Affirming Facilitation Practices in Youth Spaces

This issue brief is to provide affirming and intentional facilitation practices and strategies within current or future programming, meetings, and/or trainings for, or with young people. The following sections will touch on special considerations in order to ensure a safe, equitable, and positive learning / working environment.

GROUNDING

When facilitating any meeting, workshop, presentation, roundtable, or anything else, it's important to ground yourself in some basic, fundamental questions:

Seeking Knowledge:

- What do you want to know?
- Why do you want to know it?
- Who holds the knowledge you seek?
- How will you center the knowledge holders to allow them to speak for themselves?
- What will be done with the knowledge once you have it?
- How will the knowledge holders inform the entire process from the planning stages, to the event itself, to final conclusions and next steps?

Disseminating Knowledge:

- What knowledge do you hold, and why is it important to disseminate it?
- Who needs to know this knowledge the most and why (or how do you know they need it the most - have they self-identified as needing the knowledge)?
- Have you asked who needs the knowledge and how they'd like to receive the knowledge?
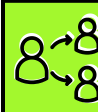
Problem Solving:

- What is the problem you are seeking to solve / what goal do you aim to achieve?
- How do you know it's a problem, and who is it a problem for?
- Who holds the solution and how do you know they hold the solution?
- What steps can we take to implement the solution?

Although, of course, there are many more elements, questions to ask, and things to consider, the common themes throughout whatever you are facilitating are:

- Identifying the goal
- Identifying the audience
- Identifying the "end product"
- Identifying the "why" and the importance of the "why"
- Centering the audience throughout the entire process
- Considering different modalities of learning styles, cultural and accessibility needs, being trauma-informed, honoring folks who are neurodivergent, etc.
- Leading with empathy, kindness, and centering soft skills and open-ended questions (some examples can be found **here**)
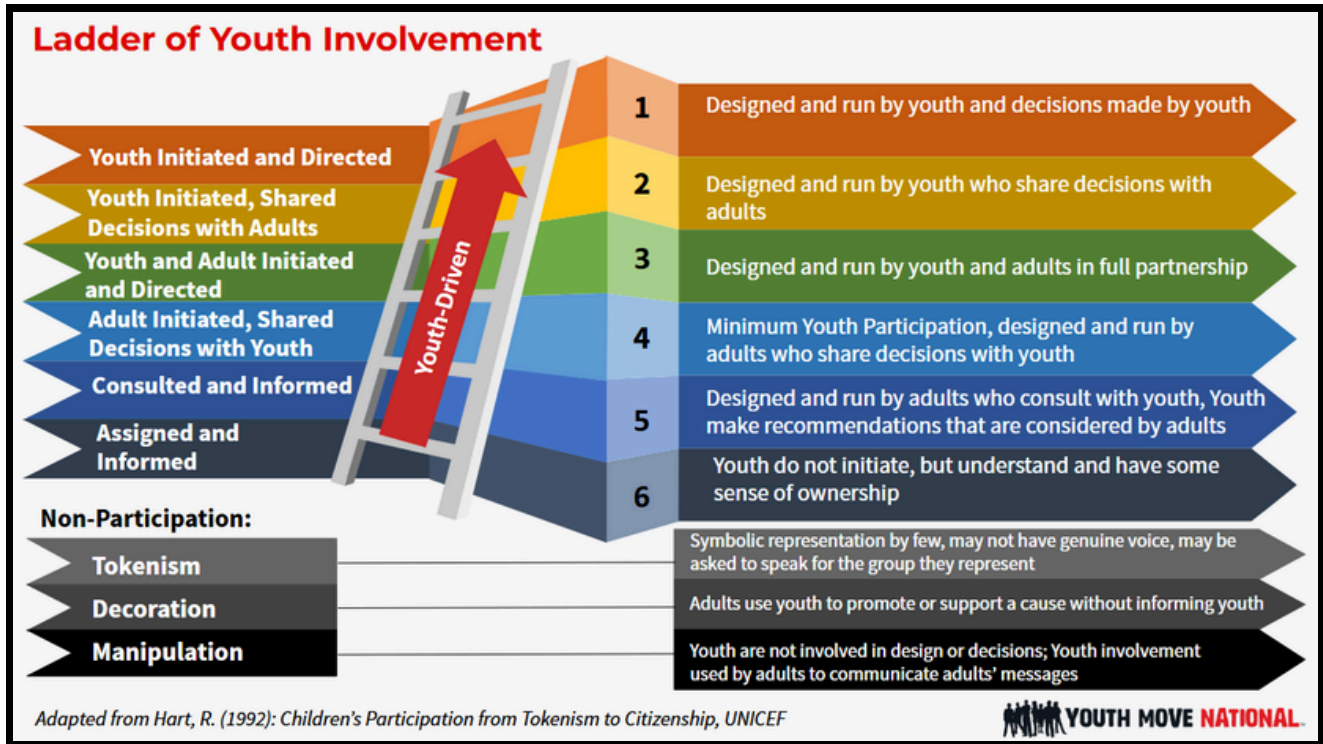
PLANNING

