

Building Relationships with Youth through Relentless Outreach



CASE STUDY ROCA INC.

About Roca Inc.

Roca Inc. is a nonprofit organization that serves “high-risk young people who are not yet ready, willing or able to change.” Roca reaches 22 communities with six physical sites: five in Eastern Massachusetts and one in Baltimore, Maryland. Its mission is to “disrupt the cycle of incarceration and poverty by helping young people transform their lives.” Roca’s programming includes alternative education, prevocational training, life-skills training, and transitional employment. Each component starts with drop-in programming and grows to more traditional certifications. Two Roca sites also serve high-risk young mothers (usually ages 16–24) and their children, providing child care, early education, developmental, and social-emotional assessments for children and 2 years of intensive programming for mothers.

Roca’s program lasts 4 years, regardless of the young person’s age at the time of enrollment. Usually, the last 2 years of the program are of lower intensity, and the focus is on sustaining the positive development that the young person has achieved in the first 2 years.

Program Overview

Most of Roca’s programs serve young men (predominantly ages 17–24) “who are traumatized and isolated” and at high risk for long-term incarceration and long-lasting disconnection from employment and education. An interviewee described the target participants as “the shooters, the gang leaders, the 3 percent of a city’s population responsible for 50 percent of violent crime.”

Roca aims to effect change by going directly to youth instead of waiting for youth to find the program, helping youth build and then tap into positive social capital and new networks. To build the necessary trust to convince high-risk young men to make “hard changes” (e.g., giving up guns in communities where they are at risk of being shot), Roca uses a data-driven intervention model that includes “relentless outreach,” which starts with a Roca staff member consistently contacting a young person to offer support



and connecting with the youth's existing network of family and friends. Roca staff explained, "We knock on doors, engage and re-engage young people, and never give up. We build meaningful relationships with young people for the purpose of behavioral change." Roca then helps youth leverage this social capital to tap into resources in the community, including employment.

Social Capital: Components in Practice and Innovative Approaches

Roca aims to build a trusted relationship with high-risk youth by reaching out persistently, creating safe places, and delivering on tangible outcomes that improve the youth's life. To do this, Roca relies on all types of social capital—especially connections with individuals from different backgrounds (bridging social capital), but also connections with individuals from similar backgrounds (bonding) and with people in positions of power (linking).

Bonding: Connections with People Like Me. Each of Roca's programs uses slightly different methods to build connections among participants of similar backgrounds. Roca uses a network-building approach to help pull young mothers out of isolation. For example, Roca connects these women to each other through family nights and community dinners to which mothers bring their children.

For young men, Roca builds off communication practices from the First Nations Tribe in Canada by creating a Circle where each person speaks about issues, successes, goals, trauma, or conflict he is experiencing. The process helps participants "see people for who they are," creating strong bonds through the empathy and trust generated during the process. A participant said that the ability to "call a Circle" and use that structured format was key to helping him and other participants or staff "talk it out instead of fight it out." Roca also pairs a peer group of mentors who are in the 4th year of the program with young men who are newer to Roca to extend networks to support them.

Bridging: Connections with People Different from Me. Much of Roca's model rests on creating relationships with those from different backgrounds. Beginning with its relentless outreach, Roca's highly diverse staff, all of whom are older than the youth and many of whom come from different backgrounds than the youth, will call, text, or visit youth consistently and will not give up on them. Staff also visit and connect with each young person's network, including friends, family, significant others, and neighbors. Typically, within 3 to 6 months "after many 'no's and door slams," youth will ask Roca for help with needs such as acquiring a driver's license or Social Security number, getting transportation to court, or navigating another government process. This request opens the door to building deeper trust between the youth and a Roca staff person (called a youth worker). It is this relationship upon which all other programming and progress rest. As an interviewee stated, "Without this relationship there is nothing to leverage."

The ties between a youth and a youth worker can become very strong. One participant explained how the relationship developed: "It was 6 months to a year before I started really trusting [my youth worker, Sean, who] was like your typical college white kid—nerdy, soft spoken, skittish around certain things... But once you got to know Sean... [and learned] he was doing some of the same stuff I'm doing... and him being able to be a successful person and still being able to relate to things I've done wrong in my life, it made me feel more close to him, like he understands."

The tie strengthened because "He was always there... To know that there's someone there to support you... There have been times when my family members have said they'll show up to court and then haven't been there, and Sean was the only person in the courtroom... [He became someone I could] confide in and express my feelings to... I don't cry in front of anyone, but I could sit down with Sean and cry all day."

Roca also brings in previously incarcerated men who are in their 40s and living stable lives to get to know the youth and serve as positive role models. Some of these men may have had experiences similar to those of the Roca youth, but they have since developed new networks and perspectives that they can share.

