

A Short Intro to Youth Engagement in the Economy

By Adam Fletcher



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A Short Introduction to Youth Engagement in the Economy.
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Introduction

After spending more than a decade promoting youth engagement throughout our communities, I had the opportunity to work in-depth with a federally-funded workforce development program focused on youth. The program was well-intended, but often poorly implemented. In the places where it was successful, adults followed the wisdom of Youth/Adult Partnerships. That let me to combine my interests. Afterwards, I started writing essays about youth engagement in the economy on LinkedIn.

This publication summarizes a lot of those essays, and some other information. It focuses on the basics of youth engagement in the economy and reasons why it matters. There are compelling arguments for considering the importance of youth to the economy, as well as scathing indictments of focusing solely on “successful” youth. One section breaks down lies youth are told about the economy, while the next suggest several ways to understand youth.

Examining youth employability, another section suggests employers, educators, parents, and others inadvertently discriminate against youth in the economy. Further along it addresses youth apathy, and shares several examples of how youth are actually transforming the economy today. Another section breaks down how to engage youth, while the next discusses the vital roles of adults in this work.

The last part of this publication identifies a relationship between youth entitlement and fostering entrepreneurship, while the next section examines some bad behaviors among adults. Towards the end, readers will find compelling arguments for adult investment in youth, while the last section shows what the future will look like, where youth and adults work together to foster youth engagement in the economy. Powerful indeed!

Please send your thoughts, ideas, suggestions and considerations to me for inclusion in the next version! My email is adam@freechild.org.

— Adam Fletcher
Olympia, Washington, USA
January 2015



1. Basics

Youth engagement is anytime a young person forms a sustainable connection to the world within or around themselves. From that understanding, it becomes obvious why youth are important to the economy. They are important because they are consumers, innovators, workers, entrepreneurs, recyclers, producers and leaders right now - and in the future

Right now, youth from the age of 12 through 25 are caught in the middle of some great divides that are tearing at our society. Faced with no real jobs in Western nations and no real opportunities in other countries, youth around the world are feeling urgent and determined to make the world a better place. By the numbers, they are also the largest generation to ever walk this planet.

Unfortunately, policymakers, employers and voters are acting as if that weren't the case. Around the world, youth programs related to the economy are the first thing slashed when budgets fall. This is shortsighted, at best.

More than ever, we need youth learning in schools and making money for themselves as well as their families. They need to be responsible consumers, entrepreneurs, significant philanthropists, policymakers, and seen as full members of the economy, no matter how little or how much money they have. Fortunately, [they aren't waiting](#) for us to catch up - but that doesn't let us off the hook.

Working to support youth engagement around the world over the last 15 years, I have seen many agendas, programs, plans and ideas come and go related to youth engagement in the economy. To varying amounts, people have talked about youth as workers; youth entrepreneurship; youth banking; youth as makers; youth consumers; youth techies; and so on. They are missing the larger point though.

8 Basic Reasons

Here are eight basic points regarding youth engagement in the economy that everyone should know, including parents, business owners, teachers, social workers, workplace managers and others. These are bigger than any one issue or approach, and show why youth matter to the economy.



1. **A lot of youth are facing hard times.** Around the entire planet, a new and extremely large generation of youth has combined with a negative global economic climate, leading to record unemployment among young people. Youth are being routinely disengaged throughout the economy. Without their personal engagement in the economic system, our economic systems face cataclysmic outcomes and will fail.
2. **It is about more than simply putting youth in jobs.** Economic engagement is about innovation, production, entrepreneurship, distribution, consumption, assessment, regeneration, and more. Youth can be engaged in lopsided ways, focusing too much on one area or another instead of the whole picture.
3. **It is about more than soft skills.** Youth of all ages are capable of forming a whole picture of the economy, and adults are responsible for teaching that to them. If we are going to sustain and grow economic engagement, we have to focus on more than customer service or becoming a maker. Instead, we have to get deep, cover a breadth and connect liberal arts to economic engagement.
4. **Disengaged youth are from more than one population.** Disengagement happens anytime a person does not have a sustained connection to something. Many young workers are disengaged from the jobs they currently have. Other youth are completely disengaged

