

# Guidance for Workforce Development Professionals on Preparing Young Workers to Engage in Conversation With Employers

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Two things are true in today's economy: 1) [Young adults are the fastest-growing group of workers](#), so it's important to include their voices and perspectives in decisions that impact the workforce; and 2) employers have a vested interest in retaining high-quality employees and improving their employees' productivity. In the past, though, many employers developed strategies to address these two issues without formally engaging youth workers in the process.

Employers can proactively engage young workers in a variety of ways, including committees, focus groups, and/or other projects and meeting types. Within Generation Work™ (see box), workforce practitioners are cultivating and facilitating opportunities for employers to connect with young workers. This helps employers better understand young workers' needs, appreciate their perspectives around workplace practices and culture, and learn about their career aspirations.

**Staff in workforce development programs, who work with young adults or who have placed young adults with employers, can facilitate interactions between employers and young adult workers to ensure that these conversations are meaningful, positive, and productive.** Staff can structure opportunities for young adult workers and employers to meaningfully connect rather than act as a conduit for sharing information or trying to represent young adults' points of view. This tipsheet provides five youth engagement strategies that workforce development program staff can share with young workers who will be interacting with employers in a committee, focus group, or other group meeting or project. These tips are intended to benefit young adult workers' interactions with current and

The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Generation Work™ in 2016 to connect more of America's young adults—especially young people of color from low-income families—with meaningful employment by changing the ways in which public and private systems prepare them for and support them in jobs. During the initiative's first phase, five local partnerships worked to align education, employment, and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world, link them with employers, and increase advancement and earning opportunities. Building upon previous successes and lessons, partners in eight communities—Birmingham, AL; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Philadelphia, PA; Seattle, WA; and Wilmington, DE—are now working with employers to improve hiring, retention, and advancement practices to better support young people of color.

## 5 Key Strategies

- Prepare
- Communicate
- Participate
- Self-care
- Be open

future employers, or with other professionals in the community. A similar tipsheet is available for program staff to use with employers preparing to meet with young adult workers.<sup>1</sup>

## Strategy 1: Prepare an introduction.

Introductions are an important way for young adult workers to make sure everyone knows who they are and why they chose to attend the discussion. For some young people, introducing themselves is natural. For others, though, it can be intimidating and uncomfortable. Workforce development staff can support young adults by encouraging them to:

- **Make eye-contact with those to whom they're introducing themselves.**
- **State their name and include a short statement that provides information on who they are why they're there.**

As an example introduction, a young adult employment could say, "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, I'm currently a student and/or employed at \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm looking forward to sharing the insight I've gained from my experience at/in \_\_\_\_\_."

If workforce development staff are present, they can support the interaction by planning an icebreaker exercise to guide participants through introductions. Icebreakers are typically informal, sometimes funny or light, and meant to be accessible. Sharing first jobs, favorite jobs, or dream jobs could be a fun introduction activity.

## Strategy 2: Communicate clearly.

Effective communication is one of the most important skills to have, inside and outside of the workplace. When young adults meet and speak with peers and employers, they should focus on communicating clearly and honestly. The following tips for communicating clearly can be useful to share with young adult workers:

- **Take your time.** When young adults take their time, speaking slowly, clearly, and from the heart, others can learn from and process what they are saying. Employers then have time to take notes or slowly reflect on learnings. Finally, taking time means that someone listening can request clarification, which prevents misunderstandings.
- **Correct yourself if needed.** Young adults should remember that it's okay if they misspeak. They can simply restate what they said by prefacing it with something like, "Wait, let me try again to explain what I meant differently."
- **Listen carefully.** Effective communication often includes listening more than speaking. When young adults make eye contact with the people who are speaking and acknowledge what they are saying, the speaker knows they are being listened to. Listening carefully also allows young people to better understand what is being said and to reply appropriately.
- **Take notes.** Encourage young adults to take notes. Taking notes can help them remember important comments and think through their response/s. Notes can also be helpful to refer to after the meeting, particularly if the young adult is someone who needs time to think and process what was said.

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<sup>1</sup> These tipsheets were developed as an immediate response to a request from a Generation Work™ local partnership. At the time, the partnership was facilitating a set of separate advisory committees with young adult workers, employers, and educators and wanted guidance on bringing those populations together into one shared discussion space. Tips were developed after a scan of resources shared with the partnership and in discussion with their facilitators to identify challenges. Initially, the tipsheets were shared with the local partnerships' participants. Child Trends then adapted them to be more broadly applicable.

- **Take advantage of different types of communication.** Meetings may offer opportunities to put written comments on a board. Encourage young adults to participate and, if they prefer this method of communication, to come prepared to share their thoughts in writing.

