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THE WILDLIFE
CONSERVATION SOCIETY, AN ORGANIZATION
INVOLVED IN THE PROTECTION
OF REEFS FOR OUR AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

SINCE IT OPENED
IN 1896
150 MILLION PEOPLE
HAVE VISITED
NEW YORK AQUARIUM.

304
LAND OPENS
ME TO
AQUARIUM



ELEVATING YOUTH VOICES
IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

This guide was created by the Wildlife Conservation Society with funding support from the Pinkerton Foundation. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature. To achieve this, we harness the power of our Global Conservation Program which operates in nearly 60 nations and all the world's oceans, and our five wildlife parks in New York City - Bronx Zoo, Central Park Zoo, Queens Zoo, Prospect Park Zoo, and New York Aquarium. We combine our expertise in the field, zoos, and aquarium to achieve our conservation mission.

Authors

Emily Stoeth, Manager of Youth Employee Engagement, Education, Wildlife Conservation Society
 Su-Jen Roberts, Director of Educational Research & Evaluation, Wildlife Conservation Society
 Karen Tingley, Director of Education, Zoos & Aquarium, Wildlife Conservation Society
youth@wcs.org

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The Bronx Zoo's Youth Employee Advisory Council (YEAC) was launched in 2017 as a pilot program informed by both *The Idea Driven Organization: Unlocking the Power in Bottom-Up Ideas* by Alan Robinson and Dean Schroeder, and our decades-long history of conducting positive youth development programming. Over the past three years, we have engaged more than 90 youth employees, generated hundreds of ideas, and shifted our thinking as an organization on the power of youth voice in our planning, operations, and culture.

Project Leadership

Emily Stoeth, Karen Tingley, Su-Jen Roberts, Michelle Turchin, Erin Prada

Project Advisors and Support Team

Pinkerton Foundation: Laurie Dien, Steven Dawson
 Wildlife Conservation Society: Judy Commando, Liam McCarthy,
 Amanda Nichols, Lauren Pedro, Emily Pinkowitz, Randi Winter

Departmental Leadership Partners

Veronica Barnes, Mike Casella, Joe Dominici, Chris Johnson,
 Edith Luis, Chris Mackay, Katie Manion, Chris Papaleo, Lauren Pedro,
 Olivia Ramos, Bricken Sparacino, Kate Svoboda, Elias Venetsanos,
 Randi Winter, Alyssa Whu.



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Introduction

Cultural institutions (i.e., zoos, museums, science centers, botanic gardens, and libraries) are continually faced with the need to expand, evolve, and adapt to changing conditions in our communities. They face myriad issues, including increasing operational costs, remaining relevant in an ever-changing society, and supporting an incoming workforce with diverse backgrounds and needs not currently met by many of these workplaces. Addressing these complex and interconnected issues will require unconventional approaches.

Many cultural institutions have devoted time and effort to exploring how to create experiences that increase visitation and enhance community connections. They have determined that visitors want to feel welcome in museums and see their voices represented in the exhibits. They want their trip to the zoo or botanic garden to be personally relevant and enriching. With limited leisure time, visitors want to make sure that they have a high return on their investment, which also includes expectations for high-quality customer service. These needs may require a significant overhaul in how cultural institutions develop experiences, design exhibits, and train front facing staff.

Additionally, the next generation of employees has demonstrated their desire - and in some cases, their expectation - that employers will provide enriching opportunities that contribute to an inclusive and supportive work environment. Financial and institutional constraints mean that cultural institutions can't necessarily provide all of the amenities that the corporate sector provides. However, cultural institutions have a mission and a cadre of staff who are passionate about their work and about creating an engaging environment for our visitors.

What if cultural institutions harnessed their employees' passion for inspiring visitors and used their insight to inform change? What if they sought diverse perspectives - including those of youth employees - to address the issues mentioned above? What if senior leadership recognized that they alone cannot solve these issues and that they need the knowledge of a wide variety of people, many of whom are entry level, front line youth employees?

This guide focuses on how cultural institutions can systematically elicit meaningful feedback from the next generation of employees while simultaneously contributing to their professional growth. We developed a [Youth Employee Advisory Council](#) at the Bronx Zoo to do just that. This program benefits both the Bronx Zoo and our youth employees and has the potential to impact both the visitor experience and workplace culture at an organization-wide scale.



What is a Youth Employee Advisory Council?

A youth employee advisory council is a small group of front line staff members who are invested in making their workplace better for themselves, as well as our visitors. The program has two main goals:

- ▶▶ Harness the unique insight of front line staff to make real change to business operations and workplace culture.
- ▶▶ Provide career development and mentorship to youth employees.



Why Create a Youth Employee Advisory Council?

There are three main reasons for implementing this type of program:

- ▶▶ Business impacts: Improve visitor and employee experience.
- ▶▶ Diversity, equity, and inclusion: Create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for visitors and employees.
- ▶▶ Youth development and advancement: Provide professional development and advancement opportunities for youth employees.



Background

The Youth Employee Advisory Council program is informed by *The Idea Driven Organization: Unlocking the Power in Bottom-Up Ideas* which posits that large numbers of small ideas can empower organizations to innovate in unexpected ways.¹ The philosophy argues that 80% of an organization's potential for improvement exists in front line ideas, simply because these staff are in the unique position to notice problems that their managers may not. If organizations can find a way to tap into this essential stream of ideas, there will be benefits for their staff, visitors, and the bottom line.

The program design also incorporates key elements of positive youth development research, which emphasizes creating an environment that capitalizes on youths' assets and agency while providing the support necessary for them to thrive.² Our approach includes connecting youth with like-minded peers, providing opportunities for skill and career development, and integrating time for personalized mentoring.



¹ Robinson, A. R. and Schroeder, D. M. (2014). *The Idea Driven Organization: Unlocking the Power in Bottom-Up Ideas*. Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc.

