

A QUICK + SIMPLE GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

“How To Engage Young People
In Your Community And Achieve
Positive Outcomes”

The **4 BIG MISTAKES** Councils Make
When Attempting To Engage
Young People AND
What To Do To Ensure That
You Dont Too!

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ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Young people are weird and wonderful creatures. They don't often understand themselves let alone anyone else, and when it comes to adults understanding them, well that's a whole other story. It's certainly nothing new and if you're concerned that young people today are getting worse, then don't stress too much. In 400 BC Socrates said:

“Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers.”

More recently Michael J. Fox suggested:

“Teenagers blithely skip off to uncertain futures, while their parents sit weeping curbside in the Volvo, because the adolescent brain isn't yet formed enough to recognize and evaluate risk. “

Throw away all of your preconceived ideas about the behaviour and nature of teenagers. New research suggests that without our turbulent teen years the human race would be, as Dr. David Bainbridge puts it in *Surviving The Teenage Brain*, “short lived and stupid.”

“The brain continues to change throughout life, but there are huge leaps in development during adolescence,” said Sara Johnson, an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who reviewed the neuroscience in “The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development” (Johns Hopkins University, 2009) by Clea McNeely and Jayne Blanchard.

As I have travelled across Australia for the past 15 years engaging, inspiring and empowering over 50,000 teenagers in high schools, youth detention, alternative schooling, community youth led organisations and youth forums I've seen it all!

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Teenagers are in a crucial stage of life - here are just a few important facts to think about in relation to the teenage brain:

- The teenage brain is in a critical period of development.
- As teens become better at thinking abstractly, their social anxiety increases, according to research in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences published in 2004.
- Because an adolescent brain is still developing, it retains much of its plasticity, which allows it to be molded by the environment.
- The last part of the brain to fully connect up—well past the teenage years—is the frontal lobe, which houses judgment, insight, dampening of emotions and impulse control.
- The brakes come online somewhat later than the accelerator of the brain,” said Johnson, referring to the development of the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system respectively.
- At the same time, “teens need higher doses of risk to feel the same amount of rush adults do,” Johnson said.

Taken together, these changes may make teens vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviors, such as trying drugs, getting into fights or jumping into unsafe water. By late adolescence, say 17 years old and after, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and long-term perspective taking is thought to help them reign in some of the behavior they were tempted by in middle adolescence.

All of these factors make it crucial for creating positive environments and communities which engage young people in strategic and meaningful ways, to ensure they have the best chance at discovering who they are and where they fit in life.

So before we look at the big mistakes councils make in their efforts to engage young people I want to first look at some key understandings about these human beings we call teenagers and who you need to BE before you even think about DOING anything to engage them.

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3 UNIVERSAL HUMAN FEARS

According to Gregg Braden, all human beings (including teens) go through life addressing 3 Universal Fears which can also be represented by these 3 questions.

1. Am I loved? (Fear of not being loved)
2. Am I enough? (Fear of being found out)
3. Do I belong? (Fear of abandonment)

The first universal fear underpins all fears as it is directly related to 'self worth', which comes from our survival instinct and the need for love and connection.

The second fear, that we are not enough, that we will be found out to be an imposter, a fake, a phoney is what often drives teenagers to compare themselves to others. Teens are very quick to compare and judge their worth based on looks, labels, brands, clothes, how much money their family has and any number of other external factors. This just increases the anxiety of not being enough because when we compare ourselves to anyone else, we're always comparing the worst we see in ourselves to our best 'impression' of others (it's not even reality we're comparing).

The third fear or the need to belong, comes from the fear of being abandoned. We all have this need to belong, especially teens in the formative years of life. The need to be accepted as part of a tribe or group, to have a family we can feel that we belong to and we have similarities and commonalities.

As trusted adults in the world of teenagers it's not just enough for us to understand these 3 Universal Fears, but in understanding that they exist in every young person we work with we can know that a lot of the behaviors we may come across can be directly linked to one

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of these 3 fears. The majority of the human behavioral issues that present themselves in our world can be directly linked to one of these 3 fears (or the 6 core needs as we will discuss shortly).

So think for a moment about a young person who you have had to deal with recently. They may have been displaying some negative behaviors, could it be that their behavior was a cry for help and a reaction to fear?

Which of the 3 Universal Fears do you think this young person may have been reacting out of?

How could you respond to the young person in a way that helps them feel - Loved, Enough or that they Belong?

