

Good nurturing leads to strong growth

Tobias Martens, a youth volunteer at the ISCA Secretariat, examines best practice in youth development and takes inspiration from Germany's 'junior team' model

BY TOBIAS MARTENS

The process of instilling social skills, health awareness, and a sense of shared responsibility is most effective if begun at an early age. Approaches can take many forms, but young people's involvement in youth and sports clubs can be one of the most effective. This article will examine best practice methods of youth development - both in ISCA member organisations and elsewhere.

In order to be seen as appealing, youth clubs must offer activities that are constantly challenging and motivating, and the task of assimilating often-reluctant newcomers should always be high on the agenda. Three key words in this area are "Attract, Qualify and Integrate"

Firstly, clubs should offer the right incentives to attract young people. Activities on offer should be fun and imaginative, and each organisation should retain its independence and avoid being seen as part of the establishment. Secondly, newcomers need to undergo a process of social qualification in which they improve their social skills and become accepted and respected by their peers. This usually takes place through shared activities.

Finally, integration is of major importance. Young people need to assimilate into a group and accept its values without feeling isolated, embarrassed or resentful. To achieve this, ongoing dialogue should take place between all age ranges. The idea of the mentor, or "helping hand", common in the German junior team



model serves to minimise newcomers' risk of failure or loss of face. The mentor's tasks include introducing the newcomer to the way things work, and imparting

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Working together: team spirit can be strengthened by shared activities



knowledge and support when he or she is faced with new responsibilities.

According to ISCA Youth Co-ordinator Jean Luc Frast, such a helping hand can often be vitally important for new members. “Young people can be enthusiastic, but they also need guidance,” he says. “When put in charge of funds, for example, they need to think responsibly. This also applies when carrying out activities related to the public image of the organisation. Older members who can speak on the newcomers’ level can help steer young people away from conflict with older people who are more set in their ways.

The importance of mentoring cannot be stressed hard enough,” he adds. “It can act as a bridge between generations”

**‘Old hands’ helping new members.
Junior teams lead the way**

The idea behind the German “junior team” concept is quite simple - to provide young people, generally aged from their early teens to their early 20’s, the chance to

engage with an organisation they are interested in, while at the same time allowing them to decide to which extent they want to get involved. Junior teams are groups consisting of interested young people who want to engage, but are still not quite sure to what extend.

This flexible, youth-oriented model means that no elections are held, and no fixed period-posts are awarded. Interested parties are free to participate in meetings and activities, but if circumstances force them to spend more time at school or university or even with their girlfriend or boyfriend, they are free to reduce their engagement. This model also means that young people are protected from stumbling into a large commitment that is not right for them, which could lead to them being put off the idea for life!

But what exactly goes on when Germany’s junior teams embark on a project? Although most projects are selected and developed by the team, their content is usually related to one of the main focuses of the organisation. An inner-city youth or sport club, for example, may choose a project which spreads information about the dangers of drugs. A swimming club

may choose a project focusing on pollution in the marine environment.

The team also decides which work methods are used, often resulting in much creativity and flexibility. Young people often see unorthodox work practices as more attractive and motivating than more traditional methods. The projects' transparency also enables new recruits to join up easily. The whole team is always collectively responsible for the project, and if any individual member can't manage the tasks they are responsible for, the team works out another solution.

Many junior teams also have their own budget. This financial independence can promote new ways of spending and saving money - many of them unconventional and innovative. As the project progresses, a constant transfer of knowledge between the members takes place, and the whole team is empowered by such an "open-source" exchange of views.

Junior teams with their own budget

This experience can be a fantastic foundation for young people to develop their own social, organisational, cooperation and management skills. Skills they are more likely to put to use working in NGOs or other careers than in day-to-day life at school. The support offered by peers and professionals or senior volunteers through the mentoring process creates a safe

environment as well as a sense of identification with the organisation and its projects. As the personal connection between team members grows, not only is the organisation strengthened, but participants become more integrated too. Other less obvious benefits include improving the ability to think and work in a structured manner.

The mentoring and coaching structures of German junior teams are so successful that similar structures are being applied in the corporate business world. Thinking about it, it is quite logical for businesses to support young trainees in this manner as it encourages innovation and the transfer of knowledge from past to present. It also provides companies with strong human resources.

Of course, not every young person who participates in a junior team project will continue to be involved with voluntary organisation for the rest of their lives. Work, travel and education often make long-standing commitments difficult. However, some will continue to volunteer, and even those who leave will have participated in a learning process for life, and will often apply their newly gained knowledge in other areas.

Put simply, good nurturing leads to strong growth. As far as youth development is concerned, best practices such as the junior team methods mentioned above can serve as inspiration to ISCA's many affiliated youth associations across the globe.

Independent decision-making often leads to creative ideas

