

A guide to engaging young people **in the social enterprise sector**

National Youth Engagement Toolkit, 2026

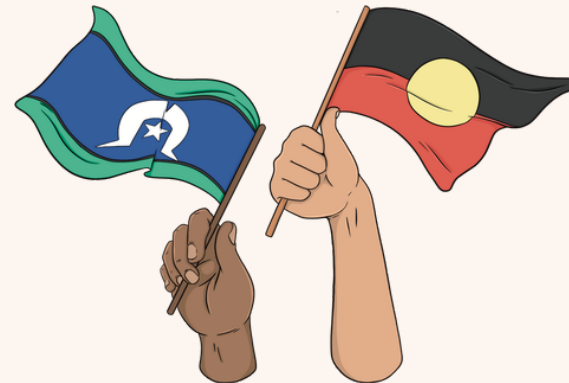


Acknowledgement of Country

At Future Minds Network, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, and connect. We recognise their enduring relationship with land, waters, culture, and community, and the wisdom and knowledge that has been shared and protected for generations.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge the strength, resilience, and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We recognise the ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to listening deeply, learning continually, and working in ways that are respectful, inclusive, and guided by First Nations voices.

We extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today and affirm our commitment to building a future grounded in respect, equity, and shared understanding.



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Foreword

At 16, I went looking for my community in social enterprise, and couldn't find them. I wanted to build something that mattered, but everywhere I looked the sector seemed to have no room for someone my age.

When I stumbled into startups instead, the contrast floored me. It was a bizarre wonderland, where being young was an asset and founders my age were everywhere. Same energy, same ambition, same me - but one sector rolled out a runway, and the other left the doors locked. I nearly left social impact behind for good.

I've thought about that fork in the road ever since, because it was never about me. 80% of young Australians are interested in careers in social impact, but less than 1 in 3 feel their skills match the opportunities available. That gap isn't a shortfall in their ability. It's a shortfall in ours. What's missing is a sector built to recognise them, grow them, and put them to work.

Imagine what this sector becomes when that changes - when a generation with boundless energy, fresh thinking, and deep connections to the problem we work on are not waiting outside, but leading from within.

We started this Deep Experience Learning Community to help build a sector where every young person who comes looking finds a way in, and a way up.

Over 12 months, over thirty organisations from every corner of Australia came together to understand what genuine youth engagement actually looks like. What you'll find in this toolkit comes directly from the sector: the insights, the strategies, the quotes, and the honest accounts of what did and didn't work.

My favourite moments were the ones where an organisation stopped mid-sentence and realised they'd been asking the wrong question about young people all along - not "what can they bring us?" but "how can we back them?"

The sixteen-year-old version of me needed the sector to be ready for him, and it wasn't. This toolkit is my attempt to make sure that the next young person who comes looking finds open doors, real pathways, and people expecting them.

The talent is knocking. It's time we opened the doors.

By Nathaniel Diong
CEO of Future Minds Network

Introduction

Across Australia, social enterprises are trying many different ways to engage young people. But these lessons are rarely shared.

What works in one organisation too often stays inside it, which limits collective learning and holds back a more effective, joined-up approach across the sector.

In 2025 and 2026, we launched the Deep Experience Learning Community to change that.

It brought more than thirty of Australia's leading youth organisations together to strengthen how young people are engaged as contributors, leaders, and decision-makers.

This national youth engagement toolkit grew out of that shared learning. It brings together their strategies, challenges, and lessons from practice, capturing what is being tried, what is working, and what we are still learning about meaningful youth engagement.

It follows the full lifecycle of how a young person engages with the social enterprise sector, in six stages:

- Awareness — how young people first discover you.
- Attraction — why they decide an opportunity is for them.
- Recruitment — how they apply and get in.

- Onboarding — how they find their feet.
- Engagement — how they stay involved day to day.
- Retention — how they grow, lead, and move on well.

Every stage is built the same way, so it's always clear where to look. It opens with the common challenges organisations face at that point in the journey, alongside the guiding insights that surfaced across everyone we spoke to.

Then, it sets out practical strategies to act on, real examples of what organisations are already doing, and a case study of one doing it well. It closes with a short self-assessment, so an organisation can see where it stands today and choose one thing to improve.

The toolkit doesn't need to be read cover to cover. The most useful place to start is the stage where an organisation feels weakest: take the self-assessment, pick one strategy, and try it.

Meaningful youth engagement isn't built in a single decision. It's built one deliberate change at a time.

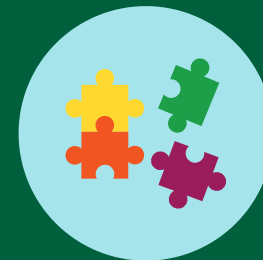
Community of Practice

In partnership with Social Enterprise Australia



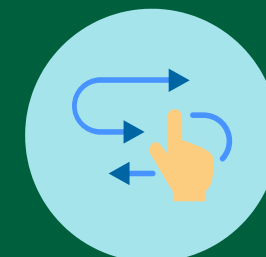
Learning

What's already working in the sector?



Co-design

What's missing and what doesn't hold?



Application

What actually changes for young people?

Community of Practice

Over 12 months, we built a national Community of Practice that turned scattered, siloed knowledge into a shared body of work. We came together to learn from one another, and every strategy in this toolkit was tested, challenged, and rebuilt by the people who use it. It moved through a deliberate cycle of learning, co-design, and application.



How was this designed?

In the beginning, we consulted eight of Australia's leading youth led organisations to understand how they wanted to learn about youth engagement, and what they were doing well.

We asked what was working, where they felt stuck, and what a genuinely useful community would look like.

Everything that followed - the topics, the format, the rhythm - was shaped by what they told us. The community was designed around its members from these very first conversations.



Learning Sessions

Community Schedule

Date	Session Type	Session Title	Description
10 Jun 2025	Learning Session	Welcome to the Community of Practice	Orientation session to establish shared goals, ways of working, and commitments from 2025-2026
22 Jul 2025	Learning Session	Awareness - How to capture Gen Z's attention for real impact	Understanding the channels that young people use to find opportunities and what catches their attention
19 Aug 2025	Learning Session	Attraction - How to build opportunities youth actually want	Understanding the key factors and mechanisms that keep young people motivated
16 Sep 2025	Learning Session	Recruitment - How to hire Gen Z and open doors to opportunity	Understanding the key steps and processes that make it easier for young people to apply and get involved
30 Sep 2025	Co-design Session	Strategic Review - Mid Year	Assessing three months of learning and sharpen awareness, attraction, and recruitment strategies.
7 Oct 2025	Learning Session	Onboarding - Setting young people up for success	Understanding the methods, tools, and environment that help young people feel confident and ready to contribute
25 Nov 2025	Learning Session	Engagement - How to motivate & engage young talent	Understanding the approaches which help young people achieve personal or professional growth
25 Nov 2025 – 1 Jan 2026	Reflection	-	Consolidate learning and set priorities before the next phase of activity

Our Impact

1,000 hours

of collective learning

Across sessions, breakout rooms, and collaboration, our Community of Practice invested close to 1,000 hours together.

30+ organisations

from across Australia

Youth and social enterprise organisations from every corner of the country, bringing the realities of city, regional, and remote practice into one shared conversation.

