Socialna akademija

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Do young people lead, deliver or simply participate?

What is youth-led youth work, and how can organisations put it into practice?

01 What do we mean by youth-led youth work?

Youth-led youth work is an approach in which young people have **meaningful influence** over the purpose, direction and key decisions, and gradually **take responsibility** for initiatives they **feel ownership of**.

Youth leadership can develop over time. A young person may begin by participating in a youth exchange, later volunteer in an organisation and gradually take responsibility for designing and leading activities. What matters is not only the tasks they perform, but also how their influence over decisions grows.

This does not mean that youth workers lose their role. They remain actively involved: providing young people with support, access to resources, learning opportunities, safety and a clear framework. Their role is not to direct every step or provide ready-made answers, but to create the conditions in which young people can make meaningful decisions, take responsibility and learn from experience.

Two questions we often confuse

The role young people play in an activity and their actual decision-making power are not the same thing. It is useful to examine these two dimensions separately.

1 WHAT ROLE DO YOUNG PEOPLE PLAY?

Young people as participants - they take part and gain experience.

Young people as activity deliverers - they carry out agreed tasks.

Young people as initiators and decision-makers - they shape programme aims, options and decisions, but need not also be participants or deliver activities.

2 WHO SETS THE DIRECTION AND MAKES DECISIONS?

Adult-led youth work - adults make the key decisions.

Co-led youth work - young people and adults share decision-making.

Youth-led youth work - young people steer the process, while adults support it.

The two columns show independent dimensions: items in the same row are not pairs. Nor are the items ranked from "bad" to "good". The appropriate approach to youth work depends on the context. Not every young person wants to initiate or lead, and not at every moment.

Examples

Young people deliver, but do not decide.

Young people run a workshop, but adults have defined its topic, objective and methods. The young people are delivering the activity; that alone does not make it youth-led, as the key decisions remain with adults.

Young people decide, adults support.

A group identifies an issue, designs an event and allocates responsibilities. A youth worker arranges the venue, budget and support. The process can still be youth-led, even if adults do much of the work.

Clear boundaries do not rule out youth decision-making.

Young people choose their own approach, knowing which safety, financial or legal conditions are fixed or non-negotiable. Clearly defined boundaries do not in themselves mean that young people lack real influence.

02 Why does "youth-led" sometimes not work?

We often say: "Young people do not take initiative or do not want to participate." What lies behind this?

This may be due to very different factors. To respond appropriately, we need to identify where the barriers arise and check our assumptions with young people. Barriers often occur at three levels.

Barriers for young people.

Possible barriers include being overcommitted, limited experience, lack of trust or belonging, and fear of taking on responsibility. In a space that does not yet feel safe enough, young people may filter what they share rather than express these difficulties directly.

Barriers related to youth workers.

Pressure to meet measurable targets or deliver activities can push relationships, group dynamics and unspoken needs into the background. Youth workers may also take over tasks too quickly, leaving young people too little opportunity to develop ownership of an initiative - something that takes time.

Barriers in organisations and the wider environment.

Funding calls, deadlines, staff instability, insufficient training for youth workers and too little time to spend informally with young people limit opportunities for open-ended processes. Sometimes an organisation mainly reaches young people who already come to it, rather than seeking to widen its reach.

Where do things get stuck, and how can we respond?

The table below provides examples as starting points for observation and discussion. The same behaviour can mean different things, so these examples are not intended as diagnoses.

