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Youth-Led Organisations: Recruitment and Retention

Youth Action Policy Paper

YOUTH ACTION

Prepared by Aditya Prasad

Contact person:

Eamon Waterford

Director – Policy & Advocacy
Youth Action
Suite 403, 64-76 Kippax St, Surry Hills, 2010
Phone: (02) 8218 9815, Fax: (02) 9281 5588
Email: eamon@youthaction.org.au
Website: www.youthaction.org.au

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About Us

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Youth Action works towards a society where all young people are supported, engaged and valued. To achieve this, it is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth services sector
 2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy and shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services
 3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers
 4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services
 5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them
 6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services
 7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.
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Introduction

A youth-led organization is defined by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) as “an organisation that is predominantly governed and staffed by young people”¹. It is not-for-profit and is run by young people and has members and volunteers predominantly being young people. Although there are exemptions, most youth-leds are run by young people who volunteer their time to participate in them.

Youth-led organizations tend to have an age limit for membership. This is to ensure that they are truly representative of young people so that it could remain genuinely youth-led. For example, Left Right Think-Tank has the maximum age at which one could volunteer being 24 years². Others, such as the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) has a limit of 30 years.

There are a great variety of youth-led organizations. Some like the Oaktree Foundation aim to foster youth leadership and advocacy in ending global poverty, the National Union of Students (NUS) is a peak body of tertiary-level student representative councils across Australia and Batyr aims to educate and empower young people in the area of mental health.

One of the core challenges facing the youth-led sector is recruitment of skilled young people and retention of skilled staff. This paper examines what structures and steps are required to ensure a youth-led achieves recruitment and retention goals, which in turn result in it achieving its policy or community-base goals.

The value and power of youth-led organisations

Delgado and Staples in their book, *Youth-led Community Organizing, Theory and Action* classify youth-led community organisations in two forms³:

- 1) Community development - Organisations aimed at community development exist to help a community develop in a practical and

constructive manner. An example would be Youth Christian Workers (YCW). In Parramatta, the YCW aims “to help young people find meaningful employment opportunities” and provide assistance to newly arrived young migrants⁴.

- 2) Social Action – These organizations operate differently. They are aimed at advocacy and influencing decision makers and their institutions for outcomes that are considered beneficial from the perspective of the organizations.

Youth-led organisations have proven to be of immense benefit for both young people participating and the wider community. As youth-led organising is led by young people, these sorts of organisations provide youth the opportunity to take up leadership and organising positions they wouldn't be able to take in another organisation led by adults.

The first benefit young people receive from being involved in a youth-led allowing them to boost their skills. This sort of voluntary work would involve doing activities that can allow a person to challenge him/herself. For example, organising in a University society would at the very least involve teamwork, dealing with agendas for meetings, working on various tasks and liaising with a variety of students.

Another important benefit is that it allows young people to boost their self-confidence levels⁵. Through volunteering, young people learn new skills, meet new people and do work they believe is good for the wider community. This has a naturally positive impact on their confidence and self-esteem. The opportunity to take up leadership roles can be especially useful in terms of building confidence levels.

Finally, young people are do voluntary work with like-minded people of a similar age bracket in a youth-led. This allows them to more easily be a part of a healthy community and have strong friendship networks.

There are also strong benefits of youth-led organising for the wider community. Young people have historically played an important role in ensuring social change in the community. They are generally a more socially active age group in our society and have always been open to new thoughts and ideas. An example would be the social change in the 1960's and 1970's, a period of great social unrest over women's rights, the acceptance of racial minorities and the Vietnam War. The social movements that led the charge towards changes in attitudes in society were led by young people.

Secondly, an organisation that is led by young people would quite naturally have a strong understanding on reaching out to young people and encouraging them to take part in voluntary activity that is intended to bring about social change.

Finally, youth-led organisations that aim to generate social action provide young people a voice in the political discourse. This is important as young people are often underrepresented in decisions made in public policy and decision making. This can result in policies that do not take into account the needs of young people. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) explains in its paper "Why young people should be engaged in policy-making" how this can result in social unrest and tensions. An example cited is how in Rwanda, youth unemployment is said to have played a role in widespread social unrest that resulted in the genocide of 1994⁶.