12 months

of sector collaboration

From early 2025 to 2026, more than thirty organisations met month after month to build something none of them could have built alone.

54 strategies

which were tested and rebuilt

Every strategy in this toolkit was critiqued, refined, and rebuilt by the people who use it - 54 practical approaches across the full lifecycle of youth engagement.

15 sector experts

and guest speakers

They shared the models, insights, and hard-won strategies behind their own practice, so the Community could learn from experts in youth engagement.

6 case studies

from the real-world

Six organisations opened up their practice in full, showing exactly how strong youth engagement works on the ground.



1 living toolkit

built by the people who use it

Voices from our community

A place to learn together

"These sessions surprised me, to be quite honest. I didn't think that I would be as engaged as I was... the most valuable part of this is the building of community with people who are all passionate about the same thing."

"Coming from a small team, there's not really many people I can bounce ideas off. It's just great coming here and going, I've got this idea, what about this? And you're actually on the same page."

Mutual support and energy

"I always leave these sessions feeling super inspired to better the work that we do and improve our processes."

"It makes you feel like you're not alone out there... creating that community around you is very, very important, so you can keep going doing the good work."

"It's almost like an expansion of your team. In the for-purpose and not-for-profit space, we're often too small and our funding is too tight to have every single solution ourselves."

Catchups and collaborations

"We finally got to catch up physically, and it was just amazing. Even if we're doing different things, there are similar things we

Other stories from our community

A support group that didn't exist before. After a session on supporting neurodivergent young people, one member who is the parent of a neurodivergent child was deeply moved by what they heard.

The session gave language and understanding to something they were navigating personally, and it opened the door to a connection with another parent in the community. The two have since met up independently and formed their own small support group, a space for connection that exists entirely because the community brought them into the same room.

From screen to in-person. Members who might never have crossed paths travelled to visit one another, deep diving into each other's organisations and pressure-testing ideas with someone who finally understood.

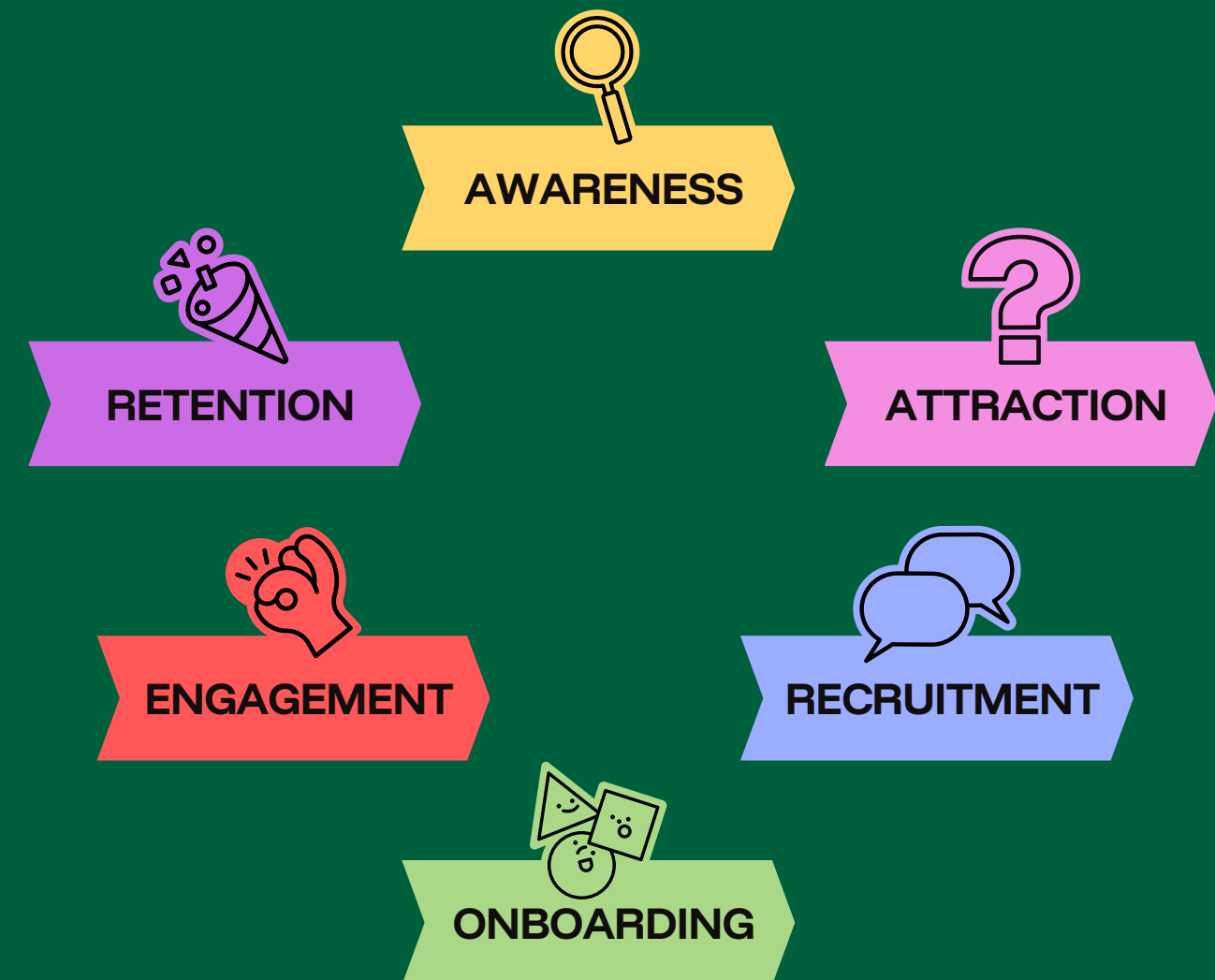
A new social enterprise, staffed from within the community. One member left the program inspired enough to launch their own social enterprise, and the first person they asked to join them was a fellow community member. The enterprise is now live and the pair continue to work together- a dream team that began as two strangers on a Zoom call.

A recruitment network in action. When one member needed to hire a peer facilitator, their first call wasn't a job board. It was the community. The group had become something rarer than a network: a circle of people who trust each other enough to build their teams from it.

A sector learning from itself. Beyond the formal sessions, members exchanged practical resources and contacts

Stages of youth engagement

Which stage does your organisation do well, and which quietly lets young people slip away?



Stages of youth engagement

Youth engagement isn't a single moment. It's a journey that begins long before a young person applies and continues well after they arrive.

We've broken that journey into six stages, where an organisation can either draw a young person in or quietly lose them.



Young people are aware that opportunities exist, through channels that feel familiar and relevant. This is about visibility: showing up where young people already are and sparking interest.