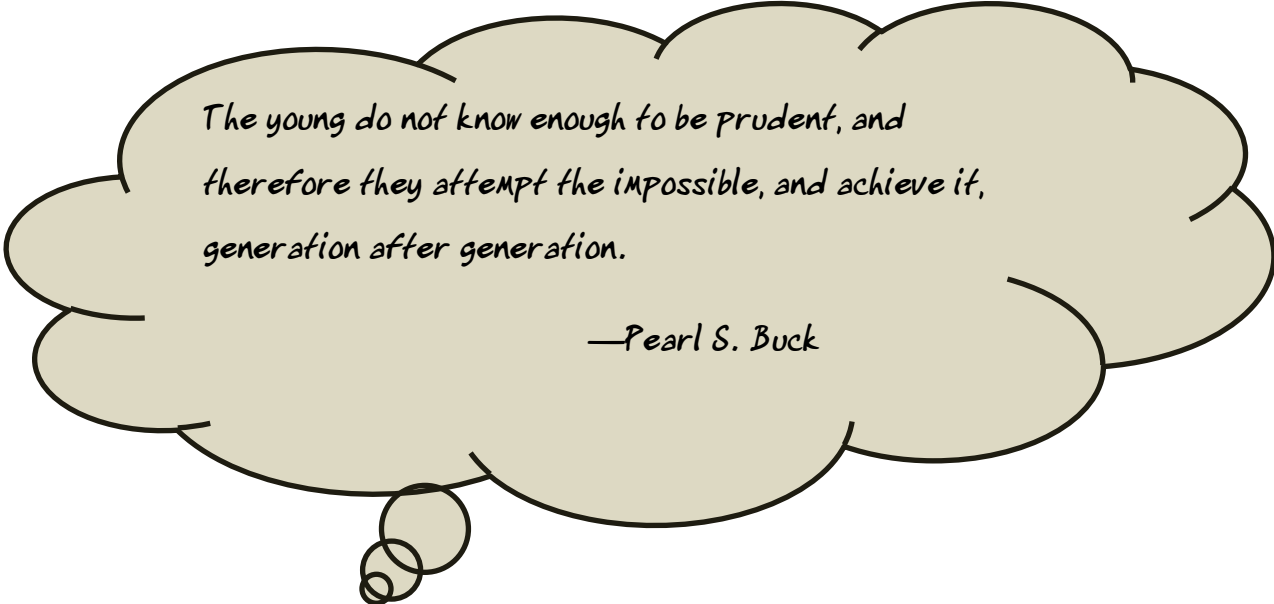
from the economy. Low-income and poor youth can be very engaged in the economy in a number of ways.

5. **Success in youth engagement is elusive.** Youth engagement in the economy is not magical or mysterious, but most adults refuse to see what the real issue actually is. Here is a secret that I will expand on later in this book: If you treat someone terribly, they will not form a sustainable connection with you.
6. **More money is needed to effectively promote youth engagement in the economy.** The old adage that, “you have to spend money to make money” cannot be more true than with youth engagement. It is not to say that young people cannot be engaged without money, but it becomes a lot easier and predictable when there is substantial funding available.
7. **This issue is about more than poor youth or rich youth.** Economies have to be successful in order to ensure sustained national existence. The issue of youth engagement in the economy is something that affects businesses, philanthropies, nonprofits, schools and governments, for sure. It is also about families, neighborhoods, the judicial system, and many others. All youth are affected, since all youth will participate in the economy throughout their lives. Complete youth economic disengagement is either the greatest tyranny of modern times, or the greatest privilege.
8. **Youth economic engagement cannot be measured in simple terms.** Young people are more dynamically engaged in the economy than adults. Their consumption habits, production value, work ethic, interpersonal relational abilities, and technological adaptation and innovation are vastly different from adults. Yet, we try applying our engagement rubrics on them, and wonder why it doesn't look good! We need complex assessments from this habitually complex age group.
9. **A lot of organizations on every level are working to address parts of this issue.** There are local, state, national and international NGOs and nonprofits working around the world on this issue. Entire government agencies and international political agendas have been established to address youth engagement in the economy. Major private philanthropies are trying too. The challenge is that they aren't addressing the real issues I have listed here.

When addressing the issue of youth engagement in the economy, there are many other issues that are important. However, the eight listed above have appeared most frequently when I have talked directly to youth, employers, and caring adults throughout the lives of young people.

Questions to Consider

- What if youth are engaged in lopsided ways in the economy, is that so bad? Like production, but not consumption; innovation, but not entrepreneurship; etc.
- What skills, attitudes and outcomes need to be measured while a youth is becoming engaged? How should those measures change according to the population being assessed?
- Is there a way to significantly measure return-on-investment (ROI) for youth engagement programs, such as long-term measures or cross-community affect?
- Why should youth engagement in the economy matter to schools? Nonprofits? Government agencies? Parents? Others?



The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible, and achieve it, generation after generation.

—Pearl S. Buck



2. Killing Adult Success

Youth are killing your success right now! Whether you are a business owner, a job seeker, a government worker, or simply a taxpaying citizen, youth are killing your success. If you are afraid of the economic abyss, being a failed consumer, or living in a depressed society, youth are killing your success. Can't find a job? Can't find workers? Can't get into college? Can't stand training? Can't get a raise or promotion? Can't find good workers? Youth are killing your success!

All of the headlines, all of the pontificators, and a lot of the economists seems to be shouting the same thing at workers today. Our culture wants everyone to take responsibility, yet nobody seems to take responsibility for teaching people to take responsibility. Instead, we blame others for our problems all the time - and when it comes to the economy, the most popular targets are youth.

This unfortunate habit of scapegoating youth has been going on for time immemorial. No fewer than 2,400 years ago, the Greek poet and playwright Aristophanes wrote,

“The young now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Youth are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.”

His contempt has rippled through the ages, with philosophers wailing on youth for all kinds of ills, including laziness, disobedience, contempt, mooching, fighting, pacificism and anything else that can be pinned on them. This scapegoating continues today, echoing in the words of politicians and TV pundits today.