Youth-led organisations are highly beneficial for both young people and the wider community. For this paper, extensive research has been done on youth-led organisations. What has been found is that although there has been academic work and research on these organisations over the past couple of decades, there has not been enough research on what sort of characteristics, processes and communications are required for a youth-led organisation to adequately recruit young people so they can be involved in their organisation and retain them so they can stay involved.

It is important to have an understanding on this, not just due to the benefits for young people and the wider community, but also because a large bulk of the strength of youth-leds to meet their goals is the number of active members they have.

There are four key requirements for a youth-led organisation to successfully attract young people and keep them involved:

1) Participation – Democratic participation is a very important component. This involves power and decision-making authority being dispersed internally allowing ordinary members at the bottom of an organization having a direct voice in the workings of the organization⁷.

As explained by Delgado and Staples, this can be beneficial for the organization as it allows it to tap into the talent and expertise of members who are actively working on the ground. This allows far more effective planning and decision making, albeit the process at which this occurs is slower than a centralized decision-making structure.

It can also be beneficial for each young individual involved. It gives them the opportunity to have a sense of ownership for decisions being made. In a decentralized structure, different sub-groups within an organization would have a large level of autonomy, allowing members of these groups to be able to make decisions collectively. The sense of ownership for decisions being made empowers individuals and makes them feel the work they're doing for the organization is more worthwhile.

If a few people at the top of the organization predominantly do the decision-making, it results in those on the ground having a lack of control over the work they do for the organisation. It can also easily generate resentment amongst volunteers on the ground if decisions being made turn out to not be effective or do not adequately take into account their needs.

Young people can benefit as individuals from a participatory democratic structure through enhanced leadership and organizational skills, which further

helps in boosting their self-confidence. Processes and structures need to be placed internally within an organization for this to be achieved.

The greater sense of ownership and gains in self-confidence and skills makes a participatory democratic structure especially important in keeping individual volunteers active for a long period of time.

2) Positive and Motivating Culture – Much of this is to do with what is being communicated to volunteers and how it is being done. To encourage people to volunteer, the important work the organization, and the volunteers within it, are doing for their community needs to be communicated internally and externally.

Young people need to enjoy the work they are doing to get involved and stay involved⁸. It can also help if there is a support structure provided for volunteers as they contribute to the organisation. This support can be both emotional support and assistance in completing their tasks adequately.

3) Wins – In order to attract young people, it could be useful to communicate the wins the organization has done. For example, if a youth-led community organization campaigns for greater recycling use, it should make clear its past wins in encouraging more recycling in the local area wherever possible. This is to foster the perception and understanding that the organization is capable of meeting its objectives in a world where people can easily feel disempowered and not feel their small contribution can make a difference.

In a world with many problems, quite a few that may feel far too large and complex for an individual to solve, it is quite easy to feel disempowered. Young people especially can easily feel disempowerment. Many young people for example don't feel they can contribute much to formal political structures largely due to the dominance of older members of the community making them feel like they can't have a real voice. However, they are likely to feel motivated and that they are making a difference if they feel that they can have a voice⁹.

4) Fostering skills, leadership and personal development – In order for young people to continue contributing to an organization they need their voluntary work to be associated with a feeling they are gaining new skills and developing in a positive manner. An organization that has structures and a culture that fosters this allows young people to feel empowered and more motivated in contributing.

Some youth-led organizations (like the AYCC) offer training workshops and seminars, which allow young people to gain new skills before they work on the ground for the organization. An organisation can also give volunteers opportunities to take up new roles and responsibilities over time so that they aren't stuck doing the same role and have the opportunity to work on new tasks.

Improving recruitment and retention of young people in youth-leds

1) Participation – In order to give young people the opportunity to be involved in decision-making within the organisation, the following will need to occur:

- Structures and processes to be set such that active members can have a strong voice in decisions being made related to the tasks they do and for the organisation as a whole. This may potentially include:
 - 1) Annual elections of top decision makers within the organisation. This could be through Annual General Meetings, online voting, or other means.
 - 2) Various teams within the organisation to have meetings – Whereby each attendee gets the same voting power no matter their position in the team and all attendees are given a chance to have their say on matters being attended to.
 - 3) Meetings organised where active members can attend on the overall direction of the organisation. These meetings shouldn't be used merely for the purpose of consultation. The ultimate decision

making on the direction of the group should be done in these meetings, so that ordinary members can have a strong say.