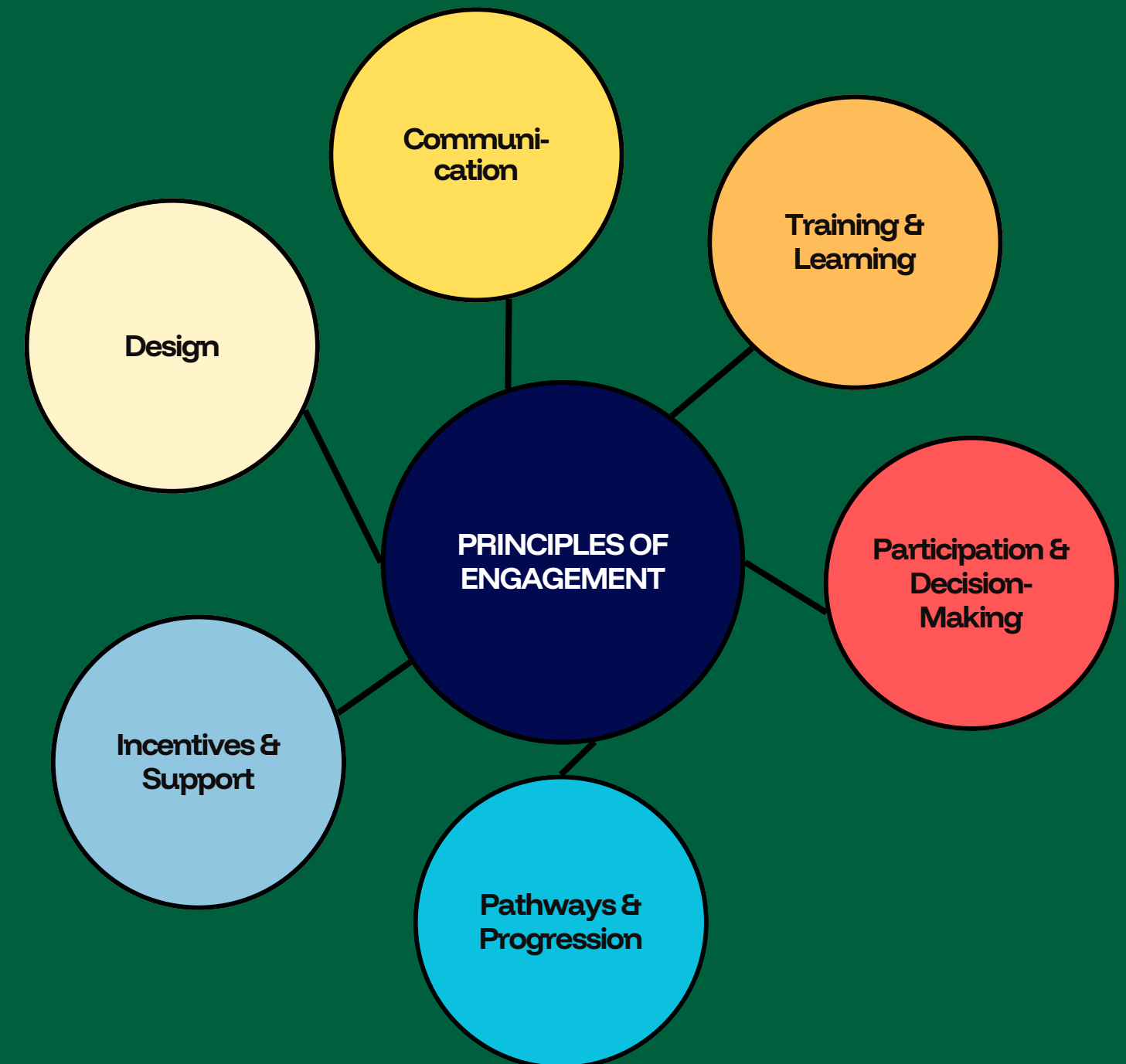


Young people feel drawn to the opportunity because it speaks to their interests, values, or goals. This is about making the opportunity feel relevant, genuine, and made for them.



Practices of youth engagement

Which of these practices does your organisation do well, and which have you never really built?



Practices of youth engagement

Some things shape youth engagement at every stage, not just one. The same few fundamentals decide whether a young person leans in or drifts away.

We've grouped these into a set of practices. These are recurring levers, including communication, design, decision-making, and pathways that an organisation can leverage at any stage to engage young people well.

Design

The process of integrating young people in every stage of job, programs, and policy creation so opportunities match their needs and interests

Communication

The way social enterprises speak to, attract, and engage young people through branding, messaging and outreach.

Training

The method of equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to succeed in SE roles, even if they're new to the sector.

Participation & Decision-Making

Practices of youth engagement (in-depth)

This wheel lays out different type of practices, and each one holds real, usable strategies and actions an organisation can take.

Some actions are small, like a reference letter. Some are structural, like participatory budgeting, or steering committees.

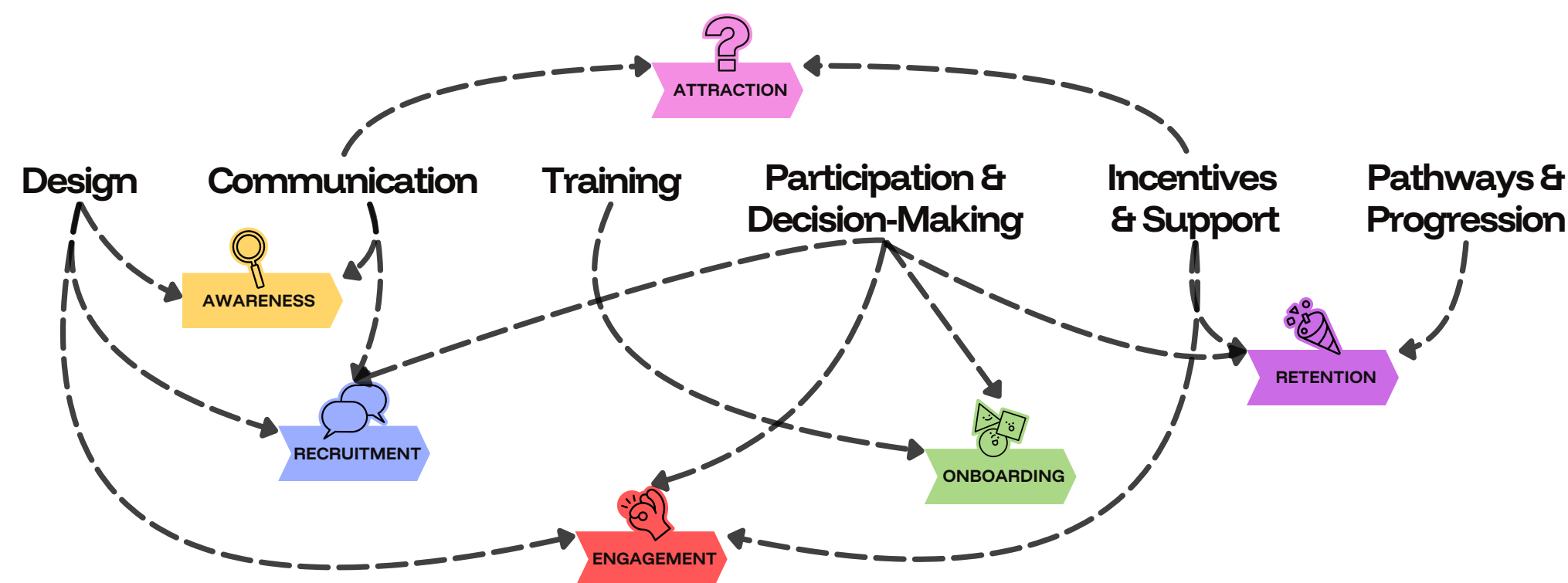
Think of it as a menu rather than a checklist, because no organisation needs all of it at once. We'll mention a few of these strategies in more depth, as the toolkit moves through the stages of engagement.