Here are some important aspects of the planning process which should be done before any formal outreach, marketing, or formalizing of plans.

Pre-meeting planning should be focused mainly around "informed consent" and building trust amongst your audience (particularly if you are seeking knowledge). Informed consent is best defined literally. Someone cannot give consent if they are not fully informed of what the ask is.

Here are some things to consider:

- As much as possible, be clear, concise, transparent, honest, vulnerable, and continuously ask "why" and question your process throughout
- Continuously involve and elicit feedback from your audience in every step of the process and pivot based on lived experience and direct feedback
- Consider everything you do as a collaborative partnership (which means shared decision-making and seeking consensus) between you and your audience (this is particularly important when there is a power imbalance or privileged communities working with marginalized communities)
- Share everything ahead of time as soon as you have it, from the agenda, to the structure and timing of everything, to the questions, slide deck, etc.
- Consider holding an "open house" or just a social hour before the event itself just to meet everyone and gain a level of comfort, and to answer any questions ahead of time
- Youth MOVE National adapted Hart's Ladder of Participation (see diagram below) specifically for when working with youth. This can be helpful and applicable to many different communities:

Ladder of Youth Involvement

Youth Initiated and Directed	1	Designed and run by youth and decisions made by youth
Youth Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults	2	Designed and run by youth who share decisions with adults
Youth and Adult Initiated and Directed	3	Designed and run by youth and adults in full partnership
Adult Initiated, Shared Decisions with Youth	4	Minimum Youth Participation, designed and run by adults who share decisions with youth
Consulted and Informed	5	Designed and run by adults who consult with youth, Youth make recommendations that are considered by adults
Assigned and Informed	6	Youth do not initiate, but understand and have some sense of ownership

Youth-Driven

Non-Participation:

Tokenism	Symbolic representation by few, may not have genuine voice, may be asked to speak for the group they represent
Decoration	Adults use youth to promote or support a cause without informing youth
Manipulation	Youth are not involved in design or decisions; Youth involvement used by adults to communicate adults' messages

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992): Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF

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Lastly, one of the most important concepts of informed consent is keeping in mind it looks different to each individual person. It may be easy to make broad statements, do things for the majority, standardize practices, procedures, etc., but truly meeting people where they are is about informed consent and information on an individual, one on one level.

MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT

The efforts around effective marketing and recruitment should follow a lot of the same principles we have already covered. Make sure all materials are clear, concise, and informative. Beyond just listing the title, date, and time, consider explaining the "why," include outreach information for any questions, and make it look attractive. Graphic design can go a long way!

In general, some important questions to ask during this stage are:

- How do we normally disseminate information and who are the audiences we usually reach?
- Are these the audiences we also wish to seek for this specific event? And if not, what can we do differently?
- Where are our audiences at (i.e. do they have professional organizations, community organizations, can we do personal, individual outreach, etc.)?
- If there is an application process, make it as short and easy as possible, always asking, "why am I asking this, and is it vital to the qualifications I'm looking for?"

One of the most important things you can do to honor your audience, increase attendance, and ensure robust participation and feedback is to pay your participants. All labor is valuable: especially when seeking direct lived experience or information from marginalized communities, which may be retraumatizing, personal, emotionally taxing, etc.. It's important to compensate folks to avoid voyeurism, tokenism, and exploitation.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the more specific the ask is, the more specific the audience will be, and thus, the harder it will be to recruit and market.

MEETING STRUCTURE

The structure of the meeting is critical to success and important to plan alongside your participants and ensure alignment with your goals. If looking for specific, detailed information, small focus groups (2 - 5) or individual one-on-one meetings is the better route. If you are looking for large, broad information, larger feedback sessions up to 30 folks may be your best bet. Either way, keep in mind that everyone engages differently. Some people will engage and participate better one-on-one when they have that individualized attention. Some need larger groups to feel more comfortable engaging. Again, everyone is different, this highlights the importance of including your audience in the planning phases and always eliciting feedback throughout.

