

Action, BlastOff, Chaos: ABCs of Successful Youth Participation

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Comment on This Article

Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a youth-led organization initiated in an Australian capital city to facilitate improvements in an area with poor social infrastructure. The project clearly demonstrates that young people are able to design and implement collective action change programs to improve their local areas, particularly when they have access to advice from a supportive adult. Food, informality and fun in the weekly meetings helped the young people forge strong bonds and contributed to their participation. The original goal set by the group changed substantially over time, but the outcome still benefited the local area. There were some difficulties, including negative attitudes from external agencies about the capacity of youth to manage their own affairs. The project highlights the success that can be achieved with a group of young people using a devolving decision-making approach balanced with respectful adult guidance. Adult mentoring made a significant contribution to the success of BlastOff. Similar groups would benefit greatly from access to capable and resourceful adults who provide appropriate mentorship, facilitation, leadership advice and access to resources. Adults working with groups of young people need to be respectful of their capabilities and able to work responsively with the enthusiasm, excitement and chaos of youth.

Keywords: positive youth action; action research; community building; adult mentoring and facilitation; Australia

Introduction

Placemaking and community building are approaches to collaborative action designed to generate change and enrich everyday lives (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995). Devolving decision-making to interested citizens is one positive approach for local change (Douglas 2000a) and young people can provide valuable contributions to these processes (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2004). It is reasonable to expect that young people would want to have a say in the design of civic projects that interest or affect them before committing to the action involved, but typically young people are not included until after adults have completed the planning and initiated actions (Wilson 2000; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2004; Banks et al. 2003). The venture described in this article demonstrates that young people are able to make decisions, take control and operationalize most aspects of a local-change project.

This paper presents a case study of a social change project, BlastOff, developed in an Australian city. The project was initiated by an adult, the author, but entirely directed by a group of young people. The young people made all of the decisions, did all of the work and took responsibility for the direction and outcomes of the project. I contributed by providing guidance and advice. The approach I used to facilitate this project is variously described as action training, social development or community building (Elias 1994; Twelvetrees 1996; Hamdi and Goethert 1997; Figert et al. 1997; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Hart and Bond 1998; McArdle 1999; Wise 2001; Ife 2002). It is a responsive practice that combines respect for a disempowered group with facilitation that helps the group members express their goals and desire for change. The facilitator is available as required or requested to assist the group in making the changes its members desire. The facilitator builds self-esteem and skills within the group, and assists the group in making action plans and establishing connections with the wider community. The practice entails mentors working *with* group members, not *for* them.

My role in this project was to establish the group, assist its members in conceptualizing their goals, and assist them in achieving their desired objectives. I acted as a guide as required, but it was their own project. Sometimes I made suggestions, assisted with influential connections, or expedited actions at their request. Sometimes, I acted as a buffer between the group and other agencies: I advocated for their right to control their own project and several times protected them from external interference. This hands-off approach proved valuable, but it was not without difficulties. Young people are enthusiastic but do not always approach tasks systematically, attend to important functions or prioritize their work in the way adults do. They have little understanding of risks, or of how much work is involved to achieve the goals they desire. While young people may not consider the way they work unusual, it appears quite chaotic to others conditioned to adult task-oriented methods. The young people in this project were very relaxed and content with its fun and free-flowing approach, but many agency representatives surrounding the project expressed discomfort that there wasn't a responsible adult running the group. To them, BlastOff seemed disorderly and out of control.

Context of the BlastOff Project

I initiated this project in part of an Australian city. The area has a high average household income but poor social infrastructure, particularly for families and young people. I became concerned after living in the area for nine years, during which time I talked to many residents at community functions and as part of my school obligations, as a researcher and as a parent. Many hidden issues appeared to exist, which were unrecognized by government or by the human services networks in which I participated. I took the opportunity to commence a systematic examination of the area while studying, and later working, at university. The project described in this paper is part of the action research I conducted in the area as a volunteer over six years. The goals of the action research were to document some of issues in the area (relative to the resources available), to profile issues identified in the area as an impetus for change, and to improve the local social infrastructure using a responsive, developmental approach described above.