² Lerner, J.V., Phelps, E., Forman, Y.E. and Bowers, E.P. (2009). Positive Youth Development. In *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (eds R.M. Lerner and L. Steinberg). [doi:10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001016](https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001016)


**"I REALLY WANT TO
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THIS WAS A GREAT
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I'M SERIOUS AND I'M
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OUR ZOO BETTER."**

-YEAC MEMBER



**"THIS KIND OF
OPENED OUR EYES
TO THINK 'MAYBE
THERE IS A BETTER
WAY' AND WE HAVE
SUPPORT TO TRY
AND GET THAT
DONE."**

-YEAC MEMBER



PROGRAM DESIGN

Institutional Buy-In



As with any organization-wide project, having the support of leadership will contribute to its success. Your organization may support the concept of a youth employee advisory council but in order to operationalize it, you need buy-in from the right people.

Who makes decisions to improve the employee and visitor experience? Finding the right level of decision-maker will depend on your organization. They should be connected to and knowledgeable about the day-to-day experience of front line staff. They should be able to make autonomous operational decisions. Involve these people early on to increase their personal investment in the program.

Here is the pitch:

- ✓ This program will increase our understanding of the visitor and employee experience and provide actionable steps for improvement.
- ✓ It will foster a culture of innovation that embraces feedback from front line team members and proactively addresses challenges that may not be noticed by management.
- ✓ It will serve as a catalyst to understanding elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion within our organization. Many DEI plans include elevating diverse perspectives and the youth voice is an integral part of that plan.
- ✓ It will support youth as they build skills and explore career options at our organization. This can create a stronger internal talent pipeline.

At the Bronx Zoo

We convened an executive level working group with individuals who oversaw human resources and talent development, youth development, and front line staff. This working group would serve as program advisors. We hired a Program Manager to oversee implementation, including recruitment, idea generation, and liaising with department leadership. We enlisted the support of Directors in our Education and Business Services (including Admissions, Merchandise, and Restaurants) Departments, who hire almost 90% of front line staff. We scheduled meetings with small teams of department leaders to introduce the program, get feedback, and address concerns. Leadership committed to attend weekly 30-minute idea review meetings with the Program Manager to provide feedback on submitted ideas and identify ideas for implementation.

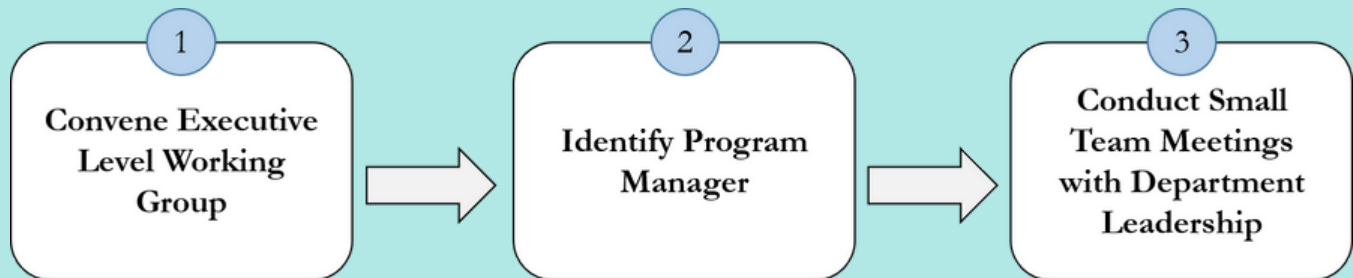


Figure 1. Building institutional buy-in at the Bronx Zoo



Framework, Goals & Timeline



Who?

How many youth will you recruit? It's important to start small: 10-30 participants is a reasonable number for your pilot program, but this number will vary depending on the size of your organization. Keeping things small will make it easier to find a regular time for everyone to meet in person. Recruit participants from the same departments as the leadership involved, so participants contribute ideas that can be reviewed and approved by those members of leadership.

When?

How often will participants meet and for how long? Ideally, idea generation should be integrated into someone's regular work day. Short, frequent meetings are most effective; aim for 30-60 minutes per week. If your group is large or employees' schedules vary, offer multiple time options each week. Does your organization have a busy season? If so, the idea generation process should take place during this time.

How will you motivate participants?

The program will help participants develop skills that will be useful throughout their careers, regardless of the type of profession they pursue. They will develop relationships with colleagues who will help them learn about the organization and connect them with opportunities for advancement. Participants should be paid for their time; if possible, make the program a part of their regular work day. If this is not possible, build the program as an internship and offer a stipend.

Who will run the program?

We highly recommend having a dedicated staff member oversee the program. Ideally, this person will sit in a "neutral" department and have a position with sufficient authority to effectively liaise with department leadership. This person should have youth development expertise and a deep knowledge of the organization in order to provide initial feedback on ideas.

