

Report

Welcoming young members in adult divisions: volunteer perspectives in 2015

June 2015



Introduction

The welcoming of young members into adult divisions has long been topical for the National Cadet Group and Event Health Services Groups. The reality is that Cadet and adult divisional environments are very different. The Cadet environment offers a very structured program that has a focus on learning and development around first aid and related knowledge and skills, as well as the development of core life skills necessary for adulthood—social, emotional, physical, moral and cultural skills development—and a focus on developing active, community-minded citizens. This additionally occurs in a context of fun, practically-based learning and development activities, and socialisation. Additionally, the majority of participants in a Cadet environment are other young members or young leaders. Conversely, an adult environment has a distinct focus on first aid learning, and without the structure and youth-focused learning styles employed by the Cadet Program. Adult divisions, where members are (for the most part) over the age of 18 years, operate within context of learning and development around the skills necessary to perform in an event health services environment. These divisions too are social in nature (however often perceived as less so by young members), but learning styles are naturally more geared towards learning styles for adults (e.g. they are unlikely to use experiential learning methods, such as games, and may have a greater focus on self-directed and theory-based learning).

The topic has become particularly pertinent to St John in the last 12-18 months with the changing landscape of youth and Cadet involvement in the organisation. For example, some jurisdictions have seen the closure of their Cadet Program, with young people aged 16-17 years joining adult divisions where Cadet divisions no longer exist. For jurisdictions that have retained the Program, while young members are generally encouraged to remain with a Cadet division until they reach adulthood, some jurisdictions allow Cadets aged 16-17 years the choice of transitioning to adult divisions. The AYAN views this as a helpful and progressive method of youth engagement, given that as young people mature and their interests diversify, a Cadet division might not be the right place for some Cadets as they are no longer interested in the Program offered, while others remain well engaged with this style of activity. Giving the option to join an adult division for those members that have lost interest, but still wish to engage with the organisation through Event Health Services, provides the flexibility in volunteering that many young people seek.

In May 2015, the National Event Health Services Group (NEHSG) requested the Australian Youth Advisory Network (AYAN) develop a paper on what adult divisions can do to welcome young people. The AYAN facilitated a discussion post via their Facebook Page in June on the topic of how adult divisions can welcome young members. The comments on the post yielded rich, qualitative information that is summarised into key themes and discussed below.

The AYAN welcomes and thanks the NEHSG for the opportunity to provide input into this topic.

Key themes

Addressing age gaps, where one exists

Ensuring that there is a good mix of younger and older members present in a division may help in retaining younger members. When there is no or few other younger members in a division, this potentially leaves younger members feeling isolated and excluded as younger and older members may not share the same interests or similar experiences. Younger members feel isolated when they do not have other members they can really speak to or form a connection with, and may find older members difficult to talk to, particularly initially.

Encouraging Cadet Leaders and Cadet Officers from neighbouring divisions to assist or be 'loaned out' or temporarily seconded to adult divisions, in order to for new members to feel connected to other members in a division, may be one way of aiding in retaining younger members until relationships with other adults are strengthened.

"As a young person myself, I personally would feel intimidated to walk in to a division where there was no one close to my age." Participant.

Training techniques

As previously mentioned, training styles differ between Cadet and adult divisions. Experiencing a very different style of training may serve to further highlight the significant differences between Cadet and adult divisions and lead to discomfort/unease when young members are not familiar with the new learning style. One member suggested that adult divisions could employ more practical, or hands-on activities and scenarios in addition to the more adult style learning options (e.g. pre-reading and PowerPoint presentations), in order for young members to get the most out of training nights.

Additionally, adult divisions may consider hosting scenario nights where older Cadets have the opportunity to attend adult divisions in order to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities to a small group of adults. This could be seen as part of a Transition Program for Cadets/young members. This gives the opportunity for cadets who may be soon joining adult divisions to meet adult members and form a relationship with these members, as well as to showcase the Cadet's first aid competence to adults. When a Cadet finally transfers to the division, they will have familiar faces and pre-existing relationships with the adult members, and adults are able to see the new members as competent first aiders ready to be deployed to events immediately as fully qualified first aiders.

