On the Road to Success: Examining how Youth Shelters Define and Value Relationships through the Practice of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication as a Method to Increase the Success-Rate of Youth Recovery Programs

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A Case Study of Youth Without Shelter

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Abstract

This case study explores how three employees from Youth Without Shelter in Toronto, whom we will call 'A,' 'B,' and 'C,' define, utilize, and value two-way symmetrical communication as a method for decreasing the percentage of at-risk homeless youth on the streets. What emerged from interviews, documentation, and archival reports, indicated that youth who continue to play an active role in shaping their futures are more likely to be engaged, actively communicate, and complete their recovery program. The findings provide insight into how non-profit organizations can achieve success and excellence through engagement with their publics.

Keywords: two-way symmetrical communication, engagement with publics, homelessness, homeless youth, youth recovery programs

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Background

Two-way symmetrical communication can be viewed as the way individuals, organizations, or publics form and communicate their ideas based on their intended audience, as opposed to trying to control how others think and perceive that message (Grunig, 2006). Youth shelters can be

viewed as having two primary parties: those who need assistance (youth) and those who are willing to give it (youth care workers or supporters). But in what sort of relationships do these two parties engage? To what extent do their relationships influence the amount of support youth receive? And finally, do youth shelters that practice two-way symmetrical communication have a higher homeless youth recovery success rate compared to youth shelters that do not?

Based on the information discussed above, it was necessary to discover what methods Youth Without Shelter used to establish relationships with at-risk homeless youth, as well as the types of relationships they believed to be necessary to accomplish their goal of successfully keeping at-risk homeless youth from returning to living on the streets.

Using a single-case methodology (Yin, 2014), this case study examined and confirmed that youth shelters have the potential to establish beneficial relationships with at-risk homeless youth through the use of two-way communication. As a result, this case study was compared to Grunig's excellence theory in public relations (1992) to further demonstrate that an organization, with the goal of addressing social concerns, can in fact achieve success through its level of public engagement.

This case study will serve as further support and evidence as to how non-profit organizations maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their publics. This case study aims to explore and confirm how effective public relations are when addressing social concerns. The communication methods, as well as the types of relationships established by Youth Without Shelter, will be analyzed to measure their effectiveness in preventing at-risk homeless youth from returning to a dangerous life on the streets.

Research Questions

To determine how Youth Without Shelter defines, utilizes, and values two-way symmetrical communication as a method of decreasing the percentage of at-risk homeless youth

on the streets, this case study focused on three main research questions:

RQ1: How does Youth Without Shelter define relationships?

RQ2: How and to what extent does Youth Without Shelter use two-way symmetrical communication to build positive relationships with at-risk homeless youth?

RQ3: How and to what extent does Youth Without Shelter value relationships?

Discussion

This case study examined how Youth Without Shelter defined, engaged, and utilized two-way symmetrical communication as a method for permanently decreasing the percentage of at-risk homeless youth on the streets. Even though the participants had different experiences and different roles within the organization, their responses held some similarities regarding their overall understanding of their company.

The first research question examined Youth Without Shelter's definition of relationships. When asked how the organization defines relationships, all three participants did not give an exact definition of the term, but rather centralized their definition around establishing trust with their primary public, the youth. Key phrases that were mentioned were "getting to know them," "allowing them to get to know us," and "accommodating everyone."

The key factor that was discussed was education. Based on the discussions with the participants, Youth Without Shelter focuses almost 100% of its time on education. Whether it is educating the community through educational outreach programs or simply educating youth on the options that are available to them and choosing the right path, education is what drives this organization. For example, by hosting educational outreach information sessions with the community, Youth

Without Shelter is spreading awareness about some of the issues that the youth are faced with. These information sessions also give the community a chance to speak up about ways they would like to help and to ask questions about topics that may concern them, keeping the dialogue going about a sensitive but important topic in their community and building trust between this organization and the people who genuinely care. Based on the evidence, it is clear that communicating through educational practices allows Youth Without Shelter to promote itself as an advocate for addressing social concerns and driving positive changes within Toronto but still allows for two-way communication between community supporters.

Based on the findings of this case study, Youth Without Shelter continues to establish mutually-beneficial relationships with the at-risk homeless youth through education. The youth are receiving support and the tools needed to ensure they obtain a conflict-free future, permanently off the street; the shelter is decreasing the number of youth who live on the streets and increasing the success-rate of youth who complete their recovery program. Appendix B includes Youth Without Shelter's Impact Report for 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. Based on the findings of the report, there have been significant statistical changes. For example, in the 2013-2014 report, it was reported that 89 youth were housed, while in 2012-2013, only 68 were admitted permanently. This demonstrates that more youth are being taken off the streets permanently and are being given a chance to find success. Even after youth have left the shelter, assistance is still provided to ensure a smooth transition. The 2013-2014 report found that 491 former residents were given and are continuing to receive the support they need to ensure their success and decrease the chances of them returning to the streets, while the 2012-2013 report showed that only 362 former residents were receiving assistance. As the report shows, there is definitely an increase in the amount of assistance Youth Without Shelter is providing.