OBSERVATION	WHAT MIGHT BE BEHIND IT?	POSSIBLE YOUTH WORKER RESPONSE
YOUNG PEOPLE **"Nobody says what they want."**	There may not yet be enough trust to express a different opinion. Wishes may be communicated non-verbally rather than through concrete proposals.	More informal time together; smaller groups; different ways of expressing ideas; checking our interpretations with young people.
YOUNG PEOPLE **"They agree, then give up."**	The task did not originate from their own initiative; the level of responsibility exceeds their current skills or available time.	Clarify whose goal they are working towards; enable voluntary commitments and a first step that is simple enough to be achievable.
YOUTH WORKER **"If I do not do it myself, it will not get done."**	Deadlines and a sense of responsibility encourage solving problems for young people; the learning process remains invisible.	Agree in advance who makes which decisions; support delivery without taking over every problem; allow safe mistakes.
YOUTH WORKER **"The group has stopped because of conflict."**	Tensions can be part of relationships developing over time. Differences in language, cultural backgrounds, generations and communication styles can make participation more difficult.	Facilitate dialogue, clarify disagreements and adapt support to the group rather than simply suppressing conflict.
EXTERNAL CONDITIONS **"The project has already been decided."**	Indicators and contracts limit choices; some restrictions also come from established organisational habits.	Distinguish mandatory requirements from adaptable decisions; make room for choice already at the project design stage.
EXTERNAL CONDITIONS **"It is always the same young people who come."**	Some young people are not involved in organised activities or do not feel that the existing space is meant for them.	Go to places where young people already spend time; build relationships without immediately expecting them to join a programme.

> *"Young people are not motivated" may be a first impression, but it is not a sufficient explanation. Before responding, it is worth examining both the circumstances and our own way of working.*

03 What can we change?

In this final section, we propose some professional principles and practical approaches that make it more likely that young people will develop initiatives, take ownership of them and make decisions about them. These suggestions need to be adapted to each group, task and set of real-world constraints.

1 Relationships first, tasks second.

Time spent together without a predefined programme is not wasted time. It builds trust among young people and between young people and youth workers. Getting to know young people personally helps us recognise their interests, strengths and readiness to take responsibility. Only through genuine relationships can we understand when and how to share power in a way that supports their growth. It also helps create a sense of safety and allows interests to emerge that young people may not yet be able to put into words.

2 Share power, not just tasks.

Before an activity, we as youth workers identify which decisions are genuinely open: the purpose, content, resources, collaborators or adjustments during delivery. We do not merely distribute responsibilities; we also give young people the opportunity to influence the outcome.

3 Enable meaningful work and safe mistakes.

The task should address an issue that matters to young people. Only then are they likely to feel ownership. We agree on the support needed and what they can try on their own. We do not automatically solve problems for them.

4 Pay attention to people and process, not just results.

Youth organisations are living organisms, constantly changing and adapting to the people involved. Alongside completed tasks, we pay attention to relationships, inclusion, conflict, trust and initiative-taking. As young people grow, our ways of working need to grow with them. Constant change creates opportunities for constant growth - for young people, youth workers and organisations alike.

5 Different young people need different pathways.

Some participate quickly and vocally; others need time or less visible roles. Taking part more slowly is not necessarily less valuable. We open up different ways of getting involved and do not expect everyone to lead.

6 Find room to act, even within constraints.

We distinguish clearly between legal, safety and contractual requirements and established habits. We cannot change the former, but we can change the latter. We should question unnecessary restrictions and create as much room for meaningful youth decision-making as possible within clear and justified boundaries.

Typical situations: small shifts in practice

IF WE NOTICE...	WE CAN TRY...
A group meets regularly, but no initiatives emerge.	For a few meetings, reduce the intensity of the programme and instead explore together why young people come in the first place.
Young people only carry out agreed tasks.	Open up at least one important decision that would allow them to change the original plan.
We measure success mainly by the number of events and participants.	In our reflection, include observations about relationships, learning, decision-making and young people's autonomy. Better still, let young people develop the evaluation questions.

Questions for discussion among youth workers

- What communication cues tell me that young people feel ownership of an initiative - or that they do not - especially when they do not say so directly?
- What can I do to make our group an even safer space for expressing disagreement and new ideas?
- Which decision that young people do not yet control could genuinely be placed in their hands at the next activity?
- How much do I plan in advance? Why not more, and why not less?
- When did young people last change my original plan - and how did I respond?
- How well do I really know the young people around me, and how does this influence the opportunities I give them to take responsibility and lead?

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