At the Bronx Zoo

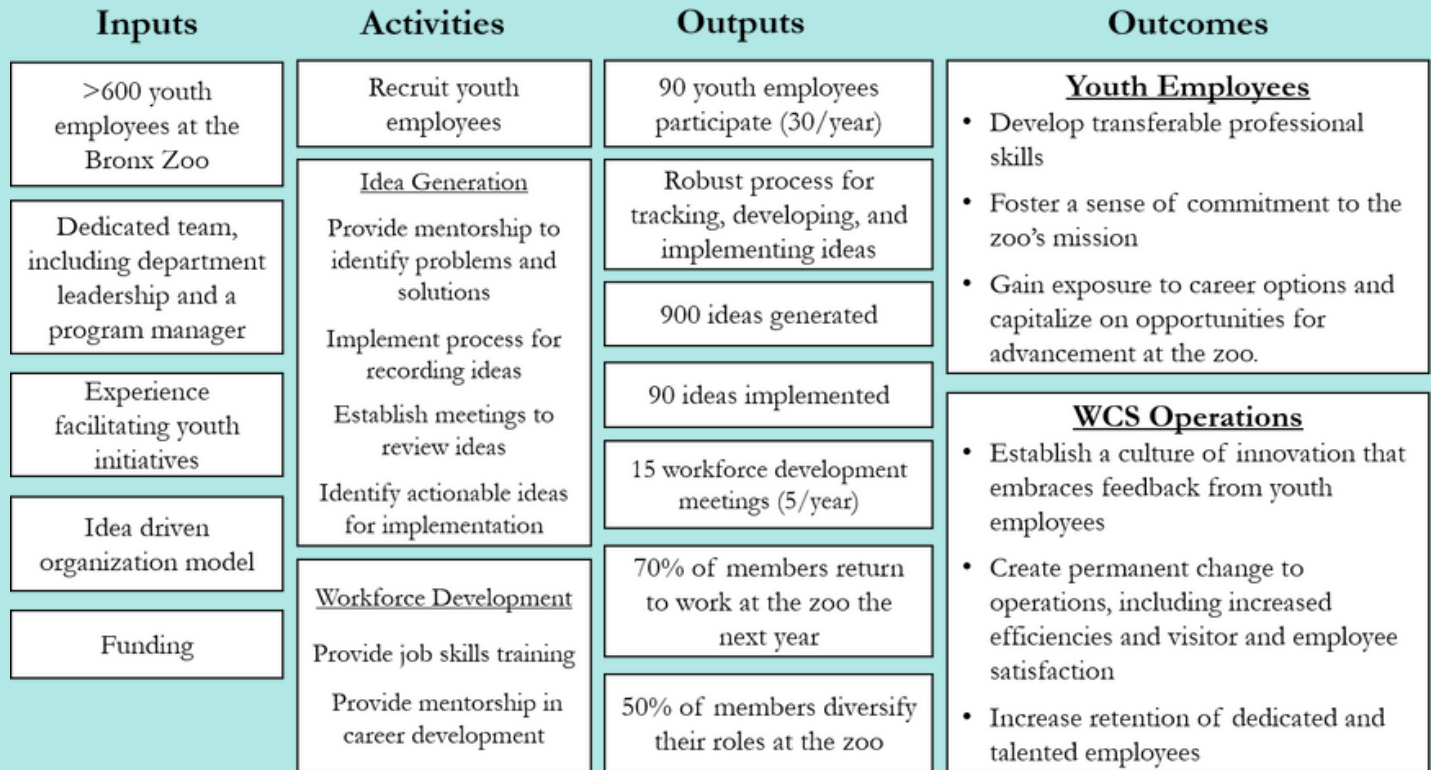


Figure 2. Bronx Zoo Youth Employee Advisory Council logic model

- ▶▶ Start small: aim for 10-30 participants for a new program.
- ▶▶ Get broad representation from multiple departments.
- ▶▶ Identify a dedicated program manager who can engage with youth and liaise with department leadership.

At the Bronx Zoo

Each year, we recruited a group of 30 youth from more than 7 departments, which collectively hire about 600 youth annually. Participants met weekly for one hour, selecting between three different meeting times scheduled before or after work shifts. We offered a \$150 stipend and provided food for all meetings and workshops. The Program Manager facilitated WCS youth programs for over six years before taking this position.

Figure 3. Bronx Zoo Youth Employee Advisory Council timeline





At the Bronx Zoo

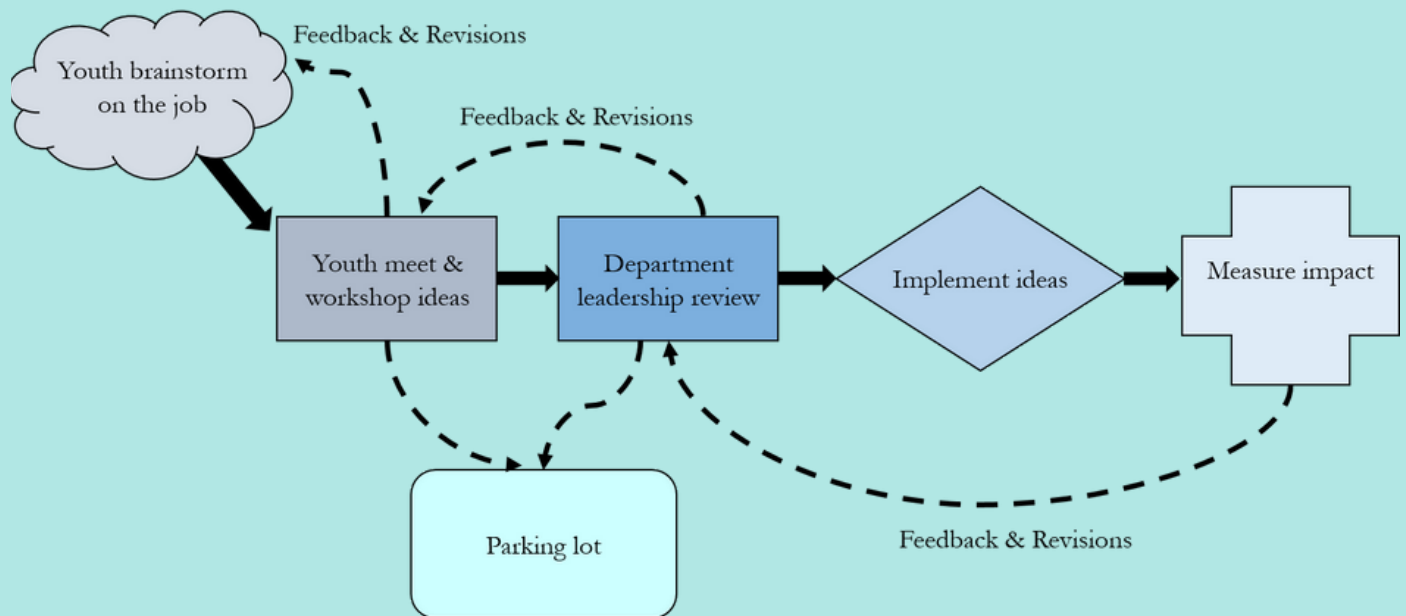


Figure 4. Idea generation, review, and implementation process.