When people are justly conscientious of youth, they tend to overcompensate by romanticizing them. That popular Greek, Aristotle, did this when he wrote, “Young people are in a condition like permanent intoxication, because youth is sweet and they are growing.” Other people grossly overestimate the power of youth in order to advance their own agendas. Hitler most deviously did this, saying that, “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.”

Leveler heads prevail though. It was Kofi Annan who said, “Unfortunately, very few governments think about youth unemployment when they are drawing up their national plans.” This kind of pragmatism about young people is what serves us best.

7 Ways Youth Kill Your Success



In more than a decade of work across the United States and around the world, I have gained insight from almost 1,000,000 young people and adults. They have repeatedly taught me what is most ailing youth in our economy today, and I want to share my findings with you.

- **Youth expect to be treated like humans.** This gross expectation comes from the belief that simply because they are humans, youth have rights. The right to education, equal work for equal pay, taxation with representation, and food, shelter, clothes and safety.
- **Youth want to be taught ways they can learn.** Youth today believe that since educators know about diverse learning styles, they can adjust their teaching styles. They believe voters will invest in the future by voting for school levies. They want to learn about democracy.
- **Youth need to be treated equitably, not equally.** Not having the same skills, knowledge, or abilities as another person does not exclude adults from participating in democracy, community, or education. However, everyday youth are routinely excluded because of their age.

- **Youth deserve to be seen as valuable contributors, not petty problems.** The value of a youth should not be determined by whether they come from low-income communities, communities of color, have different abilities (disabilities), have experienced homelessness, went through foster care, are pregnancy or parenting, have a criminal record or have been court involved, have been involved in gangs, or had issues with substance abuse. EVERY youth has value simply because they are young.
- **Youth expect there is a future.** Is it so audacious to believe there is a tomorrow they are living towards? Youth have hopes and dreams for the future as well as the present, whether or not adults do. Adults have a responsibility to act like our generation is not the last generation.
- **Youth want to be engaged right now.** Every young person of every age wants to form sustainable connections to the world around them. Becoming engaged is endemic to youth, and adults have the ethical imperative to create substantive opportunities for every youth to become engaged throughout their lives.
- **Youth need YOU.** Its not always fun or rewarding, its impractical at times, and it can be very inconvenient. However, every youth needs a caring adult in their lives right now. They deserve it, too, simply because they are young.

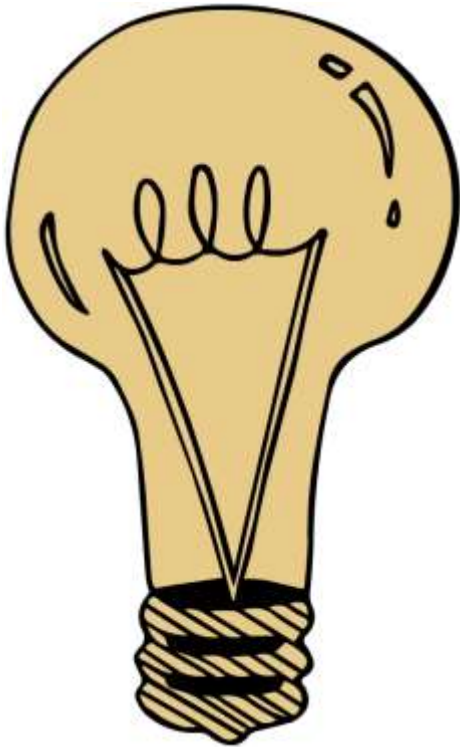
Each of these ways are killing your success right now because they are not all about you! Instead, they are about the rest of your family, the neighborhood around you, the culture we share, and the world where we live. Youth are our only hope, not just because they are the future, but because they are the present, too. Don't like what you see? Don't like what you read? Don't like what you hear? DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

Maybe Robert Louis Stevenson had it right when he wrote, “Age may have one side, but assuredly Youth has the other. There is nothing more certain than that both are right, except perhaps that both are wrong.”

Stop being wrong on your own, because individually we are all wrong. We're social creatures that require each other and the interdependent web we all share. Now act like it by helping a youth today. Read on to learn how!

Bright Idea

Combine Theory and Practice



It's great to have interesting theory or powerful practice—but why not combine them?

Train: If we really want to promote youth engagement in the economy, we have to create training programs specifically made for youth that are not only theoretical but also practical and experiential. Appropriate financial help and mentoring by experienced practitioners are also vital.

Recognize: We can combine theory and practice by recognizing all the ways youth engagement happens, instead of limiting it to the things adults approve of. What if youth determined the conditions for their engagement? What if youth dreamt of the new economies? These are the questions we need to answer.

Acknowledge: All youth are already engaged in something, even if adults think it's negative. If you want a youth to stop being gang involved, start being a responsible parent, or work towards their higher education or certification, you need to acknowledge what they are already engaged in and give them a better alternative.

Critically Examine: Stop being afraid of critical thinking. Look deeply at the programs and practices at work in your community to promote youth engagement in the economy. Are they missing the mark? Use this guide as a measuring stick.