The second research question examined how two-way symmetrical communication was examined and the various

ways that youth were engaged. Findings revealed that youth are encouraged to voice their opinions and speak up when necessary. Doing so creates dialogue between youth and staff, helping to progress the youth's recovery forward. This outcome directly relates to proves that the two-way symmetrical model works because "practitioners use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both their organizations and publics" (Grunig, 2001, p. 12). In other words, two-way symmetrical communication has the potential to empower both the organization and public to take part in the decision-making process, ensuring that there is a mutual balance of understanding between both parties.

All three participants were unanimous when describing the different methods to allow for two-way communication. 'A' explained that youth are encouraged every day to speak to the shelter staff about anything on their minds. As 'B' and 'C' mentioned, the shelter has adopted an open-door policy and encourages youth to speak up. The participants also went into detail about some of the current practices that allow the youth to feel empowered to make a difference in how the shelter operates. Having the suggestion box or resident meetings allows the youth the opportunity to be kept in the loop and remain a part of the discussion. Youth Without Shelter takes the time to speak to youth in an open setting or one-on-one to ensure that no voice is unheard.

The final research question addressed the value of the relationships Youth Without Shelter builds with its public every day. When it came to discussing the importance of establishing relationships with the youth, the responses from the participants were similar. All three participants agreed that the only reason the staff is there is to assist the youth with reclaiming their independence. Youth Without Shelter's primary organizational goal is to be there to support the youth. All three participants agreed that, without establishing positive, healthy, and trustworthy relationships with the youth, they would not be able to accomplish their organizational goal. According to Grunig (1992), organizations are considered excellent because

they allow the building of positive relationships while setting realistic goals that are dependent on the relationships established.

Even though the participants were not from a public relations background, they still provided insight into some of the communication practices the shelter conducts. Educating the community was classified as a secondary goal; Youth Without Shelter is not government funded, necessitating support from the community. Educating the at-risk homeless youth is considered the primary goal because the youth are the main focus of their organizational objectives. Without youth to assist and aid, there would be no reason for Youth Without Shelter to exist.

Conclusion

While this case study offered insight into how one homeless youth shelter defined, engaged, and utilized two-way symmetrical communication as a method for increasing the likelihood of at-risk or homeless youth returning to a drug and conflict-free life, it also can be viewed as the foundation for discovering new methods that can be used to reduce the percentage of youth currently living on the streets. For confidentiality reasons, the homeless youth at this shelter were not engaged. For future research, a study that conducts interviews with previously homeless youth who attended Youth Without Shelter and had their lives changed because of the program would prove beneficial. Acquiring a first-hand perspective from the youth who took part would further validate that Youth Without Shelter plays a role in shaping their future while gauging the extent to which the organization is valued by its former residents and seeing if two-way communication was really practiced.

Overall, this case study serves as the foundation for future research to understand how organizations whose mission it is to address social concerns achieve their organizational goals through two-way symmetrical communication. Further

research and adoption of practices discovered can provide organizations with the tools needed to increase their excellence amongst publics and stakeholders.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction

My name is Christine Bernard. I currently work for TELUS Mobility as a Business Analyst for the Communications Department. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in Communications Management at McMaster University. It is in this context that I would like to interview you to complete a case study research assignment.

This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Terry Flynn, the course instructor and a member of the McMaster Ethics Review Board. This project is covered under the course's ethics review. Your participation and contributions are protected under those guidelines. Furthermore, your participation is voluntary, and you may end this interview or your participation in this study at any time. Your information will be kept confidential and only be reported should you give me permission for the purposes of this paper.

I would like to ask you several questions to help me determine how Youth Without Shelter defines and values relationships through its practice of two-way symmetrical communication when applied to youth recovery programs. Your answers may provide insight on the types of relationships established between Youth Without Shelter and its publics, and the role every stakeholder plays when accomplishing organizational goals: helping young people move from a life on the streets to a life with a future.

In order for me to effectively report your comments, I would like to record our discussions. Once I have transcribed the recording and finished this project, I will securely erase the recordings. Do I have your permission to proceed?

Interview Questions

1. How does your organization define "relationships"?

2. What factors were considered when shaping this definition?

3. What criteria are considered when prioritizing relationships?

4. Please name Youth Without Shelter's strategic publics?

5. What communication methods are used to engage "homeless youth/publics"?

6. How often are youth empowered to contribute in the decision-making of what exercises go into the recovery program? (Are programs customized on an individual basis?)

7. How satisfied do you think homeless youth are with your organization?

8. How important are relationships with (publics/homeless youth) when accomplishing organizational goals?

9. To what extent does your public value relationships?

10. Do you have anything to add that we may not have covered?

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today and for participating in this case study assignment. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to add anything else that comes to mind. Likewise, may I contact you if I have any follow-up questions regarding our discussion?

Appendix B

2012-2013 Impact Report

2013-2014 Impact Report