- Local groups and teams in the organisation should be given adequate autonomy in their tasks from senior management so that they can tailor their work to the needs and interests of their local areas.

2) Positive and motivating culture:

- Activities should be attempted to be formed such that they are aimed at meeting certain outcomes, but also are aimed at being such that participants can enjoy themselves and have fun in doing their tasks. This ensures that active members are most motivated to doing their work and the motivating work will be noticed by people in the general public who could potentially become active members
- Newer volunteers should be well inducted into the group so that they can be well informed and aware of their role within the organization and how it works. This would make them more likely to have the confidence to contribute to the group.
- It needs to be communicated by coordinators and supervisors within the organization the good work members are doing. Positive affirmation, especially to newer members, may also be helpful
- A culture of openness and positivity would need to be fostered. A key way this can be achieved would be based on the attitudes of the leadership, which would be trickled down to the rest of the organization. If the leadership communicates in a positive and motivating manner, this attitude will spread to the rest of the group.
- Social media and emails can be used as a means of communicating to members and the general public the work the organization. This can be communicated in a positive manner, which can help in motivating people to get involved in the organization. Young people especially use

social media and the internet quite heavily to gain information and for communication purposes

- A support structure would be needed for volunteers for cases where they may be going through challenges in doing their tasks, having difficulty getting along with other members or going through burnouts. This sort of assistance prevents burnouts and ensures volunteers can have somewhere to turn to if they are facing challenges.

3) Wins:

- The organisation, whenever and wherever possible, should communicate to the general public its past wins and how it is in fact meeting its mission.
- Members should also be communicated the sort of progress the organisation is experiencing so that they can stay motivated in their involvement.
- Social media can be effective in communicating, especially to young people, ongoing wins. Other forms of communication, such as newspapers, can be utilised as well.

4) Fostering skills, leadership and personal development:

- The organisation can organise training sessions for both new and veteran members so that they can have the opportunity to learn new skills and be ready to do their tasks as per their roles within the organisation
- Opportunities should be made available for volunteers to take up new roles so that they can learn some new skills. Opportunities to go up the ladder and gain leadership roles will allow volunteers to improve their confidences and gain some leadership skills

Youth-Led Case Studies

Three youth-led organisations have been analysed to understand how they meet these four key requirements to ensure young people are recruited to their organisations and continue to be involved for a reasonable period of time. They are Batyr, the Oaktree Foundation and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition.

Batyr:

Batyr's mission is "to engage, educate and empower young people to speak out about social and mental health issues. To foster an environment where seeking help and talking about mental health is not only acceptable, but is encouraged and supported."⁹

It trains young speakers who can go to secondary and tertiary educational institutions and communicate to students their personal stories to do with mental health to inspire these students to seek support networks and support others with mental health problems.

1) Participation

When volunteers first get involved, they are provided opportunities for relational building and a job description. This is so they are able to have a strong understanding of their role within the organisation that will make them more confident to speak out on matters related to their positions during periods of consultation.

Batyr is currently going through a transitional phase and the ongoing process is aimed at meeting national standards in participatory structure for NGOs.

Side projects tend to be done with volunteers able to have organise them with autonomy.

Evaluation:

- It is encouraging that autonomy in decision-making is provided to volunteers for side projects. The fact that the organisation provides opportunities for consultation with volunteers on projects related to them is highly beneficial for the organisation and provides volunteers to chance have a voice.
- However, it may be of benefit for Batyr if it identifies ways to allow volunteers to have a degree of autonomy within main projects, and not just side projects.
- Processes should be build whereby volunteers can have a clear space where they can provide their input into the progress of the organization and tasks and decisions being made that are related to their role within the organization. As explained in the “Wins” section, these processes have been set. Now, it would be about seeing if these processes are effective for volunteers.

2) Positive and Motivating Culture:

Batyr is currently consulting its volunteers to seek ways to reward volunteers in ways they would rather be rewarded so they have a more enjoyable experience from the work they are doing and be willing to contribute in the long haul rather than just for one-off tasks.