3. How To Recruit Youth Superstars

Your business is suffering, your youth program is struggling, or your organization needs new energy. Want to raise your business's profile? Build excitement? Improve sales? Increase returns? Blast into the hemisphere? HIRE YOUTH SUPERSTARS!

Student government presidents, honors students, sports team captains and other students enjoy privileges that many employers want to benefit from. Beyond wonderful smiles, high grades, great skin, busy schedules, nice hair, the right clothes and the right attitudes, managers see the potential of increased sales, higher business profiles, and a cooler image for everyone involved. These youth superstars are the envy of many businesses, especially those who struggle recruiting them.

That struggle doesn't have to happen.

As a consultant, youth worker and educator for more than 20 years, I've been recruiting youth to participate in various activities for more than two decades. Working with dozens of employers including businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and other clients across the United States and Canada, I have helped devise sophisticated plans to recruit participants in a variety of communities. I want to share with you some of the lessons I've learned on how to recruit youth superstars.

Youth Today

The United Nations [reports](#) that there are one billion youth in the world today. 18% of the world's population is between the ages of 15 and 24 years old, making one in five people a youth. The UN also says children 5-14 years comprise of 19.8% of the world's population.

Different identities help define which of these youth are so-called superstars. Among youth, there are hundreds of subcultures they identify with or eschew, depending on their identity and predominant culture. Young people also claim religion, educational status, neighborhood or region, and nationality as their identities. These identities help determine a young persons' influence and ability among their peers. As it relates to business, this influence can be an enviable thing, as it can lead to increased sales and higher profits.

With all these different identities, it's important to recognize that being a superstar is subjective. It depends on where your business is located, who your market is, and what you are willing to do to reach potential consumers.

In North America, marketers promoted an androgynous view of youth for more than 50 years. In the last 25 years, they've begun differentiating between different types of youth. Unfortunately, many employers still haven't seen the difference.

That's the reality of youth today: They are all different. They are all unique. Every single young person has a different self-image of themselves than young people have ever had before. In the past, when youth were taught they were all the same, they grew up believing that. My work continuously reminds that when they're young, youth live up to or down to the perspectives adults have of them. When I was young, we were all expected to be the same and so we tried to be. Today, young people are all expected to be unique, and so they try to be.

And that is not just some mumbo-jumbo from some self-proclaimed teen expert or youth counseling guru; mine is the voice of an experienced, engaged adult who routinely strategizes with organizations about how to reach youth today.

Why Recruit Youth Superstars

So you've set your sights on hiring some wonderful young people, getting shiny new customers through the door, or otherwise recruiting youth superstars. Why take that approach?

- **Quick fix.** You want to solve a deep problem with an easy solution.
- **Lack of vision.** Looking at all the options, it's hard to see another path to take.
- **Incapable or indifferent.** You don't have the knowledge to take another route or you don't care that options exist.
- **Out of energy.** You've tried the harder ways, but working with superstar youth looks easy and gratifying.
- **Bad attitude.** You don't really like older people and think they're out of touch.

Those are the main reasons why people want to recruit youth superstars, and why they ignore other youth—whether or not its on purpose, or by accident. There are ways to do it different though.

6 Steps to Recruit REAL Youth Superstars

If you really want to recruit youth who are exceptional, you have to think exceptionally about youth. Here are six steps you can follow right now that will help you recruit REAL youth superstars.



1. **Recognize All Youth Are Different.** From how they see themselves to how adults see them to how the law treats them to how society acts towards them, all youth everywhere are different from each other. If you want to recruit youth superstars, you have to recognize that all youth are different.
2. **Mentor and Learn from Youth.** Instead of giving up on some youth and embracing others, take time to teach and mentor youth. Help them learn your industry and position and teach them skills and knowledge they need to succeed. If you want to recruit youth superstars, you have to ensure they'll stay superstars.

3. **Redefine Superstar.** Are superstars youth who bring you business, or youth who make business happen? Do they simply comply and agree with everything adults say, or are they creative, innovative, and appropriately rebellious or critical? Recruit youth superstars by redefining what a superstar is.
4. **Expect More from Yourself.** Know that you are capable of engaging every youth as a superstar. If you've failed at doing that before, that is not the problem of the youth you worked with! Take responsibility and expect more from yourself. You can recruit youth superstars by changing your own expectations for you.
5. **Take Youth Off the Pedestal.** Youth cannot solve every problem in your business, or even the main problems, all by their selves. Even if they're your main consumers, your main employees, or your main competitors, youth are humans. They aren't a silver bullet, a panacea, or a miracle cure. Recruit youth superstars by [taking them off the pedestals](#) you might have them on.
6. **See that Every Youth Can Be A Superstar.** Every young person has the capacity to do spectacular things, and if you don't see that already, start too! If you want to recruit youth superstars, see that every youth can be a superstar. Not only will you not fail, but you'll help make room for more youth to experience more success. That will benefit you, your business, and our world!

Youth superstars are basically a myth that schools, businesses, and parents promote everywhere, all the time. They do it because it makes them feel better, or feel like they can be better.