How do they interact?

The stages show where a young person is in their engagement journey, from first awareness through to long-term retention. As they move through the stages, what they need from an organisation changes.

The practices sit alongside the stages and show you how to meet those needs - practical tactics for communication, content, visibility, and engagement that apply right across the journey.





AWARENESS

"All kinds of organisations put a huge amount of effort into designing the thing, and then just put it out into the world and expect everyone to hear about it magically. But that's not how it works."

Youth engagement practitioner, NSW

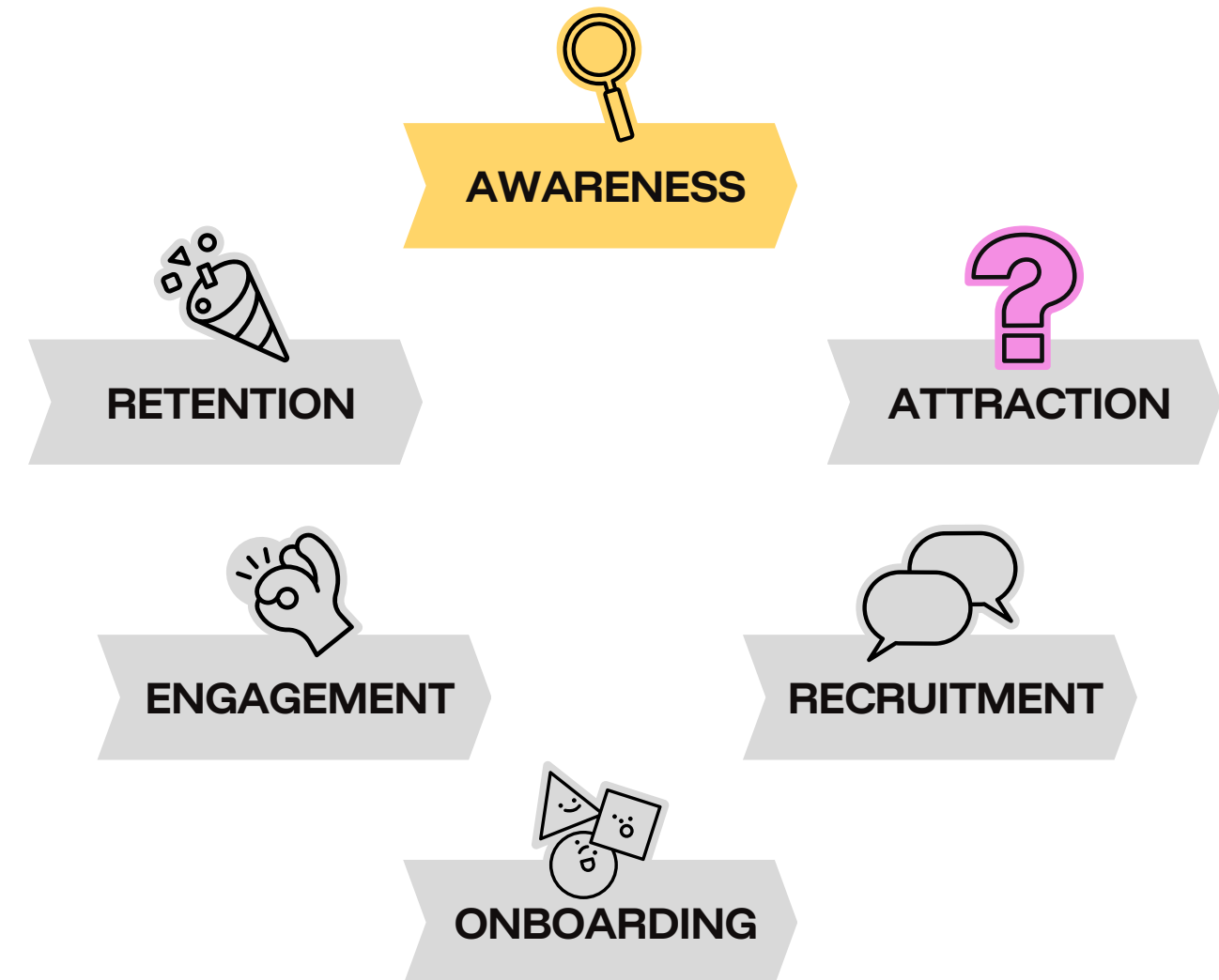


AWARENESS

Awareness is the first step in enabling young people's participation. Before a young person can say yes to an opportunity, they have to see it, and seeing it is never an accident.

For many young people, discovering an opportunity that feels genuinely relevant to them is rare. Most communication from organisations passes them by: too formal, too broad, or showing up in the wrong place entirely.

Organisations that get this right show up in the channels young people already use, carried by voices young people already trust.



COMMON CHALLENGES

What barriers do organisations face at this stage?



Time and capacity constraints

Awareness is the first thing to fall off the list when programs are running. Every organisation surveyed named this as their biggest barrier, and without dedicated hours to invest, they struggled to build recognition on social platforms.



The platform confidence gap

Organisations feel confident raising awareness in general, but not on the platforms young people actually use. Only 33% of organisations surveyed actively use social media in a way they believe works, and most maintain a LinkedIn presence they know doesn't reach young people effectively.



Lack of awareness and outreach strategy



GUIDING INSIGHTS

What patterns emerged across every organisation we spoke to?

01

BUILT-FOR-ME > BUILT-FOR-EVERYONE

Young people stay engaged with something that feels made for a specific community, not something trying to reach everyone. Get this right and awareness compounds, because they invite peers who share the same values.

02

DISCOVERY NEVER HAPPENS BY CHANCE

Young people are unlikely to stumble onto an opportunity. The organisations that reach them consistently are the ones that treat discovery as something deliberately designed rather than left to luck.

03

A COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL

Young people discover

STRATEGY PLAYBOOK

CHANNELS

A visible, predictable presence in the handful of spaces young people already spend time, online and offline, rather than broad coverage nobody notices.

01 CHOOSE THE RIGHT PLATFORMS
Identify the one platform young people spend time on, and commit your effort instead of choosing every channel. For example, use Instagram and TikTok for short visual content, LinkedIn for professional opportunities, or Discord for niche interest communities.

02 BOOK A STALL OR TALK
Find one upcoming event where young people already gather, such as a careers fair, expo, or festival, and deliver an interactive activity. For example, you could offer a five-minute activity at your stall, or a giveaway that requires a conversation.

03 MAINTAIN A CONSISTENT POSTING RHYTHM
Commit to a publishing schedule you can actually sustain, and hold it long enough for familiarity and trust to build. For example, you could post one Instagram reel a week, send one newsletter a month, or host one community event a quarter.

MESSAGING

STRATEGY PLAYBOOK

COMMUNITY BUILDING

A living space young people return to between opportunities, with real ownership over what gets made and shared, so engagement outlasts any single program or post.

07

BUILD A COMMUNITY SPACE

Create a moderated space where young people can talk between events, and seed it with content that gives them a reason to return. For example, you could launch a Discord server or Instagram group chat, post a weekly challenge, and celebrate members' contributions to keep it alive.