CONNECTION BEFORE CONTENT

Connection Before Content is a fundamental principle that should permeate all aspects of organizational interaction. *"Without relatedness, no meaningful work can occur" - Peter Block.*

Too often in organizational life, we ask things of people or try to work with them before we have established a relationship. This is often overlooked and not discussed. Establishing a personal connection is not just beneficial; it is essential. When facilitating any meeting, workshop, presentation, roundtable, or anything else, consider implementing an activity **before** diving into any content. This allows us to connect to the human being before any human "doing" action. This approach greatly supports building authentic & meaningful relationships on a much deeper level. Ensure facilitators also participate in the activity, remaining open, personal, and vulnerable. This will help everyone, *"move at the speed of trust"- Adrienne Maree Brown.*

The intention of the session is:

To connect to one another through the heart space allowing for authenticity and transparency

To emphasize the purpose or the **why (intended goal)** of the meeting

Timing is another important factor to consider. Anything under an hour may not give you enough time to get comfortable, build trust and rapport, and get things going. Anything over two hours may start to feel draining and start to lack accuracy. Work with your audience to find what feels best and don't be afraid to cut things short, or ask for more time in the moment; some of the best feedback comes from going down unexpected rabbit holes. Another factor to consider when it comes to timing is that the first 15 minutes are usually lost to folks just arriving and getting settled, and the last 15 minutes should be reserved for closeout measures and wrap-up points (ending abruptly doesn't always feel honoring).

However, if you decide to structure the space, make sure it is done in collaboration with your audience, intentionally thought through with a trauma-informed lens, and clear to all parties.

THE MEETING

After the planning and marketing, your meeting will hopefully go smoothly with little surprises; that is if you have planned thoroughly and worked with your audience every step of the way. Holding a pre-meeting "open house" will also help with this, since folks will already be comfortable with each other and should be ready to dive right in.

Nonetheless, some other factors to consider are:

- Facilitate community standards and agreements in the beginning. Having some already prepared for examples is helpful, but mainly allow participants within the space to add their own such as; use "I" statements, assume best intent, one mic one diva, take space/leave space, don't yuck someone's yum, etc. A quick internet search can provide many other examples.
  - Ensure complete consensus over these, as these will be your guiding principles to revisit if things start to go a little sideways

- Meet people where they are at by providing content warnings, not requiring people to be on camera if virtual, allowing for feedback to be both written and verbal, and meeting accessibility and language needs, etc.

- Give intentional breaks. Allowing breaks to be optional, or allowing for conversation to continue while on a break, isn't actually a break, and forces folks who do opt-in to a break to miss vital conversation. Both facilitators and participants should honor that time.

- For meetings that are heavier in conversation and content, it is sometimes helpful to have both a designated moderator and a "care coordinator" *(see description below)*.
  - For example, if holding a virtual meeting, you can have a moderator monitor the chat, field tech issues, help the facilitator drop links, etc. A care coordinator is a person to talk to and handle uncomfortable situations. Create a breakout room for folks to self-select into when feeling activated or overwhelmed and a care coordinator can monitor that room, and when they see someone in it, can enter it to simply talk and listen and process.

- It's important to note that these people are not clinicians, and this is not a space for crisis situations; if that arises, contact a professional.

- Don't expect the worst, but prepare for it. What happens if someone causes harm? What happens if there is a "Zoom bomber?" (Unwanted, disruptive, intrusion into a video conference/meeting) Prepare for these situations with your audience ahead of time so you are prepared to act quickly!

- Find a safe word. So when someone says it, everyone will know a particular situation has arised and the meeting can be paused momentarily until a solution can be reached.

- If recording, ask permission and always allow folks to clarify, take back statements, or ask the recording to be paused (this is important to get complete consensus on).

- Provide space for real-time feedback so that pivoting can happen on what is best in that moment.

- Think through data collection such as demographic information, evaluation, etc.

- Make sure your words match your actions and you are honest - if you don't know how to be trauma-informed, affirming to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, welcoming and inclusive, etc., don't claim to be. Do your homework, ensure your words match your actions, and you can deliver upon your promises and things you have said you would do.

