

Overcome Barriers to Youth Engagement

The reality today is that most positions of power are held by adults. So this is our challenge to you – adults with any kind of power: take youth engagement to the next level. Many of you are already working to try to engage more young people, and no doubt this is a step in the right direction. But, you may be running across challenges you haven't found solutions for yet. We've compiled a list of five common challenges, along with possible solutions you can implement right away.

It's important to note that young people aren't the only ones that might face some of these challenges. When you address these barriers, you're being inclusive of many groups of people.

Challenge #1: Scheduling conflicts

Everyone is busy, including young people. They have packed schedules with school, extracurricular activities, work, and helping out at home. Some may be responsible for caring for younger siblings, or they may have young children of their own. If they are going to be giving up some of their time, they need to know it will be time well spent.

Possible Solutions

Recognize that "young people" as a group are very diverse –they have different levels of education, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and lifestyles. Think about the group you're trying to reach and the scheduling challenges they might face. Evenings and/or weekends might be the best time to meet for many people. But, it depends on the group.

If you're looking to recruit high school and college students, get in contact with a club at the school or on campus. If the club aligns with the goal of your project, they may be willing to devote some time to recruiting or organizing an event.

Research shows that people are more willing to commit to a large task after agreeing to a small one. Think about some ways young people could contribute without committing to a time-consuming meeting schedule. Perhaps you're trying to make sure your kick-off event is appealing to a younger crowd. You could solicit comments and suggestions from groups you're already connected with through a poll or online forum. After they've completed a small task, follow up by asking for a larger commitment. This tactic of asking for a small commitment first works for recruiting volunteers of other ages as well.

Challenge #2: Experience barriers

It is often assumed that more experience is always better. In addition, certain types of experiences like attending certain schools or working in a particular profession tend to be valued more than others. These values and assumptions privilege only certain types of experiences and they don't leave room for young people. We need to recognize that young people do have valuable skills and knowledge and make room for different kinds and levels of experience.

This overemphasis on experience can affect recruiting, but it can also play out in meetings. Here's an example: A young person suggests an idea for a flyer design. Then, a more experienced group mem-

ber has a different idea and adds, “I have 25 years of experience in publishing, so we should go with my idea.” This automatically dismisses the ideas and skills of young people and shuts them out of the conversation. How could they possibly compete with someone that has 25 years of experience?

Possible Solutions

- Aim to include people with a range of skills and knowledge in your group, instead of focusing only on those with many years of experience.
- Acknowledge that young people do have knowledge and skills to contribute, even if they don't have related professional experience.
- Make it clear in a job description or in an invitation that young people are encouraged to apply or attend a meeting.
- Be explicit that no experience is necessary to join, if that's the case.
- When people are in disagreement over an idea, allow each person to pitch it to the group and bring it to a vote, instead of allowing one person to dominate the conversation.

Challenge #3: Young people have a limited voice in meetings

As a young person, it can be intimidating to speak up in a group of adults, especially since young people are often outnumbered in meetings. Once they are at the table, it's important to create an environment of respect that allows their voice to be heard.

Possible Solutions

- Set ground rules that you agree on as a group. Make sure the rules will make space for a respectful conversation.
- Practice active listening. As a group, talk about what it means to be an active listener. Consider doing a listening activity during one of your meetings.
- Before moving on to another topic, ask if people who haven't talked yet have any additional questions or comments.

Challenge #4: There is a racial gap between younger and older generations

The demographics in communities across the country are changing as younger generations become more diverse. This might present a recruiting challenge since you'll have to be conscious of how to recruit young people and people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds at the same time.

Possible Solutions

When you're strategizing about how to recruit young people, consider using targeted messages for different groups. Find a teacher, youth group leader, or community member that can be a liaison between your current coalition and the group you're trying to reach.

Once you have built a relationship with some younger members of your community, work together to recruit more. Take their lead on what messages might resonate with a younger, more diverse crowd.

Be open to talking about race. Pretending it doesn't exist or that it doesn't impact the issue you're trying to address can make people of color feel like outsiders. Consider using session one of our Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation discussion guide to open up the conversation.

Challenge #5: Making meetings and events appealing to young people

Inviting young people to attend bi-monthly organizing meetings with a group of adults is going to be a hard sell. It's important to think about what aspects of the program you want youth to be engaged in, and then brainstorm strategies to achieve your goal. If young people currently do not attend any meetings or events, it may be too ambitious to recruit them for every aspect of the project right away.

Possible Solutions

Many young people are looking for something meaningful to put on a resume. Let them know how this experience will help them and assign real projects to lead and contribute to. Let them know you can be a reference for them. If they can't commit to something long-term, think of a one-time activity they could be a part of.

Have a group of young people responsible for organizing a certain aspect of an event they're interested in. That way, they feel ownership of the project and the event will be more likely to attract other young people.

Use events as a recruiting tool. You can either host an event specifically for young people, or make an effort to incorporate activities into general event that would attract that age group. Some ideas include inviting a local band with young members to play at an event, incorporating a volunteer component, or hosting an art competition.

Challenge #6: Transportation

Young people may not have a car they can use on a regular basis, or even a license. Your recruitment efforts won't be successful unless they have a way to travel to the meeting place.

Possible Solutions

- Schedule meetings and events in locations that are easily accessible by public transportation.
- Consider meeting spaces at a local school or college campus, or at least within walking distance of one.