Working with teenagers we all realise that while in an ideal world these three needs would be met by a functional family environment and two loving and functional parents, the reality is we live in a world where not all young people have their primary needs met at home.

So while we might feel that its not our role to show the young person Love it is going to be vital to creating an environment for teenagers to thrive.

Just as a refresher - the 3 Universal Fears again are:

1. Am I loved? (Fear of not being loved)
2. Am I enough? (Fear of being found out)
3. Do I belong? (Fear of abandonment)

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3 QUESTIONS ASKED OF ADULTS BY TEENS

Deriving from the 3 Universal Fears every teenager who comes across your path will be subconsciously asking themselves these 3 questions about you:

1. Can I trust you?
2. Are you any good?
3. Do you care about me?

For a teenager to accept you into their circle of trust, or circle of influence they will be asking these 3 primary questions of you.

To rewind back just a touch, with any human interaction we assess the amount of value we place on the words, actions and advice of others and how much we allow it to influence us.

In the early stages of life we create beliefs based on our interactions with the world, the words that are said to us, the examples of behavior that are modelled for us. As we begin to make decisions for ourselves we make decisions and express ourselves through our actions which come from our thoughts and feelings.

The cognitive behavioral model states:

What you THINK - Determines how you FEEL - Determines how you ACT (THINK > FEEL > ACT).

This directly relates to our belief system which we created early on in our developmental phase (0 - 7 years of age).

So... through teenagers observations of you, the way you engage with them, the way you speak to them, the way you engage and speak with others around them, your habits and your behaviors they will be assessing whether or not you measure up to become a trusted authority figure in their world who they will take advice from, can

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model their life on and will be influenced by.

It is through these 3 questions, which they are asking at a subconscious level, that the teen will base their evaluation on.

1. Can I trust you?
2. Are you any good?
3. Do you care about me?

If it feels like a test you're right, you're under evaluation from the first second they meet you.

So if you want to position yourself as a trusted authority figure in the lives of the teenagers you work with then make sure you're doing a good job of answering these questions.

Firstly with your BEHAVIOUR - then back it up with your words.

Teens don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care - Show then tell!

Show the teenagers you work with that you can be trusted.

I remember growing up hearing throw away lines like 'do as I say not as I do.' It's lines like that which will ruin any trust or integrity you may have developed with a teenager.

Show the teenagers you work with that you are good at what you do. You don't have to be the best in the world, but how good you are at what you do, the passion you do it with, a desire to be better and to grow, not only shows them that you're good and you can be trusted.

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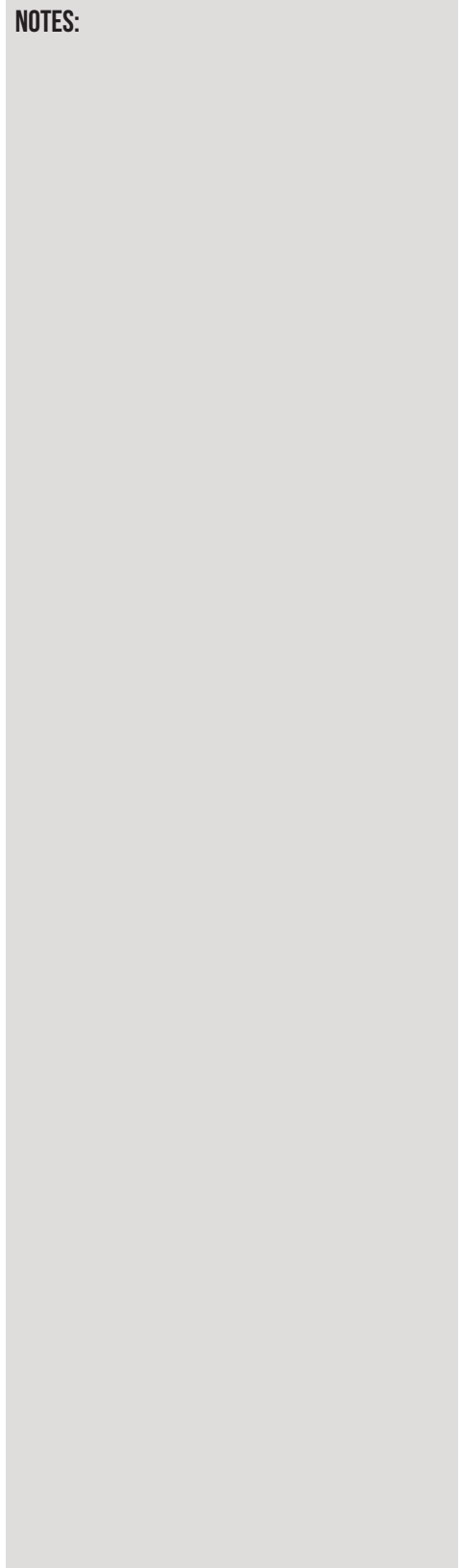
Yes you're a youth worker, but you're also a human being, a member of their community. The more we work together as a community to help each other be our best, the better our community and our world will be.