08

HOST "TAKEOVER" DAYS

Hand a young person or small group control of your social media, with a brief and payment for their time. For example, you could run a monthly Instagram takeover, plan next quarter's content calendar, or co-write your next campaign.

09

SOCIAL MEDIA 101

Social media is where most young people will meet your organisation first, but a single post rarely does the job on its own. Each format plays a different role: a post builds awareness, a story creates urgency, a reel shows what involvement actually looks like. A campaign is the formats working together in sequence.

01 STORIES

Stories are the photos and short clips that disappear after 24 hours.

Post a story every day before your announcement. Use the countdown sticker, run a poll, and share behind the scenes.

✓ WHY THIS?

Low-stakes, so you can post daily. Content refreshes after 24 hours, so it creates urgency.

✗ IT FAILS WHEN ...

Organisations skip the tease entirely and launch cold, so the announcement lands on the wrong

CASE STUDY

RIPPLE OPPORTUNITIES

SYDNEY // NEW SOUTH WALES

In 2019, Ripple Opportunities made a choice to build an audience through usefulness rather than marketing. It began as a small community of young changemakers, guided by a simple conviction that if you become genuinely useful to young people, you never have to chase them.

Instead of promoting, the team started giving away value. It began with an email newsletter sharing impact opportunities, which soon grew into free Zoom webinars offering career guidance to young people. Providing value-add worked because it earned trust before anything was asked in return, and young people came back to something that was helping them rather than selling to them.

That insight shaped everything about how the newsletter was built. Every edition arrived on a rhythm the team could sustain, because familiarity builds through repetition. Every opportunity inside it was designed to be understood in seconds and forwarded in a single tap:

- A one line summary of each opportunity that can be read in seconds.
- A quick overview covering what the role is, who it suits, and what it offers.
- A direct link to apply, removing every step between interest

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Reflect on how your organisation approaches awareness for young people. For each statement, rate your organisation from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

1. We actively use social media platforms where our target youth audience is most active.
2. We post regular updates about opportunities and programs.
3. We tell short, authentic stories of young people's involvement or achievements.
4. We partner with youth networks, schools, or community groups to amplify opportunities.
5. We show up in person where young people gather.
6. We give young people real influence over our content and campaign.
7. We track engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares, attendance) and use them to improve our outreach.

Once you have completed the checklist, add up your ratings to calculate your total score out of 35. This gives you a quick snapshot of how closely your awareness practice reflects the qualities of a visible, trusted presence among young people.

A score of 28 to 35 indicates that your awareness practice reflects the core qualities of a strong presence: consistent visibility, authentic voice, and genuine reach through trusted networks.

A score of 18 to 27 suggests that some qualities are in place, while others may need attention to build the recognition young people need before they'll engage.

A score of 7 to 17



ATTRACTION

"'Why does it matter to me?' is more important than incentives. Incentives will get you over the line, but they won't make you stay."

Youth engagement practitioner, VIC

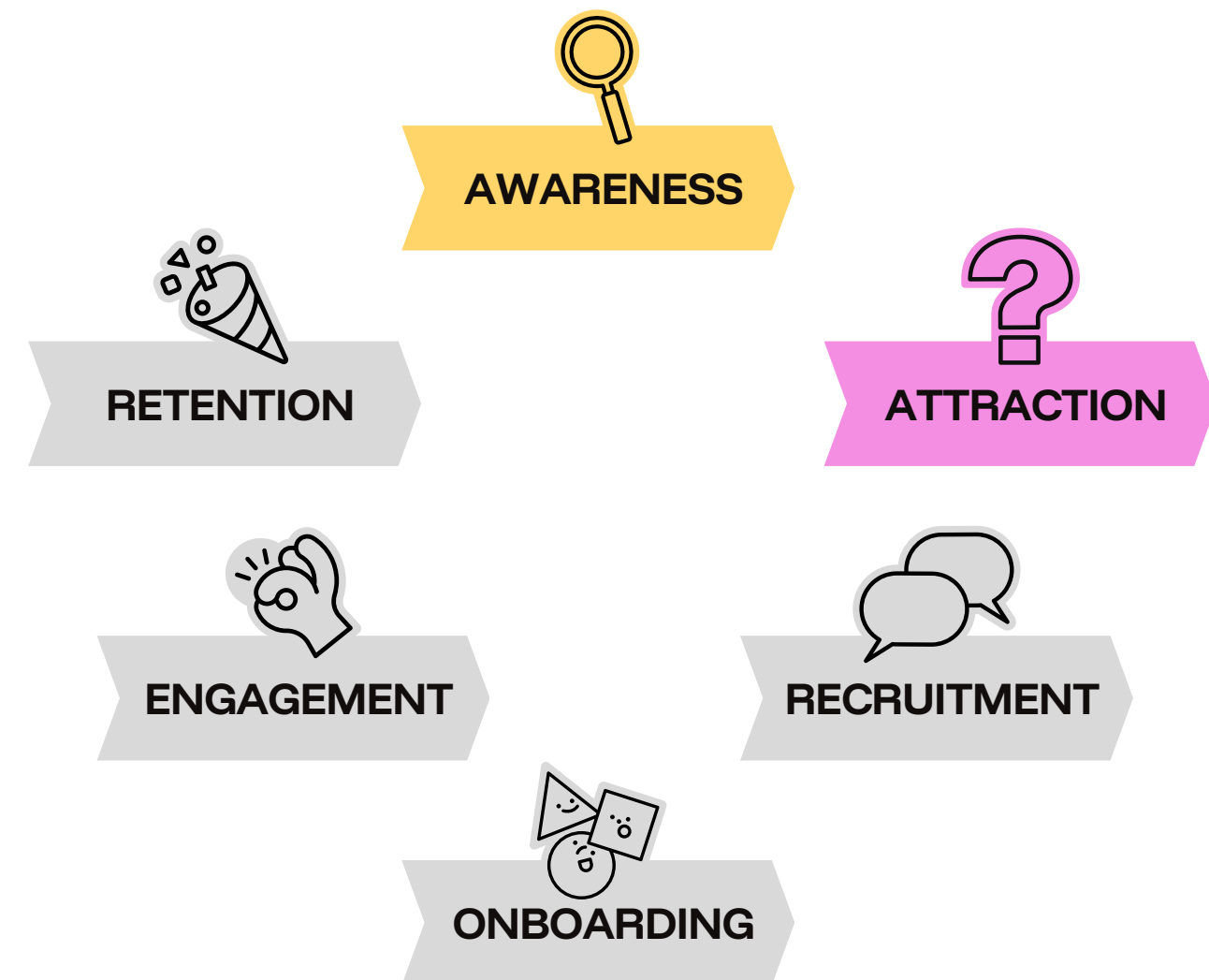


? **ATTRACTION**

Attraction is when a young person moves from knowing something exists to genuinely considering whether it's for them.

For many young people, they're vetting the opportunity and deciding if it feels worth saying yes to. Opportunities that aren't clearly relevant to their lives, that feel designed for someone else, or that ask too much before offering anything back, are quietly passed over.

Organisations that get this right create the conditions for young people to see themselves in what's being offered, and in doing so, lay the foundation for engagement that actually lasts.



