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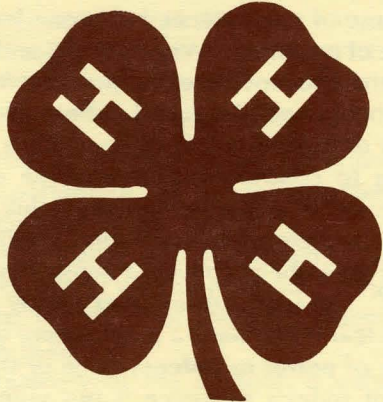
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Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service 4-H 290



Teens On 4-H Councils and Committees



Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Leo E. Lucas, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.



The Cooperative Extension Service provides information and educational programs to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, sex or handicap.

This publication is a guide for volunteer and professional adults who work with youth on 4-H councils and committees. The content has come from many sources. Adult and youth 4-H council members and extension staff attending area 4-H council meetings in 1988 thoroughly discussed the concepts. Their ideas and enthusiastic support for involving youth on committees and councils is appreciated.

Many decision making groups operate simultaneously in the county, both formally and informally. These groups make decisions about activities, educational programs, and how money will be raised and spent for the good of the community. Many, if not all, of the decisions affect the lives of youth as well as adults, and yet few youth take an active role. Why?

"The kids are too busy...They are not interested...They simply have not had the experience needed to make important decisions...Adults don't take the time to involve youth...It was tried before...The youth seem uninterested and we know how it's going to be done anyway." All of these statements may be true to some extent, but adults may be missing great opportunities for youth to give meaningful input, gain experience, improve decisions and build a working relationship between themselves and adults.

Those who work with organizations and groups, particularly those concerned with youth programs, are challenged to think about what they do and how they do it. Many groups do not have youth members. Often they do not seek youth opinions. Some have youth members but feel they are not effective, attend irregularly and say very little when they are there. Fortunately there are a few organizations that have active youth members forming a strong partnership with adults to reach organization goals.

The Benefits

When asked how youth benefit from serving on a 4-H council or committee with adults, responses included:

1. The positive feeling of being accepted by adults.
2. A sense of responsibility in contributing to something important and worthwhile.
3. Feelings of accomplishment.
4. Valuable experience that will help in school, a career and continued community involvement.

Learning to work with adults is challenging for youth even as they approach young adulthood. Adults have the advantage of experience and knowledge that youth gain only through continued involvement. Unfortunately it is common for adults to accommodate youth on a committee but be insensitive to their feelings. While this behavior is unintentional, it can be intimidating to the youth.

Identity Important To Adolescents

Four significant components of identity are important for the adolescent.*

A sense of **competence**. This may be related to, but not limited to one's work role. For most persons, work conveys the feeling that there is something that they can not only do, but can do well. In the mass society such a sense of competence helps one feel unique.

A sense of **usefulness**. Work, family, and other roles do more than occupy time and produce money. They are also the grounds for social definitions of the self. One such definition is the feeling that a person has something to contribute, that what he or she does represents something which people value.

A sense of **belongingness**. Work, family, political, and other roles help convey a sense that he or she "belongs." The work setting and family scene help teenagers learn they have a place where they belong.

A sense of **power or potency**. One of the awesome features of today's existence is our vulnerability to feelings of powerlessness. This problem goes beyond the limited boundaries of what we traditionally label "political". It has to do with our ability to exercise some power over those persons, organizations, or institutions which control or attempt to control us.

*From the publication "A Design for Youth Development Policies", Department of Health Education and Welfare.

Participation on 4-H councils and committees will help adolescents develop a sense of identity that in turn helps them contribute to decision making.



Benefits to 4-H

The benefits of 4-H participation are not limited to the youth themselves. The adults, the program and indeed the organization as a whole reap valuable benefits.

Youth bring enthusiasm and fresh ideas that come from seeing a situation for the first time. Adults may be trapped in attempting to duplicate a solution from the past that may no longer be appropriate.

Organizations that effectively involve youth in decision making will benefit in many ways:

1. The program will move in a direction relevant and important to the needs, informed choices and desires of young people.
2. Valuable youth resources are used to reach goals.
3. The presence of youth will stimulate the group to consider the views of those for whom the program is designed.
4. The creativity of the decision is enhanced by fresh ideas.
5. Learning experiences will enrich teens.

By helping youth grow, we accomplish the very purpose for which the 4-H program exists. The greater question seems to be, "How can we afford not to include youth in important decision processes of 4-H councils and committees?"

Making It Work

Does the 4-H Council constitution include a provision for youth membership?" Is there a plan to recruit youth for the 4-H Council?" Do committee appointments regularly include youth?

The size of the council or committee does influence its effectiveness. Large groups *may* bring the ideas, but a small group of nine or less is usually more effective in encouraging input to good decisions. An odd number will avoid a stalemate.