We show teenagers that we care by being genuinely interested in them, their world, their issues, their passions - and invest time and energy into helping them uncover the gold that is within them.

So my questions for you as you engage and interact with teenagers in your community:

1. Can they trust you?
2. Are you any good?
3. Do you care about them genuinely?

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4 BIG MISTAKES COUNCILS MAKE

In my work with councils all across Australia I often come across well meaning adults who have their own idea of what youth engagement is all about - but in all honesty they're not doing much more than ticking boxes and providing glorified childcare for teenagers.

To make sure that we are approaching community youth engagement properly I want us to firstly look at how NOT to do it and address the 4 biggest mistakes that I see councils and organisations across Australia making in their efforts to engage young people for positive outcomes.

First mistake I see councils make - and sometimes one of the reasons I am flown in to spend multiple days working in communities with the young people and the adults (parents and council staff) is:

MISTAKE #1 - ADULT DRIVEN APPROACH

Young people are being told what to do, when and how to do it at school, like a well oiled machine, a bell rings when its time for them to file into a classroom, sit in rows, complete exercises with the hope of getting a high enough grade to pass.

According to behavioural psychology and research conducted into an adult driven approach to working with young people (Lansdown, 2001; Larson, 2000), where adults set the direction and run programmed activities, where adults are positioned as authorities, the young people's ownership, creativity and authentic learning are undermined. These arguments suggest that young people experiencing an adult-driven approach may be **more likely** to become disengaged.

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Adult driven can also be seen in the endeavour to have a 'Youth Voice' (which could also be seen as tokenistic in this example) where adults motivate, inspire, inform, encapsulate, and generally make youth voice become convenient for their own motives. Adult-Driven youth voice is convenient and manipulated youth voice.

Some examples of Adult Driven Youth Voice are:

- **WHO:** Youth who adults want to hear from are selected to share their voices.
- **WHAT:** Young people say what adults want.
- **WHERE:** Youth voice happens in places adults want it to be shared.
- **WHY:** Adults solicit youth voice about specific issues.

Councils who adopt a purely Adult Driven approach to their youth engagement activities are making a huge mistake in their efforts to effectively engage the young people in their community for positive outcomes.

MISTAKE #2 - PROBLEM / ISSUE FOCUS

Too often in my work with training youth workers and running workshops for parents I'm asked things like 'how can I fix my kid?'

As if the young person is an issue to be fixed or a problem to be solved. Sure young people have problems and they have issues, but dont we all?

I am often asked to speak at schools and in communities to young people for 'Well Being' Days. Think about the title and then think about some of the topics which are usually address during these days: Bullying, Depression, Self Harm, STIs, Racism, Sexual Harrasment, Drugs etc

That list sounds like it should more appropriately be called 'Life Sucks.'

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So sure I'm writing with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek but you get the picture and I'm sure you've encountered the same. Our efforts to engage young people are quite often focussed on their problems and their issues. But in my world where I focus on transformation and unleashing untapped potential (in individuals, organisations and communities) no one ever fixed a problem or an issue by focussing on the problem.

As I teach the young people in my workshop called "Wake Up And Dream" about creating a compelling vision for your future - we move TOWARDS what we focus on. If you're driving down the street and something on the side of the road catches your attention, you will notice the car starting to veer towards that object. Whatever we focus on we move towards AND it become bigger in our reality.

If we focus on problems and issues we're not doing anything to fix them, we're simply making them bigger in our reality. It's a mistake made by many organisations when it comes to youth engagement.

MISTAKE #3 - ENTERTAINMENT

If you were to list all of the youth engagement activities you have ever run in your life, what percentage of them would have been entertainment based?

Dont feel bad, everyone does it.

We have a budget we need to spend, it has to be engaging for the young people in our community, so lets put on an event! A battle of the bands event, a carnival, movies in the park, something that will draw a crowd, we can take photos, present a report about how many young people were there and how it was a positive 'drug and alcohol free' event promoting youth engagement in your community.