Participant Recruitment

Recruiting for a youth employee advisory council requires a unique strategy. While it may work to recruit for other youth or employee opportunities using online methods, here, it will likely be more effective to go back to the basics.

- Post flyers in employee areas.
- Walk around and talk to youth who are out doing their jobs.
- Ensure managers are aware of the program to help identify great candidates.
- Attend pre-shift employee meetings to talk about the program and build excitement.
- Recruit broadly; include youth from as many different departments as possible.

The Application Process

Set up a simple application process. Do not let application responses bar someone from participating, but use it to ensure that youth are willing to exert some effort to be a part of the program.

- Bring a copy of the application during in-person recruitment so that youth can apply on the spot.
- Include a question about availability to ensure that youth will be able to attend meetings.
- Include short answer questions that assess interest, motivation, and growth aspirations.
- If possible, conduct interviews to meet candidates and discuss their ability to commit to the program schedule.



Who makes a good YEAC member?

Entry-level front line employees who are:

- ✓ passionate and excited about their job
- ✓ interested in developing leadership skills
- ✓ creative and willing to problem solve
- ✓ able to meet the scheduling requirements of the program

“ I first heard about the program from another employee and was interested. But as luck would have it, I ran into the Program Manager who was recruiting out in the zoo. She gave me a ton of information and was able to answer my questions right there on the spot. If I hadn’t run into her that day, I probably wouldn’t have joined or encouraged my friends to join as well. ”

-YEAC Member

At the Bronx Zoo

We had a difficult time recruiting using flyers and emails because the program was brand new and targeted current employees who were not used to being recruited for internal programs. We found that the best strategy was to walk around and talk to employees directly. Learning details about the program and meeting staff face-to-face made youth more likely to apply. Youth applied online and verified that they had the support of their supervisor. The Program Manager interviewed applicants in person or by phone.

"[WE WENT FROM]
REGULAR EMPLOYEES
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-YEAC MEMBER



"THE LITTLE IDEAS CAN
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-YEAC MEMBER



PROGRAM DELIVERY



YEAC members attended 3 different types of meetings

Meeting Type 1

Weekly problem finding and solving

Youth generate ideas based on their experiences while working. Select ideas are submitted to department leadership for approval and eventual implementation.

Meeting Type 2

Targeted idea development

Youth act as a panel of advisors and provide feedback on topics of interest identified by leadership.

Meeting Type 3

Workforce development

Youth receive professional development, training, and mentorship.



Meeting Guidelines

- Create a safe space and allow time for youth to get to know each other and the Program Manager.
- Provide time for icebreakers and informal discussions such as “what was something crazy that happened today?” This is key to developing comfortable working relationships, but it’s also a way to increase organizational knowledge by learning about others’ jobs.
- Provide snacks to reenergize employees who might be tired from a long day of work.
- Establish collective norms for meetings.

At the Bronx Zoo

Here are the collective norms we used for meetings:

- Show up on time and come prepared.
- Stay mentally and physically present.
- Step up /step back (participate actively but don’t take over the conversation).
- Listen with an open mind.
- Challenge the idea, not the person.
- Respect anonymity. We want this to be a safe space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas. Ideas will leave this room, but we do not have to ascribe them to any one person unless they want to be acknowledged.



Meeting Type 1: Weekly Problem Finding and Solving



According to the *Idea Driven Organization*, **problem sensitivity** is a key driver of ideas. When you launch this program, your goal is to train and encourage employees to seek out and embrace problems, instead of avoiding them. Employees should carefully observe their surroundings and if they see a challenge, write it down, and come up with an idea to fix it.

1 Orient Participants to the Idea Generation Process

Youth will first need to develop their skills in “**problem finding**.” This may not be something that comes naturally to everyone, but once you begin to prime yourself to be on the lookout, it becomes easier to spot problems. Once a participant is able to recognize a problem, they can brainstorm ideas on how to fix or overcome it.



Problem Brainstorm

In small groups or pairs, ask youth to answer the question, “what is something you struggle with in your job?” Bring the full group back together and ask for a volunteer to share a problem. After a problem is presented, ask for some ideas of potential solutions to this problem. Allow for lively discussion and cooperation, ensuring that the discussion remains solutions-focused. The problem should merely be a jumping off point to explore solutions.

Glow and Grow

Give each participant a piece of paper and ask them to fold it in half. On one side, they should jot down the things that they think work really well in their jobs (“glows”). On the other side, they should jot down the things that could be improved (“grows”). Encourage youth to share their glow and grow ideas in small groups. Are there areas that overlap? Did some participants identify “grows” that others listed as “glows?” Encourage youth to pay special attention to the “grows,” because we will return to these to help us generate ideas in the upcoming weeks.

The first few meetings will require a lesson plan and structure to support participants as they learn about the idea generation process. After this orientation period, meetings will become more routine and require less structure because youth will be fully entrenched in the idea generation process. They will also receive feedback from leadership on their ideas, providing topics for further discussion. Later in the program, if idea generation begins to decline, you might need to introduce idea activators, such as a guest speaker or a brainstorm prompt (see p. 25 for additional examples).