When inviting people to meetings, be sure to let them know up front how you're addressing transportation issues. That way, people won't decline a meeting invitation based on the fact that they might not have a car.

Challenge #7: The same young people are always invited

It's easy for existing group members to invite their friends or family members to a meeting. Often times this is the most effective tactic to boost membership. However, if you're not intentional about inviting a diverse group of people, it's easy for the group to be homogeneous.

Here's an example: You're trying to include more young people in your effort, so group members ask their children to join. If there are two generations of members, they likely share the same or similar background. While you may recruit a lot of enthusiastic young members by asking their children to join, you won't be adding to the diversity of the team if you're not recruiting young people in other ways.

Even if group members aren't related, sometimes the same young people are consistently invited to be a part of community events. Here's an example: you regularly reach out to a student government group at a local college to recruit young people. This is a logical place to recruit – the students are motivated enough to participate in extracurricular activities, and they are likely interested in civic engagement. However, only reaching out to the most obvious group means that you may not bring much diversity into your team.

Possible Solutions

- To make space at the table for different youth perspectives, reach out to local schools, colleges, community centers, youth groups, and other places where young people are.
- When reaching out to student and youth groups, don't stop with student council and student government. Have you reached out to the Black Student Alliance? The statistics club? Tutoring services?
- In addition to getting recommendations from adults, also ask the young people in the group to suggest someone to join the effort. This gives young people a voice in decision-making even before they come to your meeting.

Challenge #8: Allowing young people to try something that didn't work in the past

It would be impossible to follow up on every idea people proposed. However, many times adults quickly dismiss ideas because "we've tried that before." Young people are more likely to suggest things that have already been tried since they were not around to hear about it the first time. When we invite young people to come to the table, we need to also make space to express their ideas and opinions.

Possible Solutions

Give everyone a fair chance to explain an idea. Perhaps once you hear more details you'll discover that it's not exactly the same as what's already been tried. They may have a different way of implementing the idea. Or, the timing might be better and there's a good chance it will be successful at this point.

If you listened to the idea but still don't think it would be in the program's best interest to implement it, be sure to explain why. Simply saying "no" without an explanation can lead to misunderstandings. They might think that you're dismissing the idea just because of their age, experience, skills, etc.

Make sure you're honest about why you don't want to implement an idea. If it is clearly not aligned with your program's goals, or if there is a significant barrier such as funding, say no after you've sincerely listened to their suggestion.

On the other hand, if you were responsible for a similar project that didn't work out in the past, make sure your pride doesn't affect your opinion. Instead, be a mentor and have a conversation about challenges you faced in the past. In hindsight, you may have implemented your idea in a different way. Be open about what you learned from past attempts so other people don't make the same mistakes. And if you work together, you can share the success.

Challenge #9: Young people may not be aware of unspoken norms

Many of the norms your group follows likely come from working with groups of adults and/or work settings. Young people have limited experience in both of those areas. This can have an impact on things such as what experience to highlight when applying for a position, how to format emails, understanding what certain terms mean, or how to interject in a discussion.

Possible Solutions

Sometimes we perpetuate certain norms just because we've always done it a certain way, even if it might not be the most efficient way of doing things anymore. Be open to new ways of doing things. Having new people in the group can be refreshing and can help you work more effectively, so take advantage of this opportunity. It might be helpful to develop group norms together for things like how to run meetings or how to communicate with each other.

It may be helpful to ask young people if and how they'd like to get up to speed on the topics of con-

versation or how things are run. Make some suggestions, but let them *decide* what they think will work best. And, some may feel that they don't need any guidance at the moment. Here are some ideas you could run by them:

- Before moving on to a new topic, ask if people who haven't talked yet have any additional questions or comments.
- Set aside time just after the meeting to answer questions people might have about terms or logistics.
- Pair up a young person and a more experienced person to be "buddies." Young people can have the opportunity to learn more about the topic or how things are run, and those who are more experienced can gain a better understanding of the perspectives of young people.

Challenge #10: Understanding how young people can contribute

The idea that young people don't have as much to contribute as adults is ingrained in our culture. And as adults, we often perpetuate the same things adults told us when we were young. Young people of all ages can make a contribution whether they go to school, work in a grocery store, or are a small business owner.

Think of your grown daughter, son, niece, or nephew. You knew them as a child, and now that they're a young adult, it can be easy to fall into old habits. Now that they've grown up, it may be hard to transition to allowing them to make decisions on their own without your judgment. And, you may find that you treat other young people in a similar way even if they aren't your family members.

Possible Solutions

Change your frame: instead of thinking that young people are at a deficit because they don't have much experience, start seeing the opportunity for young people to build skills at a young age by contributing to your efforts.

We all have things to learn; young people and adults can learn from each other. As with any group member, find out what they're good at and challenge them to take it to the next level. If they are on the debate team, perhaps they'd be interested in helping to develop messages. If they are technically savvy, they may be able to help with some of the technical logistics of an event.

Treat young people like they can be leaders as they are. Recognize that they can be leaders now, even though there is still room for growth. Think about it: even students as young as middle school could have experience that would be valuable to your effort. Some play sports, compete in music contests and speech tournaments, run for student government, or organize volunteer events. They are already leaders; this is just another opportunity to strengthen those skills.