Let's be honest though - if we're looking for true engagement and not just attendance, bums on seats, or numbers for a report, then putting

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on entertainment really is nothing more than providing baby sitting for the parents of the young people in your community.

Now with all that being said - dont get me wrong and think that I'm some sort of anti-entertainment crusader, our youth engagement activities must involve elements of entertainment and there is definately nothing wrong with providing safe, drug and alcohol free entertainment as part of what we do. But if that's the bulk of what we do we're missing the mark by a long shot!

Engaging young people for positive outcomes cannot be based around putting on events and entertainment based activities for young people. Your expertise and experience is going to be wasted if you become an event manager for youth entertainment.

MISTAKE #4 - TOKENISM + DECORATION

Tokenism happens whenever adults put youth in formal and informal positions without any substance, purpose, or power in order to say they have youth on board.

This can be seen in so many different forms and its really not about the activity, but the motivation behind the activity.

I've been involved with Councils in training and establishing 'Youth Advisory Councils', appointing young people onto boards in community organisations and running Youth Forums to gather opinions and ideas from young people - all great initiatives and steps towards engaging young people for positive outcomes - but if the adults who are in positions of power to make the ultimate decisions about the power these young people have to do anything meaningful or take that data further to a place where something can be done with it have a tokenistic approach, then we might as well tell these young people that their opinions really dont matter.

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The motivation behind tokenism is usually to keep certain people happy or to make people feel as if they are engaging the young people in their community.

Tokenism happens through policy and practice every day. Youth tokenism is so deep in our society that many organisations never know they're tokenising youth, and youth don't know when they're being tokenised.

Here are just a few examples of Tokenism:

- When issues affecting youth are talked about by adults without asking youth, youth are being tokenized.
- At a meeting it is tokenism when adults consistently ask youth to speak about being a youth.
- An organization that will do programs to youth and won't host programs done by youth is tokenizing youth.
- In a community organization it is tokenism when youth are only interacted with on youth issues.
- During a meeting it is tokenism when one youth is expected to represent all youth.

All issues are youth issues. It is the ethical responsibility of adult allies of young people to acknowledge the capacity of youth to decide which issues are important for them to engage within, and to increase their ability to be successful in their interactions with those issues.

So that's the negative side of the coin - how do with flip this baby over and make sure that you're not making these mistakes.

What are the solutions to focus on as we endeavour to engage the young people in our communities for positive outcomes?

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SOLUTION #1 - YOUTH DRIVEN / COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

True community youth engagement happens when adults partner with the youth in the community to create a youth driven collaborative partnership.

Research I have done and anecdotally my experience in working with over 50,000 teenagers across Australia has shown youth are fully engaged when:

- They are respected, valued, trusted, feel appreciated, safe and comfortable.
- They feel they are working in a youth friendly environment and are involved in a meaningful way.
- Their voices are being heard.
- They are given the chance to be involved and make decisions, gain leaderships skills and see their ideas realized.
- There's a social aspect to their involvement.
- They see change and progress happening.
- Their imaginations are touched and they are valued.
- They are in a space where they have ownership and control.

Teens are motivated and engaged when they are given a voice and in my work with a wide range of young people I find that more often than not they will step up to the responsibilities given to them AND live up (or down) to the expectations put on them by the trusted adults in their world.

When projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.

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According to sociologist Roger Hart Youth Driven / Collaborative Partnerships are the highest run on his 'Ladder of Youth Participation.'

Young people are truly empowered to make decisions which are then followed through on and adults are not an authority over the young people but along side them in true partnership and support.

So rather than making the mistake of having an "Adult Driven" youth engagement strategy, ensure that your youth programs and projects are "Youth Driven and Collaborative Partnerships."

SOLUTION #2 - STRENGTH FOCUSED + CAPACITY BUILDING

It makes sense to make the most of what we've got doesn't it?

Understanding and using our strengths is about focusing on the things that come most naturally to us and that we love to do. And science is now showing that this can make us happier too!

Using your strengths doesn't mean ignoring our weaker areas, but it's a question of emphasis. Positive psychology argues that if we focus on developing and using more of our strengths it will help us to get the best from ourselves and feel happier. Of course we need to manage our weaker areas, especially those that are holding us back, but often we don't need to be brilliant at these, good enough is usually good enough.

Also by focusing on strengths and building capacity, rather than focusing on trying to eliminate negative behaviour, issues or problems the problems can be addressed in a more constructive and solutions oriented fashion. As I described previously, its a fact that in human behaviour we move toward what we focus on. So rather than focusing on the issues young people are facing in todays society, it is

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going to be more constructive and effective to focus on the skills and strengths they have as well as the skills and strengths they need to address these issues.