Additionally, one member suggested developing a 'membership plan' for each new member as part of their transition process that includes aspects such as what to expect in the first 3, 6, 9 and 12 months and 'volunteer career development' post the 12 month mark. Ensuring regular conversations around the membership plan and how the young person is experiencing their division may provide opportunities to address issues and problems, and may allow the young members to feel heard and validated and form solutions with leaders. This may prevent a young person exiting the organisation when addressing issues head on may be the solution.

Additionally, more collaboration generally between Cadet and adult divisions such as joint divisional nights, social events and training sessions was suggested as beneficial to breaking down the cadet/youth members and adult silos.

Cadets/young members at events

Like for divisions, ensuring young members have the opportunity to volunteer at events with other young members was identified as a solution to feelings of isolation and exclusion at duties. Again, where there is a limited number of young people belonging to a division, 'borrowing' young members from other divisions could be a framework that might be employed to aid in ensuring that young members feel connected during events.

One member described duties as 'make or break' experiences for young members. The best duties for cadets were described by one participant as:

"...one where the adult helps introduce them to other members of the team, familiarises them with all the equipment and first aid post, and also lets them treat as much as possible! It is the worst thing for a cadet to go to a duty and have to watch or do paperwork or be stuck in the corner for the entire duty!" Participant.

While Cadets (with appropriate training) can technically operate at the same level of first aid accreditation as an adult member (excluding administering some medications such as analgesics as per legislative requirements), it appears that they may still experience a lack of equal opportunity in the treatment of casualties at events. Participants suggest that adults could act as mentors supervise from a distance and provide encouragement and support—even where the young person has not been a Cadet and is actually a new member. If the person has the first aid qualification, they should be afforded the ability to practice to their level of accreditation, within a supervisory and supportive framework. Strong leadership is required to diffuse this culture in the organisation over time. Additionally, it is important to fully understand the reasons for why adults 'take charge' and may exclude younger members from first aid practice, in order to address this culture in the organisation.

It is also suggested that Cadet and adult divisions might work more closely alongside or collaborate with one another with respect to staffing events, to ensure that there is always a good balance between cadet, young and adult members, including younger Cadets. This allows exposure for both groups to one another on a more regular basis, allows more opportunities to form relationships and learn from one other.

Equal status/rank

Many young members have been a part of St John for a long period of time—they have a great deal of knowledge about the organisation, high quality training in first aid knowledge and skills and bring a great deal of experience to the table. When a young member transitions to an adult division, they often feel like the slate has been 'wiped clean', being made to feel like their (often many years of) experience in the organisation, skills and opinions are not valued to the same degree as an adult member and they need to earn the respect of older members (when in fact, many Cadets have been with the organisation for as long or longer than some adults).

"Respect the cadets transferring entering the adult team have a huge amount of SJA corporate and operational knowledge and don't treat them like the new adult "rookie." Participant.

This is a difficult transition for young members who have spent many years in a Cadet division, and have left to transition to an adult division at the 'top of their game' (so to speak). One member has suggested that if a young member (16-17 years) joins an adult division, the removal of the Cadet rank occur, giving these members the same epaulettes as adult members, is one method of removing differentiation and is suggested as a potential 'equaliser'. Additionally, strong leadership to ensure that equal opportunities are provided to all members is required in order to develop a culture of mutual respect between all age groups in the organisation.

“Cadets transferring are NOT new members... Just new adults!” Participant.

Conversely, it is important to bear in mind that transitions are also difficult for adult members. Adults often are required to adapt their way of working and engaging with their existing team to accommodate a new member, who has had very different experiences and opportunities to them. Change is often not easy for any person—especially when the current way of doing things is considered to be working for the majority (why change if things are working well?). It is important to achieve compromise in order to attempt to achieve some kind of balance. Adult members should not be expected to change everything they do as a result of young people attending their division; young members need to change and adapt also, which requires an open mind and acceptance that things will be done differently. To achieve balance is a shared responsibility, a two way street.

Mentoring

Mentoring has been described as one method of an opportunity to increase dialogue between young members and adults. This creates opportunities for members to share knowledge and experience as well as to make meaningful connections between members in a division. Not only can knowledge and information be imparted on new members, but where a secure mentoring relationship is formed, the members have a safe space to raise concerns and issues in, and seek advice and generate solutions.