## Strategy 3: Participate.

Workforce development staff should remind young workers that they have been asked to join the conversation because they bring a unique perspective. Remind young workers that they have lived experience, viewpoints, and thoughts that are valuable despite differing from others'. Young workers should also remember that participating does not mean being the only one speaking. Rather, they should also listen and share the space with others. Here are some ways to participate:

- **Be present.** Everyone should see that young workers are present, paying attention, and engaged, and that they are not preoccupied. Young adults can demonstrate being present by following up on a specific comment, taking notes, or speaking one-on-one with someone during a break. Impress upon young people the importance of making sure that their phone/tablet is on silent or vibrate, or (even better in some circumstances) turned off and put away. Some situations, though, may merit having a phone out:
  - The facilitator may ask participants to take out their phones/tablets for an activity or as part of the discussion.
  - The young person may want to take notes on a tablet.
  - The young person may need to monitor their phone for important calls (i.e., child care, family emergency, other work-related issue). If this is the case, they should make sure their phone/tablet is not a distraction. It can be a good idea to let young workers know that it's okay to wait for a specific call, or to excuse themselves as needed. When expecting a call, young adults should mention a potential call during their introduction so that their departure is not misinterpreted. This can reduce the likelihood that others will interpret their behavior as disengaged or distracted.
- **Take notes.** Taking notes allows the young person to capture what others are saying, reflect on comments, and refer back after the meeting.
- **Build on what others say.** Young workers might consider how to show support for or build on what others are saying. For example, a young worker could say, "Like [name] said, I also think \_\_\_\_" or, "You know, [name] said \_\_\_\_ and I agree because \_\_\_\_." These contributions can highlight common or strong themes for the employers participating in the discussion.

## Strategy 4: Practice self-care and advocacy.

Young workers should remember to take care of themselves in conversations. There are a number of ways to encourage this.

- **Self-advocate.** Young workers can advocate for a safe and inclusive discussion. Workforce development staff should talk to young adults about self-advocacy and explain that it involves taking responsibility for telling others what one wants and needs in a straightforward way. Self-advocacy may include young workers being able to speak up for themselves; describing their strengths, weaknesses, and abilities or disabilities; knowing their rights; knowing who to ask when they have questions; or knowing what not to share if it feels personally risky.

- **Identify how information will be shared.** Young workers deserve to know if they will be identified. Remind young workers that nothing can be guaranteed anonymous and that they should also ask how information from any meeting will be shared, if it is not otherwise clear. Explain to young workers the importance of knowing whether a discussion is intended to identify who said what or if only broad notes will be shared. If no one tells them, they should ask.
- **Share what they feel comfortable sharing.** Remind young workers that it is always ok to only offer what they are comfortable sharing. If the space does not feel fully safe, help young workers feel ok setting boundaries for themselves. Workforce development staff can also encourage young workers to think before the meeting about what they might want to share so that they are prepared to talk about a few topics.
- **Reflect on past experiences.** Have young workers use the “I” perspective to describe how they felt. This can often make discussing a past experience more powerful (i.e., “I felt X when Y happened”).
- **Manage nerves by expecting them.** Nerves and anxiety are natural physiological responses to perceived challenges. Reassure young workers that this response is normal, help them recognize and acknowledge these feelings, and flag the importance of managing their feelings and nerves. Before a meeting, share some effective techniques to reduce stress, such as talking with family or friends, listening to music, exercising or going for a walk, stretching, drinking water, and breathing exercises. These can be effective either before (in the case of the first few techniques) or during the meeting (for the last two techniques). Sometimes, a young adult may benefit by naming their emotions for the group. For example, they could say, “I’m a little nervous” when they first speak up or acknowledge that they are trying to say something clearly but are open to questions if something is unclear in their statement.
- **Leave if needed.** If the environment does not feel safe because of someone’s words or actions, young workers should know that they can leave. If they feel the risk of repercussions in some way, they should reach out to workforce development staff or to other allies. Young workers do not have to be disrespectful or create an unsafe environment for others, but they can always leave. If they leave the space feeling that something unsafe happened, staff should help them think through how they might want to respond. For example, some young workers might want to clarify something they said to an employer over email.

## Strategy 5: Be open to new ideas.

When young adults listen to their employers, they will likely hear some new ideas. Encourage young workers to listen carefully so they can learn more about what others are thinking and why, even when they don’t agree with what is being said. By asking questions to understand why someone might hold a certain belief, young workers can show they accept others for who they are, even when those beliefs are different or when they don’t agree. Explain to young adults that they can respect others by listening to differing opinions and speaking kindly, whether they agree with the other opinion or not, and encourage them to thank others for sharing their ideas. When entering a space with their peers and employers, it is likely that someone will say something to make the young worker think in a new way about a topic, even long after the conversation.

Sometimes, an employer or peer will say something insensitive or offensive. Help young workers think through how to respond to this. For example, they could say, “I don’t think about \_\_\_\_ in that way, and I think what you are saying reflects the idea that \_\_\_\_\_. I think \_\_\_\_\_ instead.” Another approach is to “[challenge the idea, not the person](#)”—to reframe their response to be about the idea and how they might think differently about that idea.

## Additional resources for young adult workers

- [Advocating for yourself at work](#)
- [Communication Skills for Young Workers](#)
- [Communication as a Soft Skill—Tips](#)
- [A tipsheet about navigating nerves and anxiety](#)
- [The EEOC's Tips for Youth at Work](#)
- [Tips for Youth when Working with Adult Allies](#)
- [Why Are Young Workers Leaving Their Jobs?](#)
- [Youth Hold the Key](#)

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