Building capacity into our young people prepares them for their future. Here are just 6 simple thoughts with regards to having a strengths and capacity building focus in your youth engagement strategy:

1. Young people are assets to be engaged, not problems to be solved or issues to be fixed.
2. Focus on individual strengths, skills and aspirations rather than labels, behaviours and issues.
3. View young people as abundant in resources.
4. Engagement activities to be based on participant self-determination.
5. Outreach and capacity building as the preferred mode of engagement.
6. Believe that people can learn, grow and change and will rise to the level of expectation you put on them.

When you cultivate young people's capacity and skills as leaders, you not only prepare them to be 21st Century leaders, but you also tap their energy and imagination to solve problems and create positive change in their schools and communities right now.

SOLUTION #3 - CONTRIBUTION

One of the six core needs of teens (as I outline in my report on "Understanding Teens - 3 Fears, 3 Questions and 6 Core Needs" also available to download from my website) is the need to for CONTRIBUTION.

Young people are engaged and motivated when they are given opportunities to contribute to something that is bigger than themselves. Its interesting to note that as human beings when

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we are given the opportunity to contribute to something outside of ourselves and the challenges we face, those challenges somehow seem to get a whole lot smaller.

Some of Australia's most impacting social enterprises started out as an activity of Youth Driven Activism to make a stand and contribute towards a cause. Examples that come to mind are the Thankyou Group, which started out as Thankyou Water. A bottled water company whose profits go to provide clean drinking water in third world countries. Started by a group of young people in Melbourne who couldn't stand by and believe that the billions of dollars being spent on bottled water every year couldn't go towards being a part of the solution to the lack of clean drinking water in some countries.

Another example is the Oaktree Foundation, again started by a group of young people who wanted to lead the charge to end poverty. They are now the largest youth-led and youth-run organisation with over 150,000 members worldwide.

These are larger scale contribution based projects, but they have the same power and ability to engage the hearts and the minds of young people in your community at a smaller scale. When you find a cause that is close to a young persons heart, you will find a passion and a drive that cannot be manufactured by any amount of hype. Maybe its a young person whose life has been touched by cancer or suicide. Maybe there is a family in your community who are doing it tough.

Whatever the cause, rallying young people around a cause and giving them the opportunity to use their skills, ideas and energy to help others is one of the most powerful methods of engagement. There are so many great organisations who are looking for support - World Vision with their 40 hour famine and child sponsorship program, just to name one.

Identifying causes and creating opportunities for young people to contribute is one of the top 10 ways of engaging the young people

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in your community in a way that not only expands their capacity as citizens and individuals, but it instills a sense of appreciation and gratitude in them for what they have and what they are able to contribute.

SOLUTION #4 - INVEST

As I outline in my report on “Understanding Teens - 3 Fears, 3 Questions and 6 Core Needs” also available to download from my website, the 6 Core Needs which drive human motivation are:

1. Certainty / Safety
2. Variety / Adventure
3. Love and Connection
4. Significance
5. Contribution
6. Growth

In my experience running youth engagement projects, young people will remain engaged and committed to a project if:

- They feel appreciated and affirmed.
- They feel safe, calm and certain.
- There is a sense of variety and adventure.
- They receive private and public recognition.
- They can see that their presence makes a difference.
- There is a chance for advancement.
- There is opportunity for personal growth.
- They feel capable of handling the tasks offered.
- There is a sense of being a part of a team.
- They have opportunities to make new and long lasting friendships.
- They have opportunities for input.
- They are contributing to a cause or a story which is bigger than themselves.
- Their personal needs are met.

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The need to invest in your youth engagement strategy goes beyond the budget, but if I ever want to know how much of a priority young engagement is in a council or community all I have to do is ask how much money is in the budget for youth engagement.

Where we put our money is a great reflection of our priorities and commitments. A council I've partnered with recently to develop a Youth Advisory Council and get them launched with a series of workshops and youth forums is a town of only 5,000 people, yet they have invested the money to employ a part time youth development officer and engaged me to partner with them on their journey.

Then there are other councils I speak with who have 60,000+ and they don't even employ a youth development officer.

If you are able to invest not only money and resources, but time, energy, human resources, attention and focus into your youth engagement strategy, plan and programs which allow you to create an environment where all 6 of these core needs are met, you will have a youth engagement strategy that young people will never want to leave and you'll find them wanting to become part of the team as they go on to grow into their young adult years.