“More direct support for new members about progress in development and skills and encourage them to participate in future events and opportunities in the organisations. More personalised and direct support can encourage newcomers to feel more comfortable in the organisation.” Participant

“Mentorship programs empowering the young are also fundamental in including youth within many organisational bodies.” Participant.

Mentoring should become a part of any membership plan or transition program for any new member of a division, and especially young members.

Information provision and expectations

The requirements of what is involved in being a member of an adult division (e.g. describing the level of commitment to service, training requirements and standards required by the organisation in order to perform its service to the community) need to be made transparent for any young person joining an adult division. Expectations need to be made clear from the outset. One member suggested that often, St John may undersell what is actually required of membership to the organisation:

“It is a waste of the organisation’s effort and \$ and the recruit volunteers time if after 6 months they then realise what is required to be an effective member.” Participant.

In communicating expectations to young people, young people should be engaged in the development process in order to ensure that the information provided is youth friendly and clear to them.

Modes of participation

Volunteering in 2015 is a rapidly changing field, with many organisations adopting a range of volunteer engagement and learning strategies that are consistent with our digital time. St John must also adapt in order to engage and retain the current generation of tech savvy individuals:

“The days of expecting every volunteer to turn up on Tuesday nights every week is over. Teams (note I didn’t call them divisions!) need to utilise a variety of strategies

including eLearning, virtual meetings/lectures with webinars and web-streaming (allowing for live and later recorded viewing)." Participant.

St John would benefit from developing comprehensive understanding the next generation of volunteers (who are tech savvy and "gamers") and invest in modern methodologies for both engagement and learning. One member suggested that today's young people like technology and hands-on experience such as via case-based learning (virtual cases) and simulation (aka competitions with more realism) and St John could benefit from incorporating more of these platforms and opportunities into our volunteer experiences.

Youth orientated events in the organisation

More youth orientated events at adult divisions and in the organisation more broadly have been suggested, such as youth conferences and gatherings. It was suggested that events where young members can gain knowledge and skills and share their opinions and experiences will aid in not only dealing with contemporary issues around volunteering with St John, but aid in helping young people to feel valued and an integral part of the organisation and that they are performing a vital role in their community. An example is NatCamp and National Cadet Competitions, where young members from across the Nation come together for a week to share in an exciting learning and development. Once a young member turns 18 years, generally, they are not entitled to attend this event and there is considered to be no other like event to engage young members (nor adults) in the organisation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the NEHSG investigate/consider the following in order to better welcome young members to adult divisions:

1. developing a resource for managers of adult divisions with suggestions for welcoming young members. This would complement the existing resources 'Talking to adults' and 'Talking to Cadets and young people'. The resource might include information and suggestions on the following:
 - Where ratios of young members to adults are low, or there are no other young members present when a new young member joins, consider seconding Cadet Leaders and Cadet Officers from neighbouring divisions to in the new members' transition to the division.
 - Consider employing more practical or hands-on activities and scenarios for learning to complement existing learning practices.
 - Developing a personalised 'membership plan' for each new member as part of their transition process that includes aspects such as what to expect in the first 3, 6, 9 and 12 months and 'volunteer career development' post the 12 month mark.
 - Collaboration with neighbouring Cadet divisions to encourage the development of relationships between young and adult members, e.g. as joint divisional nights, social events and training sessions as well as encouraging young members and adults working along-side one another at events.
 - Establishing a divisional mentoring program (that can start while a young person is transitioning to the division, including if the young member is still a Cadet).
2. undertaking research with adult members in order to better understand the perceived culture of inequality regarding opportunities for first aid practice by young members at events, then form a targeted approach to address any issues identified.
3. consider providing the same rank as adult members for those young members (under 18 years) engaged in adult divisions.
4. investigate, by undertaking research with new members (including those that have exited the organisation after a short period), how expectations regarding membership can be made clearer to new members.
5. investigate how other modes of engagement and learning can be employed in divisions (e.g. virtual meetings, web-streaming and elearning).
6. entering into discussions with the AYAN about how the organisation may further engage young members not engaged in adult divisions in youth-focused activities and increase feelings of connectedness to other young members.

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