The area's central road, about 10 kilometers long, acts as a connecting spine for about 75,000 residents. The community has well-tended houses and tidy streets. Compared with the city average, the area has a high proportion of families with teenagers and young adults. Since there is a lack of obvious physical needs, the area is not a high priority for government services, but my research suggests significant issues exist that are unrelated to residents' income (Douglas 1999a; 2000a, 2000b, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005). These concerns are poorly documented, as there are virtually no support agencies in the area to generate information or collect data.

Over the course of my research, I found that most families were "time poor," lacking sufficient time to engage in activities together. Parents were concerned about wild parties that got out of control and required police intervention. Despite the high average income in the area, information from the government social services agency demonstrates that many families receive family support supplement, a benefit based on low family income; a high proportion of single-parent families and children with disabilities also live in the area. Despite its high overall socioeconomic status, the area has few facilities available other than schools, shops and churches. Organized team sports are available for boys (but not for girls), along with mainstream youth groups, such as Guides and Scouts, but no meeting places or clubs exist for young people, nor are there any informal recreation facilities other than cinemas and some park land. Community health staff (located in another part of the city) have reported concerns about use of drugs and alcohol. Schools described issues with student relations, retention of challenging students, and vandalism. The police (located at one end of the central road) were concerned about young people involved in the juvenile justice system. General practitioners acknowledged concerns about substance abuse, particularly binge drinking by teenagers. Many young people expressed anxiety about mental health problems, family breakdown and a lack of access to helping agencies. I gathered much anecdotal evidence of a high rate of depression in families, particularly for middle-aged men. Over the six years of my study, several students committed suicide in their final year of high school. No support services exist in the area for families, young people, people with disabilities, or those with mental health

problems. Families report that access to other services in other areas of the city is poor, since agencies tend to give preference to clients from low-income areas.

Overall, a picture emerged of a respectable middle-class area, in which significant issues existed that were unrelated to income, but these issues were not officially documented and went largely unrecognized because virtually no support services were available for residents.

Development of the BlastOff Project

As part of the larger change strategy, I established an action network of local residents and interested government agencies, including police and community health organizations. Local schools and churches were invited but did not participate. The action network identified the high proportion of young people living in the area and the lack of local facilities, particularly for families with children. Initially, we focused on the whole length of the central road, but later concentrated on the middle two suburbs, in particular on the place identified as the transport hub. Many young residents used the bus and train facilities to get to school; the nearby large shopping complex is recognized as the principal youth connecting point for recreation and other less desirable behaviors.

The action network applied for a government grant to facilitate the development of youth services, but was unsure what would be most beneficial. To advise on the grant application, I invited eight local young people, whom I knew had involvement with the kinds of personal and family issues outlined above, to a meeting. The selection was a convenience sample, as time was short and the grant application needed to be completed rapidly. The eight young people suggested establishing a local youth council with the expectation it would be able to facilitate further improvements and changes in the area. Four of the young people expressed interest in staying involved and contributing to the change process. They arranged to meet regularly to assist the development of the project. One young person agreed to “chair” the group’s informal gatherings – hardly meetings in the adult sense of the word. I continued to assist the development of the group in a voluntary capacity, as no other facilitator was available in the area. Not having a youth-friendly local meeting place that was easily accessible by public transport, the group met in many unusual places. These included parking lots, the library, the police station, coffee shops, a church hall, a local government office and members’ homes (Figure 1). They had fun and slowly did some planning on possible projects to improve the area for local residents. In particular, the group was excited about arranging local entertainment events, since none was available on this side of the city.