COMMON CHALLENGES

What barriers do organisations face at this stage?



The reach-fit gap

Organisations often have to choose between reaching many young people and reaching the right ones, and few channels bridge the two. Many organisations describe reaching wide audiences, but struggling to attract young people who are the right fit for the opportunity.



The relevance gap

Organisations know their own mission fluently but struggle to translate it into terms that make a young person feel the opportunity is for them. Many organisations describe leading with their program or organisational story, and find that only young people already familiar with the space respond.



Compensation uncertainty

Organisations know they should

? GUIDING INSIGHTS

What patterns emerged across every organisation we spoke to?

01

PAYMENT IS A CLEAR SIGNAL

Young people who contribute lived experience are doing expert work, and unpaid contributions send a clear signal about how much that work is actually valued. Meaningful compensation establishes trust before the relationship has even begun.

02

COMPENSATION IS HIGHLY PERSONAL

A single payment method doesn't work for every young person. Some are on benefits, some lack easy banking access, and some simply prefer different options. Offering a choice signals that you have thought about their circumstances.

03

TRANSPARENCY BEATS EMPTY PROMISES

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Reflect on how effectively your organisation attracts young people. For each statement, rank your performance from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

1. We connect opportunities to what young people care about.
2. We offer fair financial recognition (stipends, gift cards, or paid roles) for young people's time and expertise.
3. We provide real skill development through workshops, training, or hands-on projects.
4. We offer mentorship and connections that help young people build networks beyond our organisation.
5. We give formal recognition (certificates, references, or endorsements) that supports young people's future opportunities.
6. We invite young people to co-design programs, and make sure their input has real influence.
7. We recognise young people's contributions publicly in ways that feel genuine, not tokenistic.

Once you have completed the checklist, add up your ratings to calculate a total score out of 30. This gives you a quick overview of how effectively your organisation raises awareness among young people.

A score of 25–30 indicates that awareness practices are well implemented, with consistent use of social media, storytelling, partnerships, and events.

A score of 18–24 suggests that while some strategies are working, certain areas may need attention to improve reach and engagement.



RECRUITMENT

"Treat recruitment like the start of a relationship. Whatever the outcome, the goal should be making a genuine connection with them, so every young person leaves the process more connected than they arrived."

Youth engagement practitioner, QLD

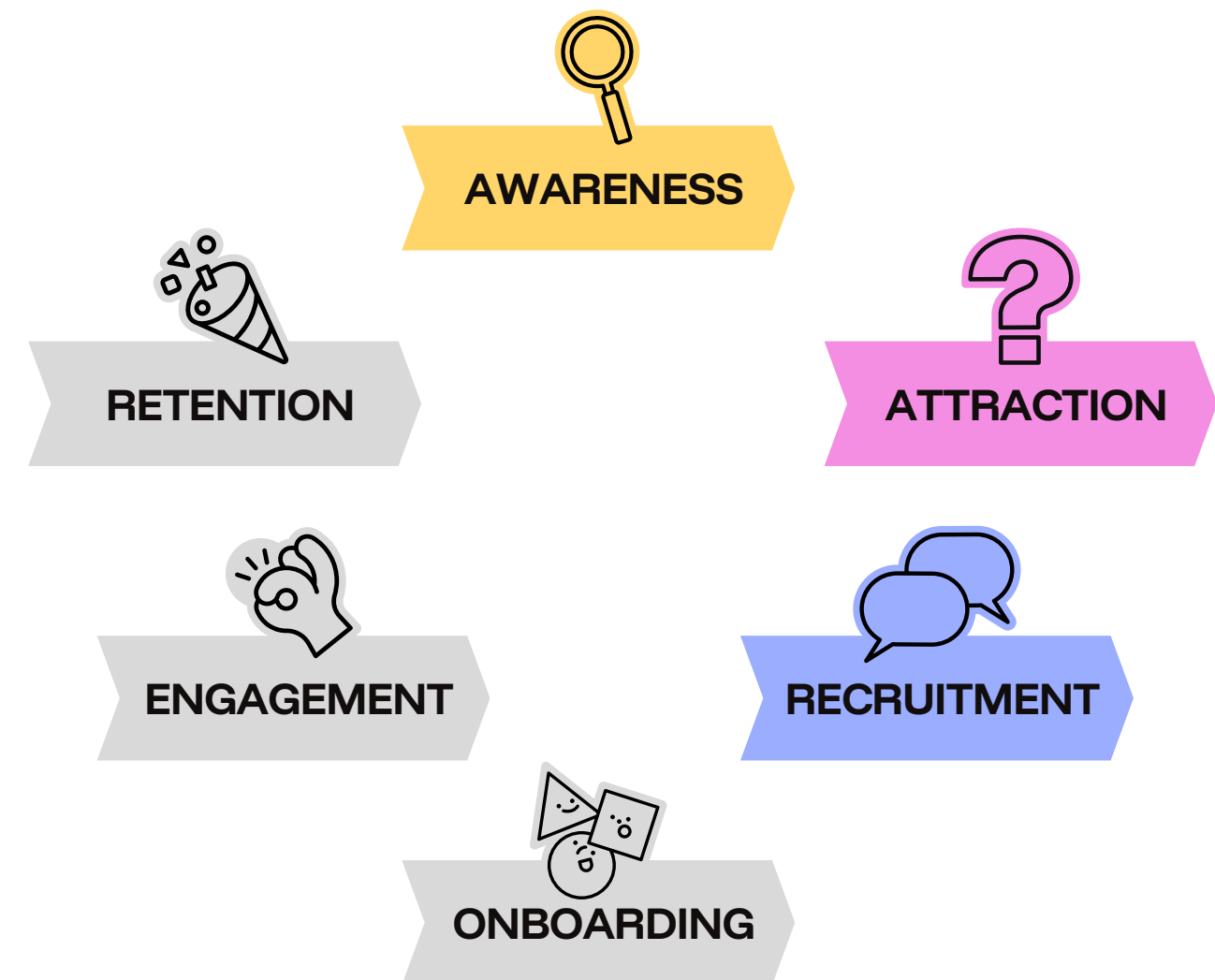


RECRUITMENT

Recruitment is about making it as easy and appealing as possible for young people to say yes and get involved. The process should be clear, accessible, and free from unnecessary barriers.

For many young people, the way an opportunity is presented tells them whether it was designed for someone like them. Unclear expectations, formal language, or complicated application processes can be enough to make a motivated young person walk away before they've even started.

Organisations that invest in getting recruitment right attract participants who show up with confidence, because the process itself told them they belonged.





GUIDING INSIGHTS

What patterns emerged across every organisation we spoke to?

01

DOUBT WALKS OUT QUIETLY

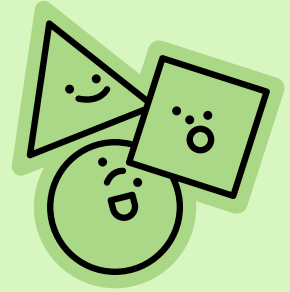
Young people are more likely to quietly walk away than to push back, ask for clarification, or advocate for themselves. When a process feels unclear, intimidating, or uninviting, they assume the opportunity isn't for them.