It also provides a support network to volunteers if any of them are going through conflicts and issues with colleagues in their voluntary work.

Evaluation:

- It is good to see that Batyr is currently in a period of consultation with its volunteers to gain ideas on how they can reward their members.
- At the moment, Batyr is clearly making an effort in this area with providing a support network to volunteers. Fostering a positive and friendly culture would help in this area.

3) Wins:

Batyr has had a series of successful individual one-off projects. Batyr especially communicates these wins through Facebook as it believes that social media can be an important tool to reach out to the wider community.

Internally, Batyr has processes set where volunteers can communicate where initiatives in various projects have gone right and where they have gone wrong. This is a great way for volunteers to provide their feedback of their experiences and reflect on the work they are doing and how they are achieving their wins.

Evaluation:

- It is encouraging to see that Batyr is tapping into social media to communicate to the general public its wins. It may be useful for it to also focus on other modes of communication.

4) Fostering skills, leadership and personal development:

Batyr is focused on providing opportunities for capacity development for volunteers. It always tries to give opportunities for their members to do new tasks so they can get new skills. One of the ways this is done is through monthly meetings where volunteers are made up to date with how other parts of the organisation are going.

Evaluation:

- Batyr is currently refining its induction process, which includes an online induction manual, with face-to-face and telephone processes to support this process. This is followed up with relationship building processes, where they meet other volunteers and staff. Strong training opportunities early on are needed for Batyr's volunteers to gain skills required to do their tasks. As Batyr already offers these, it is important to ensure all volunteers are inducted with some training so they can be effective and confident within their roles.

Oaktree:

Oaktree is one of Australia's largest youth-led community organisations aimed at reducing global poverty and ensuring development in Third World nations. They do this through policy advocacy and projects to ensure young people in remote communities get access to an education¹⁰. It aims to foster youth leadership in the area of tackling poverty through focusing on three areas – knowledge, self-awareness and soft skills and practical skills¹¹.

1) Participation:

Oaktree Foundation is structured such that there is a national team that provides coordination and steering of programs and large, nationwide campaigns to ensure consistency amongst the states. Each state is provided significant autonomy in how these campaigns are implemented. The Oaktree Foundation further allows each team member within their teams to be given autonomy and the ability to tailor the campaigns to the local communities they are working in.

In terms of input, Oaktree has recently developed evaluation processes in which all managers have half-yearly reviews. This is done by peers and team members to provide constructive feedback with anonymity. This is similarly done in evaluating specific campaigns and the organisation's strategic direction.

Participation and input is further fostered through a culture of openness, allowing volunteers to feel comfortable about voicing their opinions and provide feedback about their role or team as well as wider operations.

Evaluation:

- The Oaktree Foundation benefits immensely from its internal culture allowing members to have the confidence to provide feedback on their experiences, which is incredibly important.

- It is also very healthy that it allows state groups to have a level of autonomy in their decision making for various campaigns.
- Ensuring on a half-yearly basis that there can be reviews in the management of the teams is extremely healthy. It is helpful for young people with opinions and concerns there are review processes that allow them to take part in surveys that would influence the strategic direction of the organization.
- It could help if the Oaktree Foundation sets up processes where there are safe spaces provided for active members to discuss and deliberate on the direction of their state teams. An evaluation every half-year is quite good in providing input, but regular meetings with interactive feedback spaces could boost this.

Positive and Motivating Culture:

The Oaktree foundation has a variety of methods in communicating to young people and attracting them to the organisation:

- It has active social media accounts on Twitter, Youtube and Facebook to raise the organisation's profile and present any opportunities for involvement. Social media messaging is especially used in encouraging people to be a part of campaigns such as The Roadtrip and Live Below the Line.
- It has information on its website on positions available for young people who wish to volunteer and contribute - <http://theoaktree.org/join-us/>. This webpage features position descriptions for roles that are available for young people as well motivating information on skills and experiences to be gained from contributing to the Oaktree Foundation.
- The Oaktree Foundation also periodically takes part in University life and in local community organizations to promote their campaigns

- It has a very large supporter database that is used for campaign emails.