The group agreed they needed more members to share the planning and also to be more representative of local young people. I suggested we use a snowballing technique to recruit more young people living in the area. The goal was to find people with diverse backgrounds while maintaining a gender balance. The young people invited others they knew who may have been interested. I invited some young people with varied life experiences, and later recruited two at a local government planning forum. About 30 people were invited to join during the first

six months; some declined, and some came for a little while but did not stay. Over time, the group expanded and contracted. About 10 young people met regularly and another six participants joined and came from time to time. They named the group "BlastOff." Participants' ages ranged between 15 and 23. Their backgrounds included different languages and cultures, experience of disability, and substance abuse; some had been involved in sports, churches, music, theatre and Scouts. Two participants were unemployed; the others were either at school or university. Life experiences within the participants' families included long-term adult and youth unemployment, depression, fostering, substance abuse and homelessness.

Figure 1. Informal meetings happened in unusual places



BlastOff group members forged strong bonds in their weekly gatherings. I guided exploration of their goals, values, and preferred organizing methods. They decided they should be overtly secular and nonaligned with any school, religion or other group so as to maximize the potential for participation, especially by young people with alternative lifestyles. This decision created some difficulties since there were

few places for them to meet, and the only facilities in the area to hold activities were at either churches or schools, but independence remained a core principle. Fun was a core value, along with cooperation, participation and sharing, thoughtful action, respect, open and fair processes, and positive encouragement. One young man ensured that the gatherings were always light-hearted. He told jokes, threw sweets, challenged others to "duels" and deliberately set out to create a fun feeling rather than have it too serious and "adult," since he considered the fun atmosphere more appropriate for their age group. While the young man's behavior appeared quite disruptive and chaotic to me, several members commented the fun was one reason they stayed involved (Figures 2 and 3). The BlastOff members self-regulated this very informal group behavior; I simply advised on organizational processes when requested to do so. The unruly atmosphere helped establish strong bonds, and the group was able to continue to focus on tasks and make decisions. Each week they monitored the results of their agreed actions and openly discussed the problems when members did not follow through on the decisions.

Figure 2. Fun was an essential element



Figure 3. Locals having fun in the parking lot

In the first three months, the group negotiated sponsorships, constructed a Web site, became legally incorporated and opened a bank account, designed a promotional poster, negotiated use of temporary office space, and gained access to a computer and some sound equipment from a friendly sponsor. With the approval of the group, I successfully applied for a \$1,000 grant to stage an event as part of a state-wide festival to celebrate Youth Week. The group decided to arrange a concert as an opportunity to promote BlastOff and the Youth Council. They decided the event should be free to maximize attendance and therefore potential recruitment of new BlastOff members. Over two months, they excitedly considered many potential acts for the afternoon event. One major difficulty was locating a suitable venue that was neither a school nor a church. The council refused access to a suitable park, citing concerns about damage to the watering system. Eventually, I suggested they use the rooftop parking lot of the major shopping complex. I assisted with their negotiations: the manager was agreeable as long as BlastOff had adequate security plans. I ran a risk-planning session with two members, and followed up with a session on project planning for the whole group. BlastOff made contact with the six local high schools and invited several local youth bands to perform. BlastOff was promoted at each of the schools at lunchtime performances of local youth bands. This was their idea, but it was a huge logistical task to arrange and move the sound equipment to each school. The Youth Week concerts resulted in the recruitment of several new members. Even more importantly, it was a real project that they designed and carried out, thereby offering priceless experiential learning opportunities.

Arranging this event transformed BlastOff from fun-focused to task-focused. In particular, the older students explored many options for suitable activities, but younger members also made valuable contributions. Since BlastOff was progressing

smoothly, I applied for a \$16,000 youth participation grant from the state government to establish the Youth Council. The group was enthusiastic when they were awarded the grant, although at this time they had little understanding of how much work it would be, or how to organize the group to complete the task. For instance, they did not fully understand the legal nature of the contract, or the benefits of negotiating alliances with politicians, local businesses and other agencies. I advised that they absolutely needed to attend to the legal tasks, even if they were boring. I did some of the more complex or difficult matters, such as arranging liability insurance. They had lots of ideas and made lots of plans on possible actions to attract young people to their project. They arranged a political forum with local politicians present to answer questions from local young people. Over time with my encouragement, BlastOff members contacted government agencies, local politicians, businesses, service clubs and churches and attempted to make formal contact with the six local high schools. They commenced presenting a weekly community radio segment as an extra method of profiling their agenda for the Youth Council, and explored the possibility of starting a local youth newspaper to provide income to support the proposed council.