Instead of trying to recruit youth superstars, if you want to raise your business's profile, improve sales, or increase profits, focus on something with substance like product development, market research, or employee development. If you want to recruit REAL youth superstars, follow the steps above!



4. How to Disengage Youth

Once, I worked as a youth employment program coordinator in a federally-funded workforce development council. Overseeing programs that served more than 500 youth ages 14 to 24, I was exposed to the broad realities facing young workers today. I also learned from youth and adults that support their employment the specific things that happen to youth who are looking for jobs.

Many people agree that youth employment today is unacceptable. However, we haven't explained why that is the case.

5 Lies Adults Tell Youth About the Economy

After working with employers, youth, schools, and organizations committed to connecting each of those groups to each other, I have come to understand that a large part of the problem today is that adults are constantly lying to young people, either inadvertently or intentionally. Let me share five lies adults tell youth today.



1. **There are jobs available for you.** In 2010, youth unemployment in the US topped out at 19.6%. Last year, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [reported](#) that it had nudged down to 16.3%. When that's compared to the historical average of 12.32% since 1955, with the low point at 7.80% in 1956, it shows that the job market still has a long way to go to recover. The Federal Reserve has [said](#) that in the recession, adult workers took jobs youth had held for the previous decade at new rates.

2. **Employers believe in you.** In large, youth today are being sent into a hostile, unwelcoming job market. Employers generally neither see youth as assets, nor do they treat them as valuable employees once they are on board. Once seen as The Future, young workers in 2014 are merely interchangeable parts in an employment machine that disrespects them as humans. The reality of [discrimination against young people](#) is that the very same young people who are being prohibited from entering into stores in groups of 2 or more are being hired to staff those stores, while those store owners are taking their money.
3. **Schools are changing to make you more employable.** Politicians and parents want desperately to believe that all of the work being done to reform education today is being done to benefit students. However, at the end of the day [large corporations](#) are lining their pockets like never before. Charter schools, testing, teacher mastery programs, and many more arrows point in this direction, and [none of it](#) has to do anything with students' hireability. Instead, school reform is largely motivated by profit and power, with thin veils of concern for students' well-being in the future.
4. **You just need to pull your jeans up and take the jobs we give you.** I have heard many employers [say](#), “If only a young person would come in here with a good haircut, their pants pulled up, and no tattoos showing, I'd give them a job in a minute!” The beneficent nature of this statement undermines the reality: Most employers don't believe hiring young people would benefit them, so they don't do it. If they do hire youth, it's usually under such poor conditions for such little pay that it doesn't justify the work it took for that youth to take the job.
5. **Things have always been this way, and they'll always be this way.** Lucky for the future, change is coming. While it can't get here fast enough for many youth, the reality is that there's a burgeoning [Maker Movement](#) that's driving more young people than ever to become entrepreneurs. [Many people](#) believe this is the answer to the lies youth have been told. These youth are building, devising, planning, scheming, strategizing, and mapping like never before. While the millennial generation was fast moving, youth today are even faster. The economic transformation is being driven by The Masses, mobilized by ability and access like never before.

All adults don't tell youth these things, and all of these don't apply to every youth. However, these five lies are important to remember when you're talking with young people about employment, the workforce, spending, savings, and the economy.

How to Re-Engage Youth

If you're interested in doing something different, this publication is for you! Woven throughout this collection of pithy essays are practical, elaborated tips, hints, suggestions and practices I have collected from youth engagement practitioners around the world, including employers, teachers, social workers, and most importantly, youth themselves.

In every workshop I facilitate, there is a period of time for participants to share new knowledge they have learned, created or built upon from our time together. When we talk about engaging youth in the economy, the following suggestions for how to re-engage youth consistently emerge.

- Encourage youth to find out what they are passionate about and give them opportunities to connect with their passion through the opportunity you are sharing with them.
- Create opportunities for youth to learn more, grow more and become more by giving them chances to develop academic determination, real world skills and career goals.
- Show them a different way to be through your example. Be the change you wish to see in youth.
- Allow youth to build valuable job skills good for any job through interactive, hands-on training, and use the Cycle of Engagement further on in this book to connect their learning with their career goals.
- Give youth work that fulfills them and the hours to work it, and personally encourage them to stop being engaged in things like crime, drugs, and violence.
- Build community with youth workers and encourage adults in your workplace to help build youth engagement through self-awareness, resilience, hopefulness, and their abilities to handle traumatic experiences.

Following these suggestions alone will lead your workplace, program, organization, job, or class on a different path with youth workers. Following the rest of this publication will take you even further!

Bright Idea



Start By Listening to Youth— But Don't Stop There!

Listen: Whether you're promoting youth entrepreneurship, training youth workers, or teaching youth about economics, listening to them is an important first step to engaging them. Listening can happen in many ways, including one-on-one sessions, social media, texting, and other mediums. Make sure that you aren't the only adult listening by sharing what you've heard or making sure other adults are present when youth are sharing. And provide more than just text or spoken ways to share youth voice.