02

INTEREST ≠ CONFIDENCE TO APPLY

Young people can be excited about an opportunity and still not apply, because the mechanics of applying feel foreign and high-stakes. Hidden requirements such as CVs, formal language, unstated expectations lead to self-exclusion.

03



ONBOARDING

“The goal is to make them feel a part of us, and a part of their future. When you build your onboarding, you get to be creative and tailor the whole program to the person.”

Youth engagement practitioner, VIC

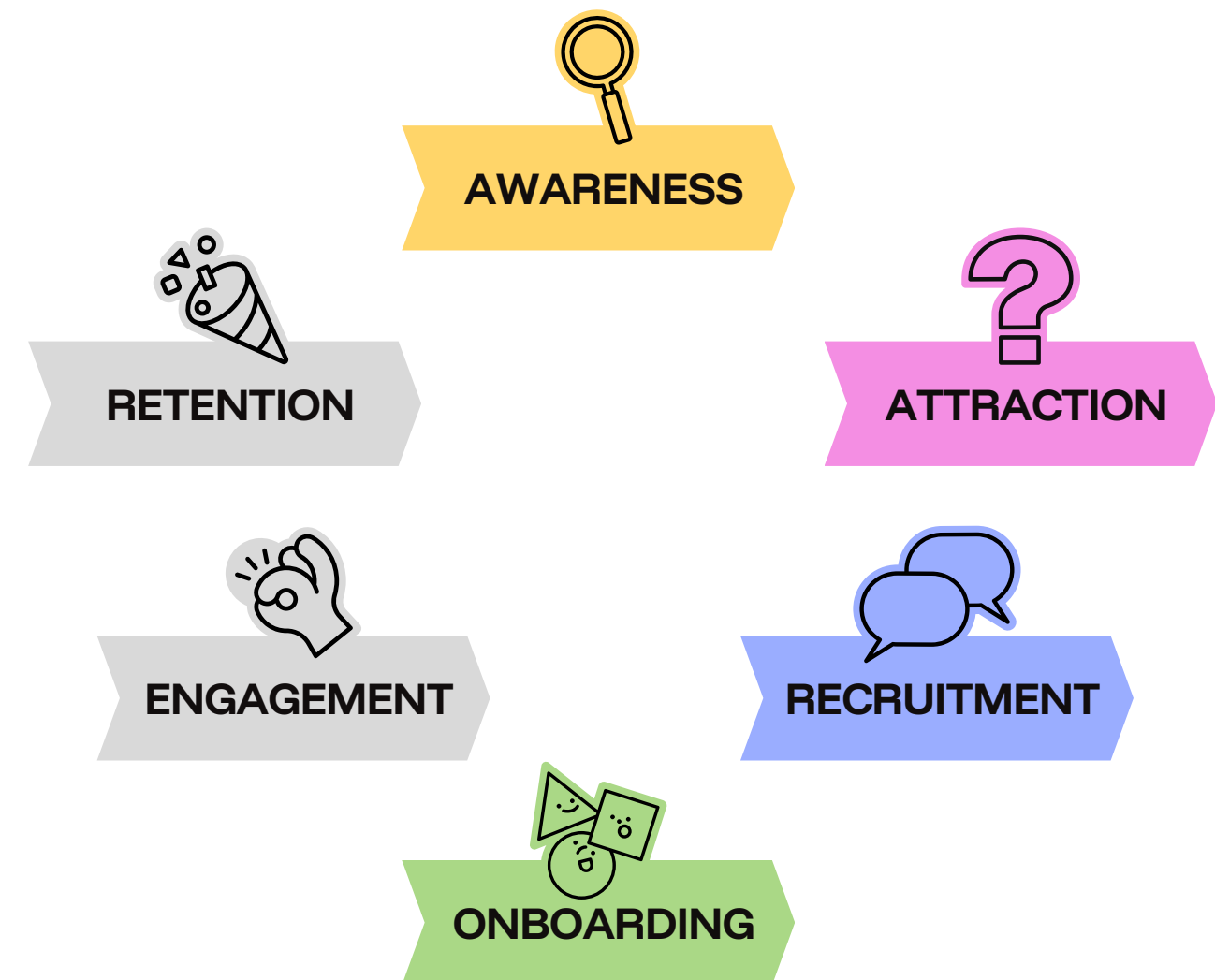


ONBOARDING

Onboarding is about building confidence, relationships, and trust. The first few days in a role can shape whether a young person feels like they truly belong, or like they're on the outside looking in.

For many, joining your organisation is their first experience of structured work or leadership, which means the first few days carry a weight they'll never carry again.

Organisations that invest in strong onboarding unlock long-term engagement. Those who start well are more likely to take initiative, grow into leadership, and become people who champion the work.





GUIDING INSIGHTS

What patterns emerged across every organisation we spoke to?

01

CONFIDENCE COMES BEFORE RESPONSIBILITY

Young people stay engaged when they feel prepared, not rushed, because early experiences shape their sense of capability. Being handed a task on day one without context doesn't feel empowering, it triggers self-doubt.

02

NO ONE STARTS FROM THE SAME PLACE

Young people arrive with different levels of experience, confidence, and support behind them. Assuming a shared baseline excludes those who need more structure. Some are ready to lead immediately, while others need to observe and practise before stepping forward.

03



ENGAGEMENT

"The biggest mistake institutions make is that we try to meet people where they should be, not where they are."