Figure 4. BlastOff with local politicians after the political forum



Overall, BlastOff has been successful. The group obtained another small government grant and hired a part-time support worker for six months to assist with organizational development and establishment activities. They managed the advertising, selection and hiring of the worker with only minimal assistance from me. Later, they obtained another small grant intended for skills training of the youth members. This grant allowed capacity building within the group which was then transferred to other sub-groups within the local area. Three years later, they continue to meet weekly although core membership has declined to six, four of

whom are from the original group of 10. The youth newspaper has not yet been launched, but the Web site is functioning. While the local Youth Council is still not operational, BlastOff members have established effective connections with local government and one Member of Parliament (Figure 4), and through this alternative process have profiled the issues and concerns of young people in the area. Hence, BlastOff members are achieving their original goals, although with a different approach from what they originally had intended.

The Role of the Mentor

In considering the outcome of this project, the efforts of the young people involved should be commended. They got excited, provided the energy to establish the group, set the project goal, maintained momentum and did almost all of the work. Without prompting, two of the young people identified my mentoring as an essential contribution to their achievements; likewise, two adults associated with the project identified my input as very significant for its success. On careful reflection, I agree.

Before BlastOff started, I had voluntarily facilitated several social improvements in my local area while working full-time elsewhere. As a local resident with children of similar ages to the young people involved in BlastOff, I was able to take an informed, insider view of the project. I remained involved as a voluntary mentor for BlastOff over the first 12 months of the project, drawing on my experience in mentoring social development and facilitating new community groups, as well as my experience as a researcher (Douglas 1999b; 2000b; 2002a; 2002b; 2003). While mentoring the group, I documented its members' progress and interactions, with their full knowledge and permission, as part of my research. I requested reflective comments from the youth participants from time to time. After the first six months, I arranged a review to evaluate the process and identify indicators of learning within the group. Since then, I have twice solicited brief remarks from most members of the group. For two years, I have maintained some contact with five people who were active in the group, and through them have monitored BlastOff's progress. The group members' comments, combined with analysis by two parents and two government officials who were peripheral to the project, and my own rigorous self-reflection, form the basis of the evaluation. Two young people from the project contributed to this paper to add to their learning.

The group accepted me as a concerned and supportive person with no fixed agenda other than to improve the local area. I attended all except three of the weekly two-hour "meetings" during the project's first year. This was an expensive commitment of my time, but it gave stability to the group, along with an informed, guiding hand. Very importantly, I provided food for BlastOff meetings: four young people identified food as an important attractor. As a conscientious parent, I brought "real" (healthy) food initially, but quickly found junk food was preferred. Providing food was expensive, but it was an incentive that helped maintain participation. I contributed to the thinking and conceptualization of the project, offered ideas and alternatives, organized the evaluation, monitored results, and worried more than the young people did about what was, or was not, happening. Sometimes, I offered

to use the rooftop parking lot. The manager was quite cooperative, so during the discussion, I introduced the possibility for a longer-term association between BlastOff and the shopping complex, an arrangement I understood would be beneficial for the group, although they had not yet considered this possibility. BlastOff had no "home base," so I negotiated for two meetings to occur in the local council office, hoping it would establish useful connections. Subsequently, the group was offered office accommodation in the local government building. I arranged local media coverage of the first two events to profile their activities and achievements, and encouraged the group to maintain contact. I organized a celebration to publicly recognize the achievements of the BlastOff members. Three local government Councilors and two Members of Parliament presented certificates. Later I arranged a meeting with potential business sponsors and "champions" to profile BlastOff, with the idea of establishing "Friends of BlastOff." A local businessman suggested they develop a youth newspaper, but sadly he did not offer to be a sponsor or guide their efforts. "Friends of BlastOff" did not eventuate, but the idea will probably be implemented at some time in the future.