At the Bronx Zoo

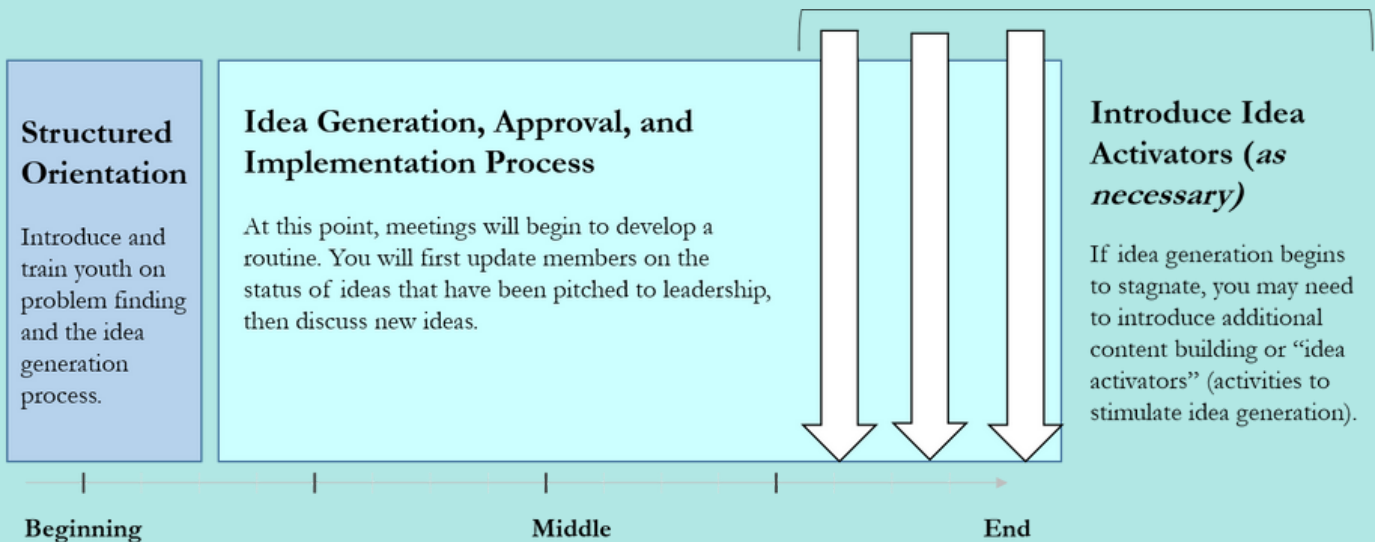


Figure 5. Progression of the idea generation meetings from the beginning to the end of the program.

2 Collect Problems/Ideas

Now that the youth have learned how to identify problems and solutions, you will need to systematically categorize idea submissions. Youth should submit ideas to a shared digital tool that keeps a permanent record of all ideas submitted, such as Google Forms. Submissions should include:

- Name of idea generator (you may include an option to leave this blank)
- Short description of problem
- Short description of solution (if a participant does not have a solution yet, it's OK to leave this blank).

During in-person meetings, review submitted ideas with the group. Allow time for questions, clarification, and sharing others' experiences. Determine if the idea requires changes, such as more detail or rephrasing, and make updates accordingly.

Tips

- ▶▶ Collect ALL ideas, including those that might be expensive, outlandish, or incomplete. No idea is a bad idea at this stage.
- ▶▶ Build time for discussion into in-person meetings.
- ▶▶ Reviewing new ideas often leads to the formation of additional ideas. Record these as well.





Tips to generate ideas

- Bring in guest speakers. What organizational knowledge are your participants lacking? If this is getting in the way of productive idea generation, consider inviting a guest speaker to discuss these key issues. For example, a guest relations manager could discuss common visitor complaints and how they are handled or a financial manager could explain how the organization makes money.
- Encourage crowdsourcing. Youth should solicit ideas from their coworkers and bring the ideas to meetings.
- Brainstorm answers to different questions and use those answers to generate ideas.
 - What questions do customers ask most frequently?
 - What are the locations where you have noticed that visitors are often asking for directions?
 - What tasks do you, as an employee, waste your work time doing?
 - What do you wish someone had told you when you began working here?

3 Identify Ideas That Will Be Pitched to Leadership

Once you have collected ideas, the focus of in-person meetings will shift to evaluating ideas and deciding which to elevate. You will need to train youth to evaluate which ideas should move on to the next step in the process and be pitched to leadership. Not all of the original ideas will be submitted for approval. You must create a mechanism for evaluating the raw ideas and deciding which ones should move forward.

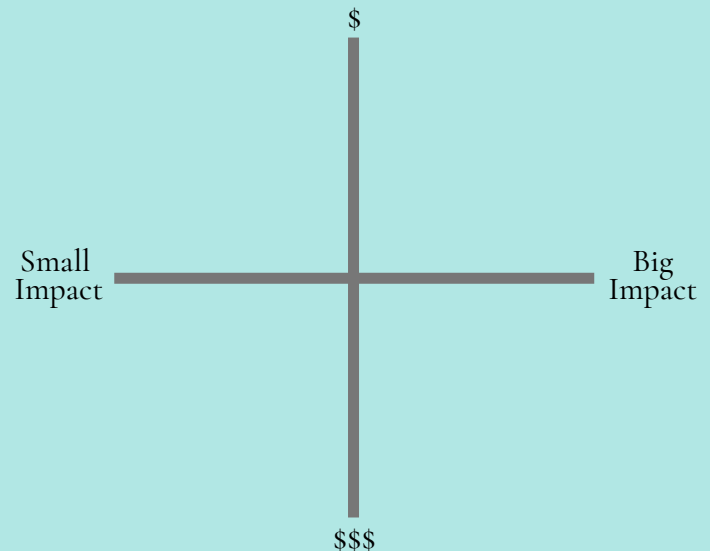


Idea sorting

Now that we have generated a lot of ideas, we need to develop a system for sorting them. Let's go through all of the ideas we have developed so far and sort them into these three categories:

- Worth pursuing
- Parking lot (too big, can't accomplish right now, WAY too expensive)
- Further research required

We will focus our efforts on the ideas in the “worth pursuing” bucket. To help evaluate which ideas should be submitted to leadership, it may be helpful to place each idea on this matrix. Ideas in the top right corner potentially have the greatest chance of being approved since they are the least expensive and will have the biggest impact. However, ideas that are placed in other quadrants might have value to the organization as well and should not be discounted.