Linking: Connections with People in Positions of Power in the Community. Roca staff noted that, in addition to building interpersonal relationships, "We strategically engage systems and organizations in young people's change process." Roca sees its path to strengthening individual relationships as going hand in hand with creating partnerships with powerful institutions and organizations in the community. Thus, Roca engages with as many people as possible representing employers, the state legislature, law and safety, and behavioral health care. Roca strategically engages people in "sideways relationships" within these systems that influence a young person's change process. For example, Roca invites police officers, probation officers, and lawyers to its Circles. Roca staff noted that, "Cops don't want to talk to young people and vice versa," but the uninterrupted communication that the Circles generate creates a level of empathy that lowers barriers between youth and people in influential roles such as police officers. Roca also connects youth (mainly those in later stages of the program) with employers through job fairs and direct connections.

"We strategically engage systems and organizations in young people's change process."

— Roca staff

Key Outcomes¹

Roca's ultimate goals are to reduce participants' (re-)incarceration rates and begin or maintain their employment. For example, program data show that 84 percent of the 283 young men who had been in the program for at least 2 years as of fiscal year 2017 (FY17) had not been arrested for a new offense since their 24th month of enrollment.

Roca measures intermediate outcomes, such as employment, for people who have been enrolled for 24 months. For example, in FY17, 66 percent of 179 young men and 94 percent of 33 young mothers retained employment for at least 180 days.

Other intermediate outcomes include that 86 percent of 58 young mothers delayed subsequent pregnancies until their 24th birthday. Among children of high-risk young mothers, 53 percent of 230 children under age 5.5 received a developmental assessment, with 9 percent of those referred to early intervention services, and 91 percent of referred children using those services.

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

Conversations with Roca staff and participants revealed four lessons about cultivating and integrating social capital to engage and assist high-risk youth.

Be Relentless to Deliver on Youth's Goals. Every interviewee described Roca's outreach as relentless. Once Roca begins reaching out to a youth, they do not give up. Roca describes its approach as "I'm going to show up for you until you show up for yourself." Daily, they try to "mak[e] the young people feel like they matter." It is also crucial to Roca to pair the relentless outreach with creating tangible outcomes from the relationship. Staff "bend over backwards, especially at the beginning" to deliver on helping a young person get something he or she wants. For example, if a youth asks for help getting a driver's license, Roca will drive him or her to the license office and stay at the office as long as it takes. A staff member said, "You have to be relentless and keep chipping away at building the relationship... and you have to do something tangible with the relationship... You have to help a young person actually get something... No one just wants a friendly person to talk to." The culture of not giving up is further evidenced by the fact that Roca does not kick people out of the program. Staff might oust a participant from the program's physical space if needed for safety or other reasons, but they then follow up and continue engaging with the young person. As a participant said, "Just because you're a criminal doesn't mean you're a failure. They don't even judge you or point out your flaws... That's why Roca's relationships are so strong. They'll let you mess up 1,000 times [and still be there to help you achieve your goals]."

Incorporate Data-Driven Approaches to Using Social Capital.

Roca staff use an "efforts-to-outcomes" data software program to track the frequency and types of outreach used with youth and their networks (e.g., family and friends), which allows Roca to not only push performance and communicate results, but also to gain insights (with the aid of volunteer researchers) about which programs and outreach efforts are most effective and to see the overall value of social capital. For example, Roca's data show that the more they contact a youth, the more likely it is that the youth will have positive outcomes on recidivism. An interviewee said, "Don't be afraid of data. Learn from data and what it tells you."

Put Relationships at the Center of the Program Design.

As one interviewee stated, "If relationship building is not a core organizational value, the program won't work. You won't get the right staff... If you do not have the right staff you can't build trustful relationships..., and the most successful part of Roca is building relationships." A participant explained why he felt so close to his youth workers: "When it's 2:30 in the morning [and you're upset]... they're the ones there to help you—not your mom, not your dad, not your friends. Them [youth workers]. They come up, they wake up out of their homes, drive their personal car to come find you because they don't want you to hurt yourself, and they want you to know that there's someone who cares about you. Without that [element], Roca wouldn't be anything." With such a strong interpersonal connection at the core of Roca's social capital approach, a staff person's departure from Roca can be difficult for the high-risk youth to process. Programs like Roca have to carefully manage transferring the social capital built up over time with individual staff.

Institutional and Community Partnerships Strengthen Individual-Level Social Capital.

For Roca to build trust with individuals, it must also build trust with institutions. For example, Roca staff may get requests to help respond to participants—particularly those who are new to Roca—who have sustained gunshot wounds. To assist these youth as they deal with the repercussions, Roca may need to engage police, probation officers, hospitals, or jails to help youth navigate these institutions. Roca builds strong relationships with individuals in these organizations to strengthen systems-level partnerships to advance overall organizational and youth goals. An interviewee explained, "Systems, institutions, and people are the same. To create change in the community and behavior change in high-risk youth, you cannot distinguish among systems, institutions, and people... In order to create space for young people, you have to build a fabric of relationships to create safety."

¹ <https://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/FY17-Young-Mens-Outcomes-Report.pdf>

<https://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/FY17-Young-Mothers-Outcomes-Report.pdf>