Consider the following alternatives for a 4-H council:

Alternative 1 — One-third youth
One-third 4-H volunteers
One-third community leaders

Alternative 2 — One-half youth
One-half 4-H volunteers

Alternative 3 — One-half youth
One-fourth 4-H volunteers
One-fourth community leaders

Alternative 4 — All youth

One or two youth on a 4-H council or committee with seven or more adults is token membership. If youth participation is desired, include a sufficient

number to allow reinforcement from peers. Many 4-H councils are moving toward equal representation of youth and adults. A 4-H council or committee made up entirely of youth with one or two adult advisors should not be overlooked.

Terms. The length of term for youth members may have to be different than for the adult members. Obligations to school, graduation and other circumstances suggest the youth terms be flexible. Some councils have two-year terms for youth. Others have one-year terms with reappointments if the youth is still available.

Age. A minimum of 15 years is a general guide for youth members. However, an individual's maturity may be more important than chronological age.

Recruiting

The recruitment of strong youth candidates for the 4-H council or committee is little different than recruiting adult members. These steps will help find capable and committed candidates.

1. The nominating committee identifies eligible youth. Start with a computer printout or list of 4-H members fitting the age requirement. Select youth who are knowledgeable about 4-H and 4-H programs, communicate well with their peers and are willing to talk and share ideas.
2. Personally contact the candidates to determine their interests in serving. Explain expectations of the assignment and gain a commitment should they be selected. This contact could be made by the nominating committee or the Extension Staff. While youth who are popular with their peers and active in many activities may be excellent candidates, don't overlook the individual who may not be as involved but who is willing to give a good effort.
3. Selection of youth members completes the process. Some counties let peers make the selection. Other counties require an open vote by all 4-H families. Keep the process open to make the opportunity available to the maximum number of youth.

Orientation

Expecting new members to become active without orientation is unrealistic and unfair. Someone giving time and energy to a cause deserves information and support to be effective. Consider the following:

1. Prepare a notebook or a packet of information for new members that includes (a) a copy of the constitution and a job description of the assignment, (b) lists of council/committee member names and telephone numbers, (c) minutes of

previous meetings or a list of issues dealt with during the past year, (d) budget information, (e) basic information about 4-H relevant to the assignment. Enrollment trends, participation reports and evaluation summaries will be helpful to the new person.

2. An orientation conducted by the president, committee chair or Extension Staff will pay dividends for new youth members. Help them feel the importance of the task and the value of their participation.
3. Spend time at the first meeting with introductions and making new members feel welcome.

Attitudes of Adults

Adults may have difficulty accepting youth as "legitimate" members of the council or committee. It is easier to involve youth in project legwork than to accept their ideas in making hard decisions about programs and budgets.

It is important to acknowledge that adult and youth ideas are likely to be different. They have different ideas about what is fun, good, bad, boring, beautiful or ugly. Even basic values may differ. Each has a unique and personal frame of reference that helps him see situations from his own perspective. Appreciate these differences as a strength of a diverse group, not obstacles to be overcome.

Youth members may need encouragement to contribute to a group discussion. Asking youth, as well as the adults, for their opinions will help get them started. Ask for more information if the idea is not clearly understood.

As issues are discussed, keep an open mind. Learn where ideas are coming from and why they are important. Look for "creative" solutions to problems and concerns. Avoid putting down other individuals. Focus on ideas rather than personalities, particularly on controversial topics.

Give youth meaningful roles appropriate for their abilities. Assigning busy work or jobs that adults do not want to do, will not help youth members gain leadership experience. One strategy may be assigning

youth with an adult for shared responsibility. The resulting teamwork will benefit everyone.

Above all, look to the youth in the group as a resource. They are concerned for the welfare of others. They are intelligent and knowledgeable about many things. Their values have been learned and cultivated from the adults in their lives. Above all, do not underestimate the potential of their young minds.

Recognition

Appropriate recognition is important for both youth and adults serving on councils and committees. Be sensitive to the feelings of youth members. Check with the youth members regarding the publicity given for their participation. They have a relationship with peers which they protect and guard very carefully. A poster showing the names of the council and/or committee membership could be displayed in the Extension Office or during the county fair. Some counties provide a name badge for council members to wear when attending 4-H events, including the county fair. Giving youth members specific responsibilities is recognition that carries the strong message, "You are capable, can be trusted and are a valued member of the council or committee."

In Summary

It is the policy of the Nebraska 4-H Youth Development Program to involve 4-H teens in leadership opportunities whenever possible. This provides a growth opportunity for the youth and strengthens program decisions.

For youth to be effective on councils and committees, it is imperative that the adults resolve to support the youth in every way possible. A passive attitude will be clearly read by the youth as meaning, "It is not important for the youth to participate." Positive steps must be taken to insure that youth are selected in a fair and open manner, receive adequate orientation and are strongly supported by adults. Youth leaders on 4-H councils and committees are a strong resource for planning current and future goals.