4 The Idea Approval Process

Once the group has selected their ideas for review, transfer the ideas into a shared document for the approval process. The group should refine the descriptions to make them specific and actionable for leadership review. You may want to include the following information:

At the Bronx Zoo

| Entry Fields | Description/Tips | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Idea Generator & Collaborators (if relevant) | Include the names of anyone involved in the idea process to make it clear when ideas are relevant to multiple people, roles, or departments. | John (Call Center) & Julie (Education Department) |
| Idea/Problem | Describe the identified problem; be as specific as possible. | When talking on the phone in the call center, cradling it on your shoulder while trying to type is difficult and uncomfortable. |
| Solution | Outline a potential solution for the identified problem. | Pilot the use of headsets for a group of Sales Associates. |
| Approximate Cost | It may be challenging to know the exact cost, so you might opt for a scale instead: Low cost <\$300, medium cost <\$1,200, high cost >\$1,200 | Low cost <\$300 |
| Projected Impact | What will this idea do? Increase revenue? Improve employee experience? Improve visitor experience? | Employees will be more comfortable. Employees may also make additional sales and deliver the highest level of visitor experience. |
| Department(s) needed to review | Which department(s) need to approve this idea? | Admissions |
| Replication and Reach | If successful, how can this idea be expanded into other divisions? | Are there other departments or units who could benefit from using headsets? |
| Department Review Outcome | Example: Approved for implementation, pending approval- more information needed, not approved | Approved |
| Rationale | Explanation if idea was not approved/questions/comments | n/a |
| Implementation Plan | Who will implement the idea and by what date? | Call center manager will order headset by xx/xx. |

Complete before submitting to leadership

Complete during leadership review

Figure 6. Example fields for the idea approval process

Additional considerations for the idea review process:

- Who is pitching the ideas? The Program Manager or the youth employees?
- If a department leader is not available to approve ideas, can someone else step in?
- How will good ideas be replicated for other positions or departments?

At the Bronx Zoo

The Program Manager created a Google doc containing all ideas for review and met weekly with leadership from participating departments, convening one meeting with Education and one with Business Services for scheduling efficiency. These meetings lasted for 30 minutes, during which the Program Manager shared the Google doc, using it to pitch new ideas to leadership. Leadership discussed the ideas, provided feedback, and made decisions that the Program Manager recorded in the Google doc and reviewed with youth during their next meeting. If department leadership was absent, the Program Manager tried to arrange alternate meetings and if not possible, pitched ideas through email.



***The Idea Driven Organization* suggests that **frequency** and **speed** are essential to the idea generation and review process.**

Tips for the facilitator

- ✓ Have **empathy** for the youth and their work-related challenges. Allow them to complain a little, however, try to take their gripes and help translate them into problems with solutions.
- ✓ In general, be as **neutral** as possible. However, don't hesitate to play devil's advocate to encourage youth to think about the challenges of implementing an idea.
- ✓ Respect **confidentiality**. Youth need to trust that you will not identify them to leadership unless they want to be recognized.
- ✓ Prioritize the feedback loop. When you have to deliver bad news, such as an idea not being approved, try to share as much information as possible in explaining why. When ideas that are submitted for review receive little or no feedback, employees begin to lose trust and the entire idea generation system will break down. Additionally, this information can help youth learn more about the organization, including complexities they might have not considered.
- ✓ If the idea is not approved, go back to the original problem to see if there is a way to move forward with a modified solution.
- ✓ Be prepared to escalate workplace misconduct reports to appropriate channels within your organization. For example: allegations of sexual harassment or mistreatment by a supervisor.

Early wins are especially important, so consider elevating ideas that can move through to implementation quickly.





Meeting Type 2: Targeted Idea Development

In addition to problem finding, you should think of this group as an invaluable audience for feedback on a variety of topics. If there are subjects that are of particular interest to leadership, create a plan to solicit targeted information from the group. Targeted idea development sessions will feel very much like a focus group.

Focus Group 101

- ✓ Keep the group small (no more than 8 participants).
- ✓ Run multiple focus groups so that you can include all voices or recruit participants who reflect a variety of experiences.
- ✓ Establish collective norms.
- ✓ Provide background on why you are asking for input from this group. Share that leadership is particularly interested in this group's point of view and will use their feedback to inform policies and practices.
- ✓ Include a variety of activities that will ensure engagement and participation from all members. If possible, include individual reflection (such as post-it brainstorms), small group activities (such as think/pair/share), and large group activities (such as vote with your feet).
- ✓ Keep the group solutions-oriented. After soliciting feedback, build in an opportunity for participants to brainstorm solutions.

Aggregating and Reporting Feedback

After completing a targeted idea development session, the facilitator should aggregate feedback to share with leadership. Unlike problem finding, the feedback from targeted idea generation sessions is completely anonymous. Prioritize documenting the range, rather than frequency of responses. It is most helpful to share majority opinions while also acknowledging if there was not a consensus in the group. When possible, include suggested action steps or solutions.



Identify a topic that is relevant for all youth, such as onboarding and training. Ask participants to form groups with people in similar positions and spend 5 minutes identifying the main parts of their training. Ask a volunteer from each group to share their list with the larger group, with a scribe recording the items on a whiteboard. Pose questions that prompt the group to reflect on individual items or the entire list. For example, “In what ways do you feel that your training prepared you for your job?” or “Are there parts of training you would change?”