In my negotiations and conversations with agencies, youth activities were always considered high-risk and young people irresponsible. This attitude was expressed by schools, service groups, banks, and some government agencies not associated with youth, such as the incorporation agency. Agencies always expected an adult to be "in charge" to maintain order. I provided group members with practical advice on approaches to overcome legal obstacles, and intervened when it was impossible for BlastOff members to manage. For instance, the funding agency required the group to have public liability insurance before an event could be staged, but the first grants were insufficient to purchase the insurance. It was extremely difficult for young people to negotiate insurance for a self-managed youth project, but eventually, I arranged insurance through my contacts. I provided training on project planning and risk management, both of which contributed to the success of the group's first projects. I was the risk monitor. I notified local emergency services of events, arranged first aid coverage, planned emergency evacuation procedures etc. No one in the group ever considered hazards or consequences, so no risk planning would have occurred without my input. Sometimes I vetoed ideas (such as fire twirling and a gladiator game) if I knew the activities would not be approved by the insurer or the venue, or that they might result in injuries or adverse outcomes. This would have been a big problem for future insurance coverage. The group accepted my bans without dispute – possibly a sign of their trust in me, or perhaps an indication of their "laissez faire" approach. These project planning and risk-management skills were very useful for the group to learn at the beginning, and they probably contributed to the group's success with other grant applications. In the first year, I wrote all of the public documentation, media releases, grant applications and reports. This formal writing style was somewhat of a mystery even to the university students in the group, and my reports were used later as models.

These mentoring activities were all critical interventions without which BlastOff could have stalled. After about 12 months, the group suggested I should no longer attend meetings, as they felt confident they could manage without guidance. Later, they established a similar guiding relationship with a state government Youth

Development Officer, and afterwards established strong connections with two local government officers in similar roles. These mentoring relationships continued for the next two years, suggesting BlastOff members judged mentoring as helpful.

Figure 6. Participatory entertainment aimed to recruit new members



Discussion

Early in the establishment process, BlastOff took time to create a strong, positive and productive climate rather than concentrate on set tasks. Common values and goals clearly outlined to all members what the group was about and how it would operate. This contributed to the group's cohesion and harmony. People who did not continue were respected for their decision to leave. The informal atmosphere and having fun was very important, and certainly contributed to continued participation. The meetings were lighthearted and inclusive; even important decisions were made with laughter and lighthearted banter. Members told jokes, flicked rubber bands and threw paper balls at each other, exchanged useless objects, and as time went on, regularly teased each other. Teasing is a sign of close and trusting friendship in Australia. BlastOff's regular fun-filled meetings and decision-making processes

appeared chaotic to adults used to more orderly procedures, but they worked well for this group. Adults tend to be task-oriented, but young people need fun and social interaction to engage and commit to the group process even when they are doing serious work (Quinn 1999; Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005).

Continually recruiting diverse people into the group improved the chance of success by engaging new ideas, skills and contacts (Figure 6). This increased the range of possible activities and the potential for effective change. The two-way transfer of knowledge within the group provided an innovative vehicle for developing confidence and leadership skills that some BlastOff members later applied in other settings. For instance, at least four members cited BlastOff as evidence of their skills in job applications. One younger member became school captain; another developed his project management skills and started planning events for a political party; and a third started managing a shop within two months of leaving BlastOff, even though he was only 19. One of the leaders later gained employment with the local council as a community development facilitator, clearly gaining experience for this work from BlastOff activities. The multi-age dimension of BlastOff encouraged a more natural learning process across age groups. In particular, it was valuable for the younger members to observe and model new behaviors. Young people are commonly forced into activities with artificially small age ranges, even though adult activities usually cross generations (Wang et al. 2004; Karcher 2005).