So far, it has approximately 140 000 young people nationwide who have signed up to the Oaktree Foundation's email list.

It tries to keep young people motivated in staying involved in their organisation using a variety of tools

- Opportunities for leadership and skills development through retreats and branch meetings. In these retreats and meetings, they also have an opportunity to learn and educate themselves on aid and the development sector.
- One of the values of the Oaktree Foundation is the "Oaktree Way" philosophy which is to build a passionate & unique community with a spirit of fun". The intention is that there is a culture of ensuring that volunteers feel like they are making a real difference and enjoy the work they are doing

A support structure is provided through regular meetings for volunteers where volunteers are given the opportunity to speak in the meeting about their processes. The organisation tries to encourage a culture of open communication and strong team in order to make volunteers feeling comfortable in asking for help when required.

Evaluation:

- The Oaktree Foundation has done a very good job in ensuring that there are good communication methods and a culture and processes developed to ensure a positive and motivating culture.
- It's excellent to see that the organization fosters a culture of open communication and positivity. This is a great way of keeping young people motivated to contributing. Young people need to be kept

enjoying themselves and feeling they are getting something positive out of their work in order to continue contributing.

Wins:

The Oaktree Foundation has enjoyed a number of successes over the past few years. This has been through policy changes, the “*Live below the Line*” campaign and in education projects.

The Oaktree Foundation communicates its wins in a variety of ways:

- Primarily through emails and social media
- The national communications team forms youtube videos, blogs and social media to communicate these successes
- Amongst active volunteers, wins are communicated and celebrated during meetings and within the facebook group for active members.

Evaluation: Communication is strong, particularly with branded ‘stand-out’ campaigns such as Live below the line.

Fostering skills, leadership and personal development:

Oaktree provides ongoing opportunities for volunteers to learn new skills through:

- Education and skills sessions that are provided throughout the year
- Sessions during the branch retreats and the national conference
- External mentors are utilized readily during skills sessions

Young people are provided the opportunity to do a variety of tasks through being encouraged to take up new positions when they are vacant.

Evaluation:

- The fact that Oaktree offers skills sessions over the course of the year is a fantastic way to ensure that volunteers are given the ability and know-how to gain confidence and ability to do their voluntary work for the organization
- Opportunities available for new positions once in a while are encouraging. However, these are subject to the fact that there are equal opportunities for applying for those who haven't yet involved themselves in the organization. This is perfectly understandable, however if a volunteer is given the chance to move onto new positions when he/she is ready, the person would be more likely to find his/her experience in the organization more rewarding. This would involve open communication between managers and ordinary volunteers on the aspirations and interests of each volunteer and how potentially they could utilize their experience in Oaktree to meet these aspirations and interests.

Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC):

The Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) is a very large, nationwide organisation that is aimed at creating a generation-wide movement to solve the climate crisis. It believes that the world has very little time in order to tackle this problem. In order to solve the climate crisis in time, the AYCC believes there is a need to build a generation-wide movement in communities across Australia applying pressure on Governments and businesses to take climate change seriously and adopt solutions that will help solve the climate crisis¹¹.

It has a national team based in Melbourne, which has state teams under them based in all the state capital cities, which has local and regional groups under them.

Participation:

The AYCC has a national campaign team and state campaign teams. These two teams work with AYCC groups across the country to help them in their campaigns and local community organising. Communication is done through regular meetings over Skype.

Feedback to the state and national teams by local groups is frequently provided through surveys and strategy sessions. Strategy sessions are used as a means of reflection on the direction an AYCC branch or the team nationally is progressing and discussing the next step forward in terms of campaigns and internal processes. Surveys and strategy sessions are aimed at ensuring that ordinary active volunteers on the ground are able to have a say and play a role in decision making.

Local groups operate through consensus decision-making where all active members are able to be a part of the decision-making in frequent group meetings. The groups are able to have autonomy on how they conduct their campaigns, though the state and national teams do provide them support, training and resources.

