting youth, they will take on greater ownership for their community.

2. One size doesn't fit all for education

Youth are members of a newer generation that embraces technology and different approaches to life and education. It is our responsibility as leaders to connect with them and understand how they think, communicate, and function. These methods need to be incorporated into any practice where youth engagement is desired. Programs or practices that were successful 5-10 years ago are now an outdated method for engagement and motivation. In order to sustain youth engagement, processes need to evolve alongside people, and leaders need to be flexible.

3. Lead by example

High expectations will lead to unfulfilled goals when involving youth. It is important to recognize that they are new to many of the processes and practices that we conduct on a daily basis. Patience and trust are significant values for anyone working with younger generations. To maintain engagement and motivation you will need to ensure that you are sharing information, guiding individuals on how to use the information, empowering individuals to take on projects, encouraging their efforts, and acknowledging their successes. If they don't find success in their effort, work with them to identify their challenges and determine solutions for the next attempt.

4. If it doesn't fit, don't force it

Public programming is always a gamble. By the time you gather input and build a successful program, participation begins to fade as people move on to another interest. Society evolves quickly through trends, and changing values, which means approaches to engagement should as well. Thus, the age-old method of 'if it ain't, broke don't fix it' does not apply for youth engagement. When it begins to feel like you are forcing participation or involvement and find it challenging to achieve goals, it is time to rethink the program or project. Forcing an opportunity for youth involvement based on the convenience for the leading organization will only result in resistance. Working together as a team to make sure that the program/project fits the participants will lead to greater levels of success and inspiration to remain engaged.