Although the BlastOff members always felt confident in their ability to manage, the support and assistance of adults were vital for the success of the project. Through my coaching, BlastOff members learned effective methods of engaging with the external environment. I provided useful connections and advised on how to link to the broader policy environment where young people are typically less visible. These were essential skills that enabled the group to realize early outcomes; they also helped BlastOff make an easier and faster transition to a sustainable organization. Like my mentoring, actions of the government officer in the funding agency were vital. He strenuously advocated on behalf of the group when the project was making slow progress and apparently diverging from its agreed goal to establish the Youth Council. The project could have been aborted without this important intervention as a consequence of not achieving its objective within the approved timelines. One BlastOff member wrote that the government officer "was very patient and understanding ... never showed frustration or annoyance at our unprofessionalism ... but provided guidance and support." He "knew who to talk to and what to say to ensure BlastOff gets best outcomes." This important intercession allowed the project to continue and to become a viable self-managed youth group initiating local change. It was a brave action that could have affected his career, and not every officer would be as supportive or courageous.

Evaluations regularly consider project outcomes, but less often reviewed is the effect of the facilitator's interventions (Letendre 2003). The value of mentoring is recognized (Aronowitz 2005; Karcher 2005), but it is not well documented in youth participation projects. Finding the right fit between support and control is an art, particularly when working with a group of young people. I am comfortable with uncertainty and chaos, a necessary skill for working with young people. I was

respectful of BlastOff members owning and controlling their agenda, believed in the group's abilities and encouraged their commitment. My guidance and experience contributed significantly to organizing the first successful event. This increased the group's credibility and reputation in the local community, which in turn allowed them to progress their agenda. Two BlastOff members commented that my mentoring role contributed to the personal and organizational capability of the group and was a crucial element in the success of the project. "Although we had vision, energy and motivation we needed specific guidance in the steps to take to get us there," one member said. The other commented that I was an "extremely important element to assist us to realize our vision and plans ... [and] an unrecognized part of our success."

The project risked being sidetracked, losing focus and not achieving its goals without mentoring and guidance. Particularly at the beginning, I provided some structure to assist decision-making processes. This was very important in allowing BlastOff to develop effective operating methods and establish visible ownership of their agenda. The young people in BlastOff were inexperienced in designing and managing projects and were overly confident about what they could achieve. They often aimed to do far too much for the time and skills available in the group. For example, with the first \$1,000 grant, they arranged five concerts in different schools in six days. Logistically, this was a huge undertaking for 10 young people with only two cars between them. Afterwards, they did not equate their tiredness with the effort entailed. During the year I was involved, they remained optimistic about their abilities. While this is commendable, the group benefited from a more realistic appraisal of how much could be achieved, how long it would take, and how much effort would be required. Over-committing could have easily led to a disastrous result, with the group organizing activities that did not work, or neglecting essential parts of the process, such as keeping good records, or costing projects accurately. This would have meant the group did not achieve its objectives, and would have resulted in future difficulties.

This put me in a difficult position of advocating for them while hoping they would not crash. Failure would have been a loss of their efforts, a public humiliation for them, and in some ways for me as well. While I trusted in their commitment and abilities, I was aware of their limitations, a situation somewhat similar to parenting.

Clearly, the attitude and skill of the adults involved in similar youth-led projects are vital for their learning, as has been demonstrated in other contexts (Kerr and MacDonald 1997; Letendre 2003; Burden 2004; Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005). Although very capable of great achievements, young people are inexperienced, they can be overly certain of their abilities and not sufficiently aware of potential risks. Youth-led groups may not achieve their objectives, or they may become dysfunctional. A respectful and supportive facilitator or mentor can empower the group, transfer expertise and guide the learning process for a successful outcome to achieve positive change in communities (Shepherd 1995; Holder and Moore 2000; Ife 2002; Gilchrist 2004). Likewise, the value of mentoring youth is recognized as offering considerable benefits to all involved: the young

people and the mentors themselves (Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2003; Aronowitz 2005; Karcher 2005).

