Common Barriers in Youth Adult Partnerships and How To Overcome Them

(Many of the barriers for youth cause problems for adults as well.)

- **Meeting time is when youth aren't available** - If your group only meets during a school day, you severely limit your ability for youth to participate. Meetings during the school-day or meetings that run late into the evening may present challenges for youth.

- **Transportation** - Many youth rely on others for transportation. Consider holding your meeting in a location that is easily accessible by youth, or coordinate with parents to offer rides to youth attending the meeting.

- **Meetings last too long** - After about an hour and a half, meeting productivity often goes downhill. Consider setting a defined "ending time" for meetings and sticking to it, and share the agenda in advance so people can form their thoughts.

- **Meetings are boring** - Adding an icebreaker can make the meeting better for everyone. It can also help understand how to play off each others' strengths as a team.

- **Youth don't show up** - Usually there is a reason youth aren't attending. Engage youth and ask them what could be done to encourage them to attend the meeting.

- **Youth don't speak up** - For youth are used to raising their hand to be called on before they speak. Adults often blurt things out if they want their ideas heard. Consider giving youth an advantage here, by calling on them first, or asking adults to wait ten seconds before voicing their opinion. The leader of the meeting can also make it a practice to only call on those who have raised their hand, and using a gavel to quiet down others.

- **Adults want to act as parents, when that is not their role** - While parents may be part of the same group as their children, when they are serving on these decision-making entities, youth and adults should come to the table as equals. Consider the setup of the room and potential challenges or advantages if youth and their parents sit together during the meeting. Youth may find strength in their voice by sitting next to their peers instead of their parents.

- **"Token" youth** - Just like you wouldn't ask one adult to represent the views of all adults, avoid doing the same for youth. Youth can only provide their individual perspectives and ideas, and can't speak for all of their peers. A true youth-adult partnership structure would offer an equal number of youth and adult "seats" on the group.

- **More is expected from youth than adults** - Don't expect more for a youth than you would from a fellow adult. For example, when meetings are in progress, adults readily excuse other adults for responding to a text message or checking their phones, citing that, "It must be important," but adults may be quick to judge youth for doing the same. Remember that both youth and adults have other important things happening. Also in requirements for joining a group, youth shouldn't have to go through any more steps than adults.

- **Adults dismiss "wild" ideas/Don't value youth input** - Adults that tap into the creativity and out-of-the-box thinking of youth may find their own decision-making processes and programs will benefit. The unique combination of youth creativity and adult wisdom is what makes youth-adult partnerships work.

- **Lack of patience** - It's true that teaching someone else to do something often takes more time than doing it yourself - in the short term. However, assuring others in the organization and especially the next generation understand the necessary intricate processes ensures the organization's longevity.

- **Rules don't allow for youth participation** - Many times official rules or bylaws don't allow for minors to engage in the board. Sometimes it is just an assumption even though it isn't stated anywhere. Changing bylaws is usually a simple process.

- **No role/limited role for youth** - Youth, like adults, want a purpose for being at a meeting. If youth are just "keeping a chair warm" they can easily disengage. The meetings must be productive and they should walk away with an idea of how they contributed. When adults ask youth to do "grunt work" that adults aren't willing to do themselves, it can be disheartening.

- **Adults unwilling to give up control** - While it's true that youth-adult partnerships embrace a model of shared decision-making authority, which can feel like a loss of control to adults, adults are often motivated by the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of youth and may find their purpose for attending meetings even more valuable than before.

- **Unfamiliarity** - In some groups, the same adults have been working together for years, or even decades. New people to the group (whether youth or adult) could feel intimidated by those established relationships. Name tents can help overcome some of those concerns. It can also help with memory problems - it can be embarrassing when you have worked with a person for a long time and forget their name.

- **Adults are "stuck" in their ways and think there is only one "right" way to solve a problem** - Many times others are frustrated by this. Bringing in the new perspective of youth it can sometimes get past those frustrations because some are willing to listen to youth rather than adults.

- **Differences in comfort with technology** - Working to find a method of communication that works for everyone can sometimes be difficult. Being open about how communication will happen and making sure you are accepting of the diversity of comfort levels is important. Consider using multiple forms of communication in order to make sure everyone is included.

- **"Youth can't handle it"/Lack of trust** - Youth make mistakes. So do adults. Building resiliency to really mess things up and keep going forward is an important skill to develop. Sometimes adults assume youth can't handle an issue, when they can. Creating a safe space where youth can wrestle with difficult issues can develop skills to deal with those difficult issues as adults.

- **Room setup** - How is your meeting room set up? Communication flows very differently in a board room or round-table style room versus a classroom style room. Consider how your room set-up can reduce visual barriers and make everyone feel equal.