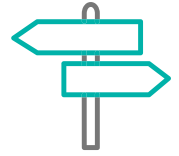


At the Bronx Zoo

We held targeted feedback sessions on the following topics:

- | | |
|---|---|
| Recruitment | What made you want to work for this organization? Which parts of the recruitment website are helpful / not helpful? |
| Training | What parts of training were the most valuable? Was there any information that you did not receive but needed? |
| Employee Recognition | How do your supervisors / the organization recognize your successes as an employee? Which were the most meaningful? What else could the organization do to make you feel appreciated? |
| Employee Retention | Why do employees leave the organization before the end of the season? What are some ways to mitigate this? |
| Feedback & Performance Reviews | What kind of feedback do you receive from your supervisor? Was it sufficient? For this feedback session, youth reviewed the various performance review instruments used by different departments and provided feedback. |
| Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion | How welcomed do you feel at the organization? What is working well? What needs improvement? |

Meeting Type 3: Professional Development, Training, & Mentorship



This program can help promising part-time employees develop career readiness skills by providing relevant, youth-focused professional development. Investing in part-time employees' skills and career development can increase retention of dedicated and talented employees who pursue new and elevated roles within the organization.

Many organizations provide professional development or networking opportunities to their full-time employees that may also benefit part-time employees. Conduct an inventory of the professional development resources at your organization. Are there ways that these can be adapted for youth? What are some additional skills that are needed early in one's career?

Critically, the facilitator also should work with youth to provide one-on-one career counseling and support finding new opportunities within the organization. This mentorship process includes not only identifying open positions, but also contacting hiring managers with recommendations. Personalized career support often means the difference between retaining and losing a high-performing part-time employee.

At the Bronx Zoo

Youth attended five three-hour workshops that covered a variety of topics including:

- Communication in the workplace
- Working on a team
- Goal setting
- Resume building, cover letters, and interview skills
- Accepting feedback
- Customer service
- Introduction to leadership and managing others

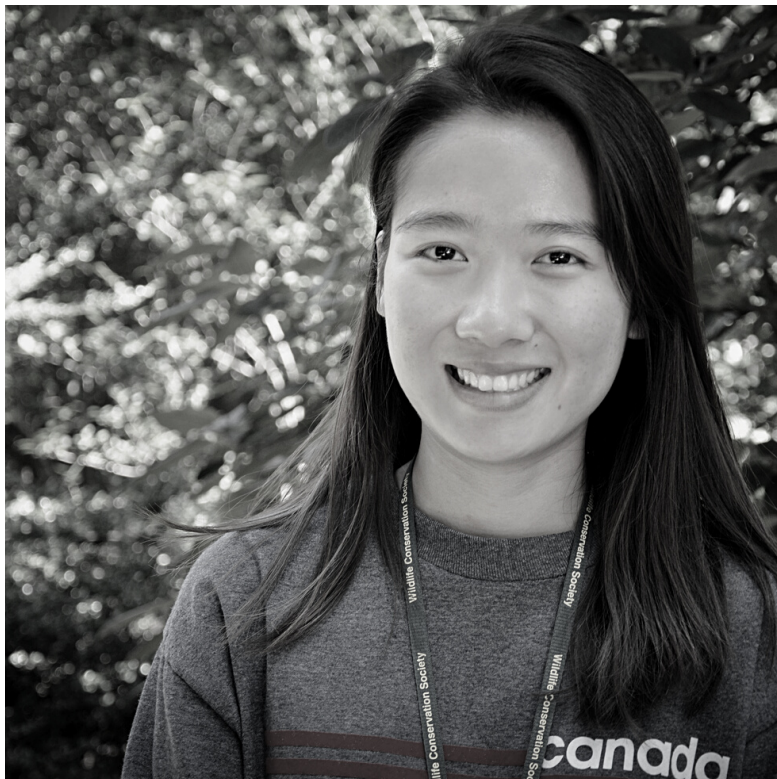
Tips

- Identify internal professional development resources that can be adapted for youth in part-time positions.
- Get to know participants individually, including strengths, areas for improvement, and career aspirations.
- Share job opportunities and support interested youth applying for positions, including contacting hiring managers.
- Develop a mechanism to track the movement and advancement of participants.



**"[YEAC] MAKES YOU
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COMMUNITY AND
YOU HAVE A PLACE
HERE."**

-YEAC MEMBER



**"[YEAC] IS
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AMONGST THE
TEAM HERE."**

-YEAC MEMBER



ASSESSING IMPACT

Impact on Youth



The impacts on youth participating in the program are likely to be multi-faceted. Identify your target outcomes early in the program and align your impact assessment methods with these outcomes. Do you want to build workforce skills, develop a peer network, or support youth into new careers? Measuring impact will be most successful if you focus on the specific goals of your program rather than trying to do everything at once.

Consider how you want to assess the impacts on youth before the program starts. If your program is small (20 or fewer youth), you should prioritize qualitative methods; focus groups work particularly well in this context because youth are used to working with each other and building off of others' thoughts. If your program is large (more than 20 youth), you may consider additional quantitative methods, such as surveys, to ensure that you capture feedback from everyone.



Youth- Empowerment & Inclusion

Since one of the main goals of YEAC is about youth empowerment and including their voice in the fabric of cultural institutions, you will want to dedicate a portion of your assessment to this element. Your assessment should focus on feelings of connection to the organization and may explicitly prompt youth to reflect on their perceptions before and after participating in the program. You may use questions like:

- What is the one idea that has meant the most to you? Why was it meaningful?
- What was it like to collaborate with youth from other departments? What worked well? What was challenging?
- How has the idea generation process impacted your feelings about your job? About the organization?
- Do you feel like your department / the organization values input from employees? Why or why not?

The information gathered can help you understand the impact the program has had on youth as well as any changes in their perception of the organization.

“ I felt like I was actually making a change to the whole organization...it’s a satisfying feeling. ”

- YEAC Member

At the Bronx Zoo

Youths’ reaction to having an idea accepted and implemented was universal: it made them realize that their thoughts mattered to the organization. Though implemented ideas were the primary motivator, participants felt that the process itself - specifically knowing that their ideas were being considered by leadership made them feel connected to their workplace and colleagues. Working with front line employees in other departments strengthened that sense of community and belonging and many youth developed friendships that lasted beyond the program.