CARE COORDINATOR

A Care Coordinator can be a vital part of any meeting, workshop, presentation, or facilitation. For in-person meetings, the care coordinator can monitor the room to ensure it stays a safe / brave space. They can be the person participants go to if they need to step away, self-care, or are feeling activated. They are there to listen, talk, and connect folks to resources. They can also monitor a wellness room if physical space allows. They could also serve a dual purpose as a mic runner in the audience during Q&A or feedback sessions, an individual to pass out materials, and other things of that nature since it helps them be seen and move around the room. The same basic concept applies to virtual meetings. This is the person participants can private message for assistance, they can monitor a virtual self-care / wellness breakout room and, in general, just be a person to help and assist in maintaining a caring environment. This person acts as a kind, empathic person to talk to, and thus is essentially an informal peer supporter. Because of this, the care coordinator does not need to be a social worker, therapist, or clinician. However, they will need to be transparent about what their role is, and to define clear boundaries of what they can and cannot provide, and know how to get folks who need more attention to caring professionals who can continue care in the areas they cannot.

DEBRIEF

Lastly, hold a debrief meeting afterwards in order to process together as a group how the event went, what could be improved, what went well, etc. Inform folks what the next steps are, and most importantly - share the results and change based upon everything you have learned.

Things to think about might be:

- If you had slides, how were they perceived?
- Was there any language you used that people did not understand?
- Did your projected timing for the presentation work out?
- Were there any concepts that needed more attention and explanation?
- Were there any tech issues that needed to problem solve ahead of time?
- What are some actionable steps the group can achieve before the next meeting?

A NOTE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

One of the most common questions I receive from adults who are looking to share space with youth is, "will youth receive training on how to be professional and properly interact with the adults in the space?" My experience truly has been the exact opposite, that it's really adults who need to be trained to treat youth with respect in shared spaces, as I've witnessed adults act far more "unprofessional" in my time than youth. I really challenge adults to think through their own bias and prejudice, to be honest with themselves around their actions, the language they use, and how much space and time they take up. Yes, having good intentions is important, but listen to, and honor the impacts you have regardless of your intention. Doing some pre-work on yourself and potentially doing a Social Location Mapping exercise, can really help ground adults in practices they can be helpful and reduce harm, before even entering a space with youth.

We often have this notion that we should be creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces for all, and I don't know if I always agree with that. The whole reason we have concepts like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive (DEI) is because certain communities and identities are devalued and marginalized in our society (such as our BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, and yes, youth communities), while others are valued, privileged, and empowered over them (including adults). More often the goal is really to create safe spaces for youth and other marginalized communities, by being brave adults and/or people with privilege, who are able to step back, listen, create space, give agency, not gaslight or talk over, and not only be truly open to receiving feedback, but actually using that feedback to grow and change. This could include welcoming friendly corrections and kind call-in's, while honoring these as gifts not insults. Inclusivity is specifically for those who have been excluded, which requires the folks who have always been included to change the way they have been thinking, acting, and sharing space. This may actually cause some discomfort or feelings of not being included as fully as you once were. That's okay adults, make room and lean into that discomfort, use it as an opportunity to listen, change, learn, and grow - this is what it means to do equity work.

- ***Arc Telos Saint Amour (they/them)***
  Executive Director - Youth MOVE National

If you would like to request technical assistance and consultation from Youth MOVE National, you can submit your request HERE!

RESOURCES

- Organizing Engagement. Ladder of Children's Participation (Hart's Ladder): https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-childrens-participation/

- Youth MOVE National. Stipends for Youth: https://youthmovenational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/T2C_1-Stipending-Youth.pdf

- Youth MOVE National. A Guide to Youth Recruitment. https://www.umassmed.edu/globalassets/transitionsrtc/pubs-and-products/documents/ya-toolkit/samhsa_guide_to_youth_recruitment_final.pdf

- Conversational Leadership. Connection Before Content: https://conversational-leadership.net/connection-before-content/#:~:text=Connection%20before%20content%20is%20a,diving%20into%20tasks%20or%20content

- Shawn Chang. Emotional Intelligence 101: Empathetic responses: https://students.ubc.ca/ubclife/emotional-intelligence-101-empathetic-responses

- National Equity Project. Developing Community Agreements: https://www.nationalequityproject.org/tools/developing-community-agreements

- Delgado Community College. What is Zoom Bombing?: https://www.dcc.edu/administration/offices/information-technology/zoom/zoom-bombing.aspx

- Indeed Editorial Team. What is a debrief meeting? (And how to host one effectively): https://uk.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/what-is-debrief-meeting