Follow the Cycle: Later in this book, there is a simple 5-step process shared called the Cycle of Engagement. It provides a clear map for practitioners to listen, validate, authorize, act and reflect with youth. When this happens in the economy, youth become connected throughout businesses, in classes, programs and organizations, and across entire communities. The Cycle of Engagement makes sure there are opportunities, innovation, diversity and empowerment for all youth in a business or community.



5. Don't Let Youth Be Misunderstood

Many adults are well-meaning in their intentions for youth. Parents, teachers, youth workers and others genuinely want youth to get good jobs and have successful. They create activities and opportunities, programs and entire organizations that intend to promote youth success, in ways that many adults define it: Future-oriented, success equates to having good educations, nuclear families, and successful employment, which means a great paycheck and a powerful position.

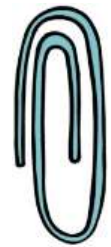
Youth who don't aspire to that vision of success are looked upon suspiciously. They are given labels and stigmatized constantly, and their version of success is frowned upon by adults. These youth are given many descriptions. They are said to be:

- Deficient in basic literacy and numeracy skills
- Disconnected or at-risk of disconnecting from home and/or school
- Facing disabilities
- Coming from low-income families
- Experiencing past, present, or chronic homelessness
- Living in foster care or transitioning out of foster care
- Experiencing pregnancy or parenting
- Having a criminal record

- Being court involved
- Being gang involved
- Experiencing substance abuse

Unfortunately, these descriptions show how we're misunderstanding youth. When we address youth *only* as illiterate, disabled, foster youth, or gang members, we completely obliterate their sense of being complete people who are wholly human. Instead, we accidentally dehumanize them, making them merely a description or label without seeing who they really are.

3 Ways to REALLY Understand Youth



If we are serious about engaging youth throughout the economy, we have to understand what really disengages them right now. Here are three ways to REALLY understand youth.

1. **Understand that ALL Youth ARE Engaged in the Economy, Right Now—We Don't Recognize That.** With so many different avenues for economic engagement, including production, innovation, distribution, consumption, destruction and re-invention, the vast majority of youth are engaged in the economy right now. However, adults aren't acknowledging how this is happening.
2. **Understand that Youth are Engaged in Other Activities—We Aren't Validating Their Importance.** Even if they've dropped out, left home, or play video games all day, youth are engaged in all kinds of things. They can be engaged in friendships, skateboarding, fashion, music, video gaming, cars and anything else in which they have a sustained connection. Because of that, they can also be engaged in things adults see as negative, like drugs, alcohol, sex and vandalism. If adults want youth to become engaged in the economy, we have to present them with something of equal or greater value to become engaged in—after we learn what they are currently engaged in.
3. **Understand that Youth have been Taught to be Disengaged—We Are Responsible for That.** Through television, at school, in their family lives, and throughout our communities, youth are routinely taught to be disengaged. Parents and teachers constantly make decisions for youth without youth while politicians and business owners choose what youth need without them. However, the day comes when adults insist youth

automatically become engaged, and when it doesn't happen we become frustrated and confused. Its no wonder why—imagine what its like for youth themselves!

These are three ways to REALLY understand youth. If you want to engage youth in the economy in any role, its important to understand these ways, because every youth experiences some part of them right now.

Why It Matters

When faced with youth who fit the descriptions above, adults in a variety of roles make immediate decisions based on them. They decide what youths' behaviors, attitudes, ideas and beliefs are without ever talking directly with them. In many cases, employers, teachers, social workers and others decide these youth are disengaged. Because of that, they brush past them in interviews, ignore them in classes, or release them from services that might be vital to these youth.

Youth disengagement is often presented as a viral disease that sweeps through particular populations of young people, like those above. This is especially true when talking about the economy, with youth disengagement leading to them becoming “failed consumers”. This view is often presented with research by its side, including claims that youth engagement in the economy is determined by the income levels of families of origin more than other effects. However, correlation is not causation, and a lot of this research is presented from a lopsided perspective.

3 Steps To Change It

If we really want to address youth disengagement in the economy, we have to really understand youth. Here are three ways to do that.



1. **Acknowledge Youth Engagement in the Economy Right Now.** Look at these seven parts of the economy: Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Production, Delivery, Consumption, Destruction, and Re-invention. Every single youth is engaged in at least one of these parts. Alas, society might not value their economic engagement, but that doesn't

mean they aren't economically engaged. Youth are economically engaged if they are writing apps for cell phones; selling magazines for school; running a lawn mowing business; knitting scarves to sell to their friends; buying the latest songs online; recycling soda cans for money; or taking apart old TVs and rebuilding them into something else. If you want to change your understanding of youth, start seeing how they're engaged right now.

2. **Validate the Importance of Every Form of Youth Engagement.** If you aren't happy with the ways youth are economically engaged right now, try seeing the other things they're sustainably connected to right now. The economy is woven throughout our society, and every form of youth engagement benefits every part of the economy. That means if a youth is sustainably connected to sports, they're benefiting the economy; if they're engaged in comic books, they're benefiting the economy; if they're deeply committed to learning about any topic, they're benefiting the economy. If you want to understand youth, validate the importance of every form of youth engagement.
3. **Acknowledge You are Responsible for the Problem, and can be Part of the Solution.** No generation has created the challenges it faces, and none is solely responsible for creating the solutions. However, if more people are going to understand youth, we need to recognize that we're partly responsible for this challenge—and for the solution. This isn't some grandiose charge, either. It's an earnest call for practical, meaningful action right now. You have to take it in order for things to be different.