Youth- Career Advancement

Your assessment should focus on how youth are diversifying their skills, work experience, or roles within your organization. To do this, you must first develop an understanding of each participant's goals. You may use questions like:

- What are your career goals? How can your job help you achieve those career goals?
- Are there other roles or departments you would like to explore? What are they?

You should consider how you will track youth over time, which can help you demonstrate the impact of the program and tailor the career support to the needs of the participants. It can be challenging to track youth after the program ends because they are no longer in regular contact through in-person meetings. The Program Manager may be the most appropriate person to follow up with youth because of their position as a trusted mentor. A text every few months provides an opportunity for the Program Manager to reestablish contact, learn about what the youth are doing, and if there are ways that the organization can further support their career development.

At the Bronx Zoo

Participants had increased access to information about internal employment opportunities through regular conversations with other group members and the Program Manager. To date, approximately 30% of participants have diversified their roles within WCS, making an upward or lateral move within the organization. 19% of participants have received promotions.



Impact on Leadership



This program relies on buy-in from leadership and understanding their experiences can inform program changes and increase their interest. Conducting one-on-one interviews with leadership that focus on their key tasks can provide insight into successes and areas for improvement. The program will likely change from year to year, so take leadership input seriously and incorporate feedback into programmatic evolution.

In these interviews, leadership may also share their perceptions of program impact, potentially surfacing impacts that you had not considered previously. For example, has the program changed their understanding of common visitor questions? Has it changed how they interact with front line staff? Their feedback may inform how you approach your assessment of program impacts.

“ This program has changed my perspective on the way that I check in with staff. I’m not afraid to ask them questions about our work because I’ve realized that they are already thinking about these things and I can use their insight. ”

- Department Leader

At the Bronx Zoo

We interviewed members of leadership who were involved in idea review and implementation, and they universally praised the process. Several people emphasized how the process built connections across departments and provided insight into how others address similar challenges. Members of leadership who supervised front line staff noted that the program changed their interaction with these employees, making them more likely to approach them with questions or problems to consider. Leadership also reported that even when ideas were not novel, the process helped to prioritize actions that were already on their radar. Finally, some noted that they received their own morale boost from being able to say yes to ideas.

Impact on Business Operations



Assessing the impact of implemented ideas will allow you to understand how insight from front line employees can create change at your organization. Your method for measuring impact will depend greatly on the idea type, audience affected, and scale. For larger ideas, you may consider if visitor or employee interviews or tracking changes in revenue would help to isolate the effect of an idea. Keep in mind, it can be difficult to measure the impact of a specific idea implemented within the larger organizational context because many additional factors can affect results.

Take a look at your idea tracking sheet and count the number of ideas generated, submitted for review, approved, and implemented. Is there a point where there's a particularly large drop-off? Use this inventory to focus your programmatic changes. For example, if very few ideas submitted for review are approved, consider working with leadership to identify areas for targeted idea development.



At the Bronx Zoo

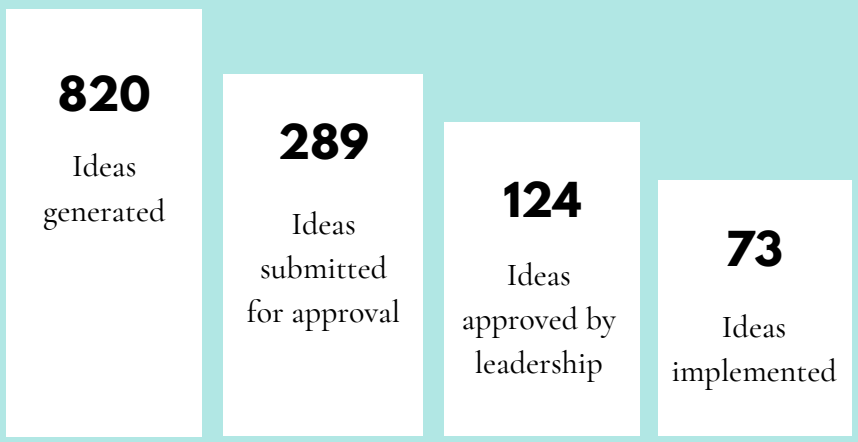


Figure 7. Number of ideas that moved through review process during the three-year pilot program.

Categorize ideas to identify common themes (e.g., visitor experience, employee experience, revenue-generating). This process will showcase areas where the group has particularly deep insight and other areas that the facilitator may prompt them to think about more deeply.

Don't be surprised if some of the biggest operational changes come as a result of the targeted idea development sessions. These are typically areas that leadership has prioritized for improvement and they are especially motivated to act on feedback.

“ The program reinforced the idea that there's a lot of benefit to listening to the voices who are actually on the ground interacting with visitors or delivering programs. ”

- Department Leader





At the Bronx Zoo

Business Impact Case Studies



Case Study 1: Visitor Experience

Youth working in the zoo gift shops noted that there was no music playing in two gift shops, which lacked the ambience of other locations. Leadership agreed that music would improve the visitor experience and added a speaker system to the gift shops, selecting music that fit with the exhibit theme.



Case Study 2: Employee Experience

Youth working in the Nature Trek outdoor playspace observed that the garden hose that they use to bring water into the play areas often got tangled and dirty while lying on the ground. They requested a hook to hang the garden hose. Leadership ordered a hose hook and installed it in a central location. This resulted in increased efficiency and improved staff morale.



Case Study 3: Revenue-Generating

Youth working in the Rides Department noted that there were two minutes of down time when visitors were waiting for the monorail ride to end. They proposed that staff could use this time to promote other activities at the zoo, such as the ropes course. Leadership approved this idea and worked with internal experts in live interpretation to develop a short script that Rides staff incorporated into the down time.



Conclusion

Though the concept of soliciting ideas from employees may not seem groundbreaking, by purposefully and formally elevating the insight of front line staff within your organization, you will increase your understanding of the visitor and employee experience and be able to proactively address challenges that may not be noticed by management. Additionally, the program will support youth employees with skill development, career advancement, and an increased sense of belonging and value.



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