One fundamental aspect of BlastOff was the total control of the project by the young people. They set the goals, made decisions, took responsibility and managed projects to their conclusion. Ownership increased the young people's commitment. Too often, adults provide young people with a project and request their participation rather than building in the flexibility needed for youth to decide their own goals (Finn and Checkoway 1998). BlastOff provided an opportunity for youth to voluntarily connect with a social group that was focused on achieving a target set by youth. This is close to the top of Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, which steps from tokenist inclusion of citizens in "consultation processes" up to a stage where citizens have control and are responsible for deciding policy actions (Arnstein 1969). Many authors have documented the benefits of an empowerment approach, where participants learn to create change through a process of considering ideas and then implementing practical actions (Altman et al. 1998; Finn and Checkoway 1998; Lane and Henry 2004). Opportunities for young people to engage with constructive leisure activities have been identified as contributing to positive pro-social behavior (Burden 2004; Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005). However, this self-managed method of engaging young people is seldom offered by adult mentors (Finn and Checkoway 1998), even though volunteering and collaborative action is recognized as providing opportunities to create long-lasting social and human capital (Wilkinson and Bittman 2002; Burden 2004).

BlastOff demonstrated an alternative, citizen-driven approach to engaging with populations in need. The locality for the project was identified by adults as a potential site for positive change, but the young participants determined the program. This project reversed the more common method of identifying an at-risk group or problem behavior and then establishing a specific intervention program. This community initiative aimed to achieve sustainable improvements by developing local change agents, facilitating access to informed sources of support, encouraging stronger networks and strengthening local protective factors. Barton and colleagues (1997) suggest that a conceptual shift to enhancing youth development and building competency is more likely to be successful than simply addressing problem behaviors. Focusing on positive pro-social behaviors and protective factors rather than difficulties or risk factors offers a long-term return on investment (Burt 2002).

A whole community approach offers a sustainable site for achieving positive youth development, but settings that are framed positively are less well-studied than negative situations or populations at risk (Morrissey and Werner-Wilson 2005). A combination of positive youth development and youth-at-risk programs is suggested to provide the best outcome (Catalano et al. 2002). Although peer groups in schools are common to improve the students' academic achievements (Ryan 2000), assisting young people to manage a local change process is not the most common method of implementing social change (Finn and Checkoway 1998). The BlastOff project is only young, but already it is demonstrating that young people can successfully convert opportunities into new connective networks and ventures.

Conclusion

Although BlastOff members made some mistakes, they learned a great deal from the reality of the project. The opportunity to apply theory to a practical situation to plan and stage an event provided valuable experience for each participant. The responsibility of making their own decisions was exciting, and it increased their ownership of the project, since they were accountable for the goals they had set. Each participant has subsequently benefited from the BlastOff experience for their employment and future capacity to contribute to activities.

Access to external support is an important consideration for the successful outcome of projects designed and managed by young people. Youth have the vision to know what they want, and they have the energy and drive to achieve, but they need access to committed and engaged people who can provide guidance and advocacy. In Australia, most change projects originate from government planning, or via projects managed by adults. Partnerships that delegate decision-making can improve the situation for local young people. Advocacy may be crucial to the project, combined with steady intervention of the facilitator or mentor to enable resolution of critical matters. Community projects are often not allowed time to develop and gel, but the BlastOff project clearly demonstrates that, given time and confidence, young people can themselves drive change and successfully manage complex projects. It is helpful if the young people are well-supported by a capable facilitator or mentor and have access to other helpful adults. The BlastOff case illustrates that a facilitator or mentor must be comfortable with chaos and value the energy, enthusiasm, and excitement young people offer. The question remains why this approach is not used more commonly with young people.

After many years facilitating grassroots social development and local change processes, Heather Douglas is now studying for a Ph.D. at Griffith University. Her doctoral study considers how emerging social ventures survive and become sustainable. She continues to work as a university researcher at the intersection between business and society. Much to the consternation of her academic colleagues, her research often delves into interdisciplinary areas that emerge from life issues and problems she has encountered rather than based in traditional academic fields. Previously, she has worked at the World Health Organization in Geneva, several government departments, and local community service organizations. She has three wonderful sons and a husband who help to keep her sane and provide amazing entertainment and conversation at the dinner table.

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