These are important considerations for adults of all kinds to keep in mind when they are trying to help youth get jobs; learn about economic issues; train youth to do a particular job; teach adult living skills to youth; make policies and regulations for youth employment; and much more. They should be kept in mind by programs, classes, organizations, curriculum writers, and others who promote youth engagement in the economy.

When we work from these places, we will see dramatic improvements in the outcomes of our work with youth. That includes better classroom outcomes, employment goals, workplace tasks, and much more. If we fail to acknowledge these realities, a different future is waiting than anything that's been anticipated.

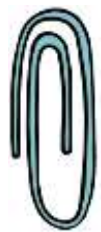


6. The Main Reason Youth Are Unemployable

There's a growing consensus among many employers that youth today are unemployable. Whether they're looking for blue collar jobs or professional careers, workplaces simply aren't satisfied with the skills, knowledge, or abilities of young people anymore. The reason for employers being dissatisfied with young workers is relatively simple. However, seeing that simple problem requires peeling back some different lenses used to talk about youth employment today.

3 Reasons Employers Say They Don't Hire Youth

Using my experience working in education and workforce development programs, along with current news and research, I have identified several lenses that color the ways employers see youth today. Here are some of them.



- 1. Youth Seem Too Entitled.** Employers frequently say that whether they're high school dropouts or college graduates, youth today seem too entitled. No matter their station in life, they think they should have rewarding work, ideal workplaces, fair pay, good benefits, and substantive advancement opportunities. In return, they don't want to work as hard, as long, or as meaninglessly as their parents or grandparents did. Employers talk about how parents

of youth today are too obsessed with their childrens' happiness, and because of that young workers don't know how to work hard for anything. Instead of working for the opportunities they have, [many youth](#) are simply taking those things as if they belong to them by birthright instead of earning them.

- 2. Youth Are Too Apathetic.** With their obsessive amount of piercings, tattoos, and poor clothing, employers say youth [constantly show](#) that they are [indifferent](#) to common workplace expectations for appearance. Reflecting that indifference, youth today don't respect the predominant Protestant Work Ethic that has dominated successful businesses around the world for more than 400 years. Many bosses say that young workers' [apathy](#) shows in monumental ways when they simply don't exert the energy needed to get the job done.
- 3. Youth Just Aren't Ready.** Despite all their [education](#) and education reform, tutoring, youth programs, and other entitlements youth enjoy today, employers consistently report that youth [aren't](#) showing up for work [ready](#) to get the jobs done. Instead, they're under-skilled and less-than-willing to learn what they need to in order to perform the most menial labor. Even college graduates are incapable of accomplishing the most basic of tasks for many jobs, with employers saying these youth shirked necessary learning in higher education in order to pursue learning that made them happy, or just took the easy classes to get through.

I have regularly heard and seen these reasons effectively stop young workers from getting and keeping the jobs they need today. [President Obama](#), [Republicans](#), the [pope](#), and many, many other leaders around the world see youth unemployment as [a major issue](#).

Before we can address youth unemployment in a real way though, we need to see what the *real* causes are. Since we've read some of the reasons employers readily share, I want to uncover the main cause for why youth today aren't employable: Discrimination Against Youth.

The Real Problem

Discrimination against youth is the main reason why employers think youth are unemployable. Discrimination, which is defined in several ways, includes the meaning, “the recognition and understanding of the difference between one thing and another.” Employers are constantly discriminating; however, in the case of employing young people, they are discriminating *against* youth.

Whether we're reviewing job applications, interviewing prospective candidates, hiring youth, training them to do their jobs, or supervising and managing them every day, employers are constantly discriminating against youth.

For 17 years, I have run a boutique consulting firm. Of the 25 employees I've hired, more than half were under 21, and many were under 18. Throughout my career in education, I've supervised hundreds of employees for other organizations, with the vast majority of them being under 18. I have worked as an adult living skills instructor, teaching youth skills they needed to become successful adults including the ability to get and keep work. Most recently, I oversaw a youth employment program serving more than 500 young people across the region where I live, which is mostly rural along with seating the state capital.

I discriminate against youth. Surely, I judge them by their appearance, their actions, their attitudes, and the outcomes they produce too; however, I start by judging them by their age.

I don't do that with adults.

Instead, I study adults' resumes carefully, engage deeply with their interviewing processes, and thoughtfully inquire about them to their references. I review their education and training, and delve into their thinking if I call people back in for a second interview. I don't do it the same way with youth, and I know that many employers are just like me.

All of that is to say that this isn't a hypothetical essay written by a well-meaning do-gooder. Instead, its meant to be a practical treatise that examines a common, under-explored, and urgent reality facing the world today.

Why We Discriminate Against Youth

For more than 50 years, marketers have been ripping away at youth engagement as economic actors. This includes their roles as customers, employees, clients, and producers. We discriminate against youth because doing so makes us money.