The investment of time and money training your adults and ensuring that everyone is on the same page with regards to the importance of youth engagement in your community is paramount to the success of any youth engagement strategy or plan.

A council or community who are not willing to invest in their youth engagement strategy will often fall back into the mistake of tokenistic and decorative activities, just to tick boxes and appease the requests of those who are passionate about authentic youth engagement.

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Now that you understand a bit more about:

1. The 3 Universal Human Fears
2. The 3 Questions Asked of Adults By Teens
3. The 4 Mistakes Councils Make
4. The 4 Solutions To Make Sure You Have Authentic Youth Engagement.

My challenge for you, is to use those as a guide for creating an environment in your organisation and in your activities.

In the work I do with teenagers and adults in communities around Australia facilitating youth forums, running personal and leadership development workshops, youth worker training, parent workshops and motivational speaking - I get the opportunity to see it all.

Before you can have the right to speak into the lives of teenagers you need to answer the 3 questions (with your actions), address the 3 fears (with your words and your actions) - and THEN you will be positioned for the teenagers to receive from you as a trusted adult in their world. Make sure you're not making those 4 mistakes and build your youth engagement strategy around:

1. A Youth Driven / Collaborative Approach
2. Strengths Focussed and Capacity Building
3. Contribution
4. Investment In The Future

If you'd like to find out more of the work I do speaking in High Schools, running workshops for teenagers, parents, teachers and youth workers and youth development coaching, please have a look at my website - www.NathanHulls.com

I'd love to support you and your community in developing the capacity of the future leaders of our country in any way that I can.

Cheering you on!

Nathan Hulls

Teen Behaviour Specialist | Motivational Speaker | Youth Development Coach

**YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PARTNERSHIPS | YOUTH WORKER TRAINING | PARENT WORKSHOPS
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ABOUT NATHAN HULLS

**“REAL... ENGAGING... INSPIRING... INTERESTING... DYNAMIC...
FUNNY... EMPOWERING... UPLIFTING... MOTIVATING!”**

PREVIOUS CLIENTS

Strathbogrie Shire Council (VIC)
Gloucester Shire Council (NSW)
Northern Grampians Shire Council (VIC)
Kentish Council (Tasmania)
Central Coast Council (Tasmania)
Walcha Council (NSW)
Melton City Council (VIC)
Marion City Council (SA)
Temora Shire Council (NSW)
Onkaparinga Shire Council (SA)
Orange City Council (NSW)

Department of Justice (VIC)
Bundaberg City Council (QLD)
Bendigo City Council (VIC)
East Gippsland Shire Council (VIC)
Moorabool Shire Council (VIC)
Medicare Local – Murrumbidgee
Department of Sport and Recreation (ACT)
Culcairn Shire Council (NSW)
SAPOL – South Australia Police (SA)
Goomaling Shire Council (WA)
Karratha Shire Council (WA)

ADULT FEEDBACK

“Your approach is casual and down to earth, which makes it easy to connect and relate to. Your stories move people and resonate with the heart, the suffering as well as the power of hope. Inspiration and hope are great antidote to what I think is the greatest epidemic of all time: depression. I feel it is the beginning of something great for young people in East Gippsland, Thank-You!”

Amelie Boucher, Youth Engagement Officer, East Gippsland Shire Council

“Hands down the most constructive & motivating presentation/discussion I have been a part of. Your perspective is refreshingly realistic & the practicalities of it mean I have been able to begin implementing it into my work immediately. Having someone put into words & a logical order, many of the thoughts I have had myself is such a boost to continue trying to kick goals & to help young people kick their goals too! Thank you, Nathan Hulls, you're a star!”

Ellysa Cunningham, Youth Worker

STUDENT FEEDBACK

“To be honest, I was only going for free pizza, but I got so much out of your talk. You are a really inspiring and funny guy. I can't remember your exact words, but I loved the apple seed metaphor, that we all have potential inside us, even if it's really small!”

“I absolutely loved your speaking today, you presented it so well, and kept me entertained the whole time, I literally couldn't stop listening, everything you said was so relevant, one thing you talked about that really effected me was when you talked about putting the blame on one thing, and how you talked about how we are all important individuals and how we are all on this world for a reason. I would love to meet you again and I personally think that what you said would have changed many peoples lives including mine. Thank you so much, I enjoyed every minute of it.” Maddy (Student)

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