Evaluation:

- Strategy sessions are an excellent way of ensuring that active members can have a say on the strategic direction of the organisation nationally or within the state branches. These sessions should be based on participatory decision-making where all attendees have an equal voice.
- Local groups having their meetings done in an environment where all attendees are equal and able to have an active say is excellent in ensuring that ordinary members could feel like they are able to adequately participate and feel a sense of ownership to decision and tasks formed at a local level. The same applies to strategy sessions at a statewide or national level.

- The AYCC could do well in also having a democratic process at which state or national coordinators, basically the heads of the organisation are appointed. This is so that these leaders are representative of the expectations of active members in the direction of the organisation.

Positive and Motivating Culture:

Methods the AYCC uses to motivate young people to be a part of their activist campaigns include:

- The campaigns are implemented at the grassroots level through local groups. Since there is a campaign for young people available in their local area, this provides them accessibility to the campaigns.
- The AYCC endeavours to make its campaigns as creative, fun and exciting as possible in order to attract young people.
- Campaigns are also communicated online through the website and facebook so that young people can be kept informed via the Internet and they can participate online if they wish to do so

The AYCC intends to ensure that active members can contribute for a reasonable period of time by:

- Offering roles and position descriptions to volunteers when these positions are vacant so that the volunteers can have a sense of ownership over the responsibilities.
- Maintaining a friendly and positive culture within the organization.

A support structure is provided through a volunteers team in the state branches. The intent of the volunteers teams is to provide regular check-ins with all volunteers through the convenors of local groups and the grassroots support teams.

Evaluation:

- The AYCC has some clear achievements in aims to create a positive and motivating culture
- Its intentions to make all campaigns clever and fun is an excellent way in attracting and involving young people. Young people are generally more likely to be a part of voluntary work they ultimately find fun, not work that is too serious
- Opportunities for young people to participate in campaigns in a small way online is useful as it allows those who can't provide much time to still contribute. It can also act for some young people as a small starting block to further involvement if climate activism is new to them.

Wins:

The AYCC grown rapidly over the past few years and during that period has achieved a series of wins in its campaigns. A couple of these campaigns are:

- Repower Australia - AYCC volunteers held over 50 large events in cafes, pubs, restaurants, theatres and cinemas, where funds raised went to 'repowering' venue switch energy efficiency, solar panels or green energy. Over 26,000 young people also signed a petition asking the Government to invest more in renewable energy for our future.
- Repower Port Augusta – in 2012, the AYCC identified the opportunity to build Australia's first concentrated solar thermal plant in Port Augusta, South Australia, to replace the closing coal plants. Activities included releasing a report on the benefits of the project, convinced the energy company that owns the existing plants to support the idea, and convincing the State Energy Minister to travel to Nevada to look at the solar thermal technology available.

The AYCC communicates its wins in a few ways, including:

- Emails – Having a list of over 70 000 members allows the AYCC to send updates and promote their campaigns to a wide range of young Australians nationwide. They also promote their organization via these emails through communication their wins. They also have a list of active members, where they can communicate wins to maintain morale whilst campaigning or to inform members the achievements they have been involved in
- Social Media – Via facebook
- Media – Local groups and state branches readily use television networks and newspapers to promote their campaigns.

Evaluation:

- The AYCC having a multitude of ways it can promote its campaign allows it to benefit. This ensures it can effectively communicate wins both to the general public and to its active members
- Many youth-led organizations use social media, its website and emails, but ensuring local groups and branches use the media to promote its campaigns when possible provides another avenue for the AYCC to communicate to the public its work to the wider community. It is especially effective in reaching out to those who do watch or read the news, but may not actively ensure they receive updates on the AYCC.

Fostering skills, leadership and personal development:

The AYCC offers to each of its active members several training sessions over the course of a year. Per annum, its National team holds two training camps and the state branches offer two separate training camps. There are also training sessions by state branches for local groups if and when needed.

These training programs provide young people an opportunity to gain skills and understanding of the organisations ways of promoting its campaigns and how to be an effective climate activist.

Opportunities for leadership positions are available with key positions changing yearly. Volunteers are encouraged to apply so that they have a chance to step up from their current positions and roles.

Evaluation:

- Offering several training camps over the course of a year makes it easy for volunteers to quickly skill up and be effective within the organization
- Leadership positions being offered yearly allows volunteers who wish to gain more skills and have experience in leadership ample opportunity to do so.

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