Youth engagement practitioner, VIC

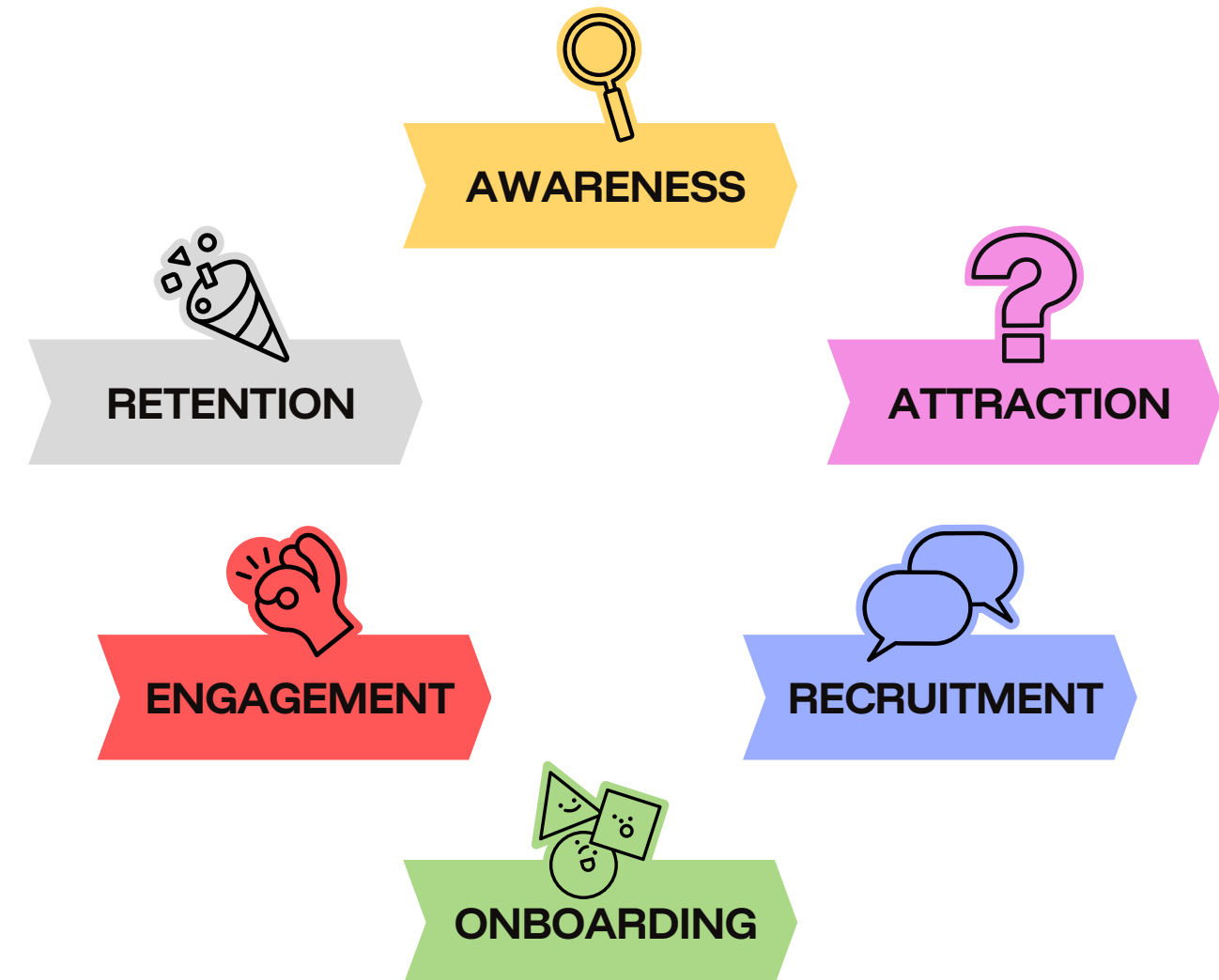


ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is about creating day-to-day environments where young people feel safe, connected, and motivated to keep showing up.

For many young people, the everyday experience of a place is what tells them whether they belong in it. When questions feel risky, when there's no room to step back, or when their ideas go nowhere, even a motivated young person quietly starts to disengage, long before they ever say so.

Organisations that get this right, ensure that young people feel valued, motivated, and confident to contribute.





RETENTION



"Retention as a word sets us up to think they're already leaving. Team culture is continual - and when culture is done correctly, it leads to stronger retention."

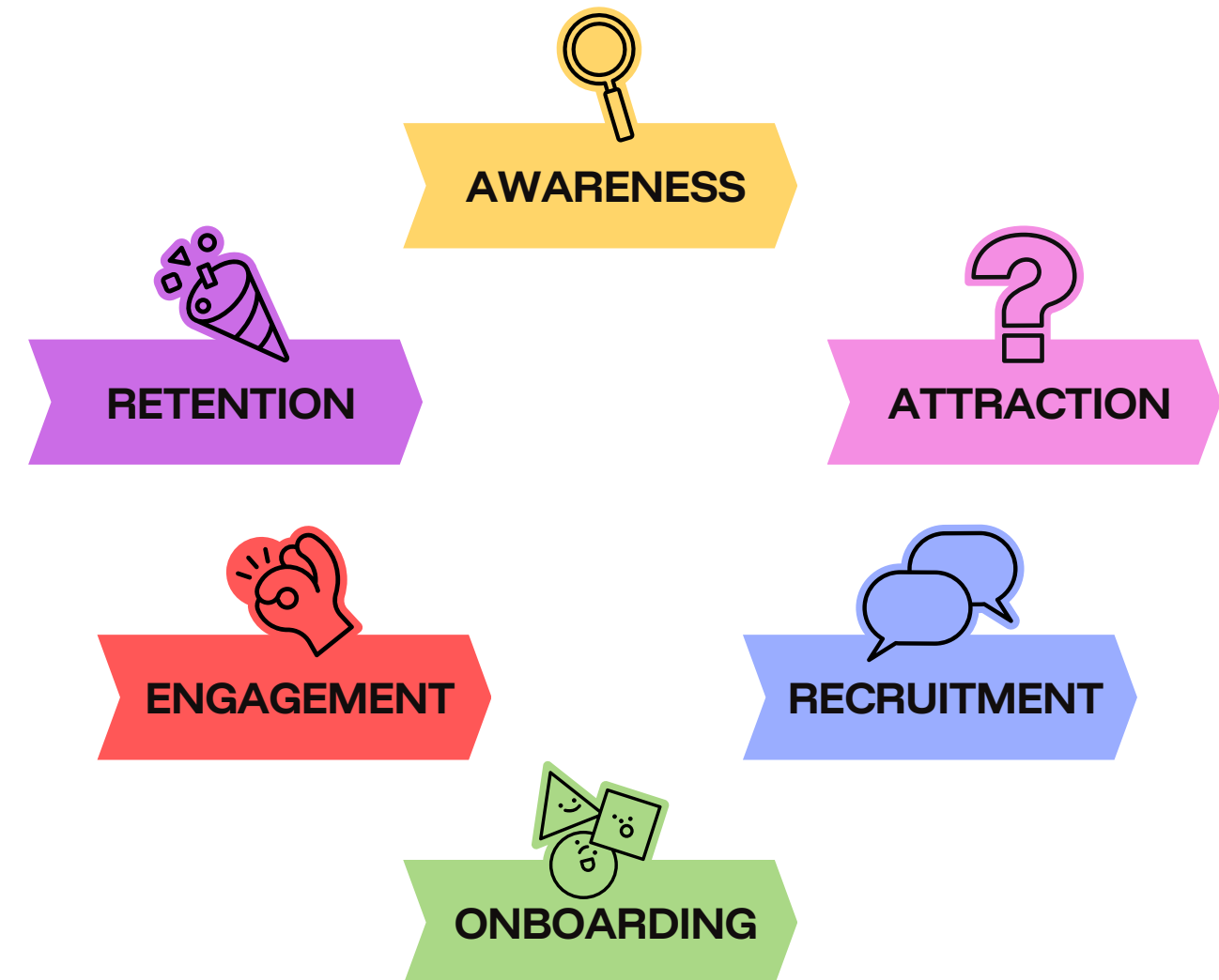
Youth engagement practitioner, NSW

RETENTION

Retention is about helping young people see a future for themselves, through clear pathways, growing responsibility, and support that lasts.

For many young people, staying comes down to whether they can see what comes next. When the path forward is unclear, the role stops growing, or when no one seems invested in where they are headed, even a committed young person can drift.

Organisations that get this right give young people a reason to stay and to return. They grow into leaders, mentors, and advocates, because the organisation showed them that staying was a way forward, not a way of standing still.





GUIDING INSIGHTS

What patterns emerged across every organisation we spoke to?

01

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESSION

Young people weigh what staying gives them - growing pay, new skills, real perks, recognition that compounds - and when the offer stops improving, so does the reason to stay.

02

A CLEAR LADDER FOR THE FUTURE

Young people stay when there's a visible career ladder with the next rung within reach - a named role above them, clear requirements to get there, and proof that people like them have made the climb.

03

SUPPORT IS A SYSTEM, NOT A