Before the 1950s, youth were not treated as distinct figures in the marketplace. Instead, they were generally treated as young adults and were marketed to using the desires of adults to captivate their attentions. Realizing their potential as consumers, marketers identified them as an under-attended segment starting with the post-WWII economic boom.

Slowly and steadily, marketers repositioned youth from being the passive recipients of the adult-driven economic towards becoming active consumers. Initially relying on the concept of a generalized type of “every youth”, ad campaigns and new products frequently suggested that youth without discretionary incomes could earn their way to wealth. Marketers began exploiting difference social values among youth, increasingly pushing market segmentation along socio-economic class lines. They casted images of “punks” and “jocks”, “surfers” and “cool cats”, “Blacks” and still others upon American youth, leaving them to identify with the clothes, music, and other trends marketers foisted on them.

What the ad men and corporate leaders soon discovered was that this line of thinking ignored the economic reality of youth: Without money, there was no way to market high dollar items to low- or no-income youth.

That led marketers began keying in on youth with passive, discretionary income as their ideal targets, and cuing up others for cheaper, lower quality purchases. Children and youth became identified as the penultimate consumers, as their young purchasing habits informed their older purchasing habits. With their singular position in life as the compulsory attendees of public schools, the vast majority of youth were literally a captive audience for both explicit and passive marketing campaigns. Students in schools who wear particular logos identify along particular social and economic class lines, forming clear brand identities that are associated with their personal and familial worth. Those same students take certain classes, attend the right social events, and do the same activities both in and out of schools. Their apparent desire for conformity and community make them the ideal audience for high pressure peer-to-peer marketing tactics that marketers have honed since the advent of youth.

Simultaneously, the promoters of mass media realized that sensationalizing the challenges facing young people and making youth the problem instead of seeing them as the solution sells newspapers. Falling into the trap of commercialization, many nonprofit organizations and educational leaders have fell into this perspective too, actively discriminating against youth in order to secure funding for their seemingly beneficent activities. Politicians respond in kind, boosting police funding, entrenching standardized teaching and assessments in schools, and continuously and deeply demonizing youth themselves. All of this further segregates youth from society.

Youth who are excluded from the mass socialization in schools had room made for them, too: Getting low grades and dropping out makes them ideal candidates for service sector jobs, while the school-to-prison pipeline situates them squarely as income generators for corporations that profiteer off delinquency.

All this is to show that adults discriminate against youth because we make money by doing it. There are many ways that happens, and following are three:

- **Segregation:** Ensuring their self-identification in social class segregated consumer spending groups through schools allows marketers to appeal directly to appropriate potential youth consumers according to their income levels.
- **Condemnation:** Originally condemning to service sector work adults wouldn't do gave them disposable income marketers could appeal to with high demand, low-cost, high profit products;
- **Stagnation:** Repealing those job opportunities from the lowest income young employees virtually assures their economic and educational stagnation, perfectly positioning them to move along the school-to-prison pipeline that generates major revenues.

Basically, we rely on discrimination against youth to drive our economy. Our perception that youth today are unemployable is intact because of discrimination against youth.

How It Happens

These realities apply to young employees in a variety of ways. In an age of economic downturn, young people are seen as expendable participants in the employment pool because of their socio-economic statuses. Denied those formerly presumably disposable incomes, they are viewed as irrelevant actors in a sea of adults who apparently need jobs more than youth. Employers rationalize this during hiring processes in many ways, attributing their discrimination against young people with the cliché condemnations:

“Youth today don't know how to wear their clothes! Their pants are too saggy or their hair is too colorful!”

“These kids don't have the right work ethic. When I was young...”

“I don't like their attitudes. I need someone who wants to come in here and work hard, do the right thing, and get paid money to get a job done, not just because they think they're owed something.”

These attitudes are typical and common among adults today. While every single adult doesn't discriminate in these ways, we all discriminate in some ways, whether at home or throughout our communities. However, the irony is that people who are in hiring, supervising, and managing roles today had the very same things said about their generations when they were younger. The cyclical nature of marketing insists that companies return to the same tried and true strategies every generation in order to assure repeat customers and brand loyalty. Large corporations do this continuously; small companies and upstarts rely on previous generations' attitudes towards young people to sell product too.

All of this is inherently discriminatory towards youth for many reasons, chief among which is that implicit and immediate condemnation of youth because of their age. Rather than being based in non-biased research and reality that acknowledges the varying and evolving abilities of all young people, we routinely and systematically lump them all into the same category, assign them the same attributes and deficits, and figure they'll do the same things, no matter what.

How to Make Youth Employable

There are many different things we can do instead of relying on discrimination against youth to forward our economy. We can recognize the possibilities that are inherent within every single youth, no matter what race, socio-economic class, cultural background, or educational ability they are. We can actively, purposefully engage youth as economic actors who are capable and responsible for engaging future generations of youth. We can change the world.

10 Steps to Youth Employability

Recently I spent a few hours working with a group of educators focused on youth employment. After discussing different concerns, we talked about what everyone can practically, actually do to make a difference. Here are several options anyone can do right now make youth employable.

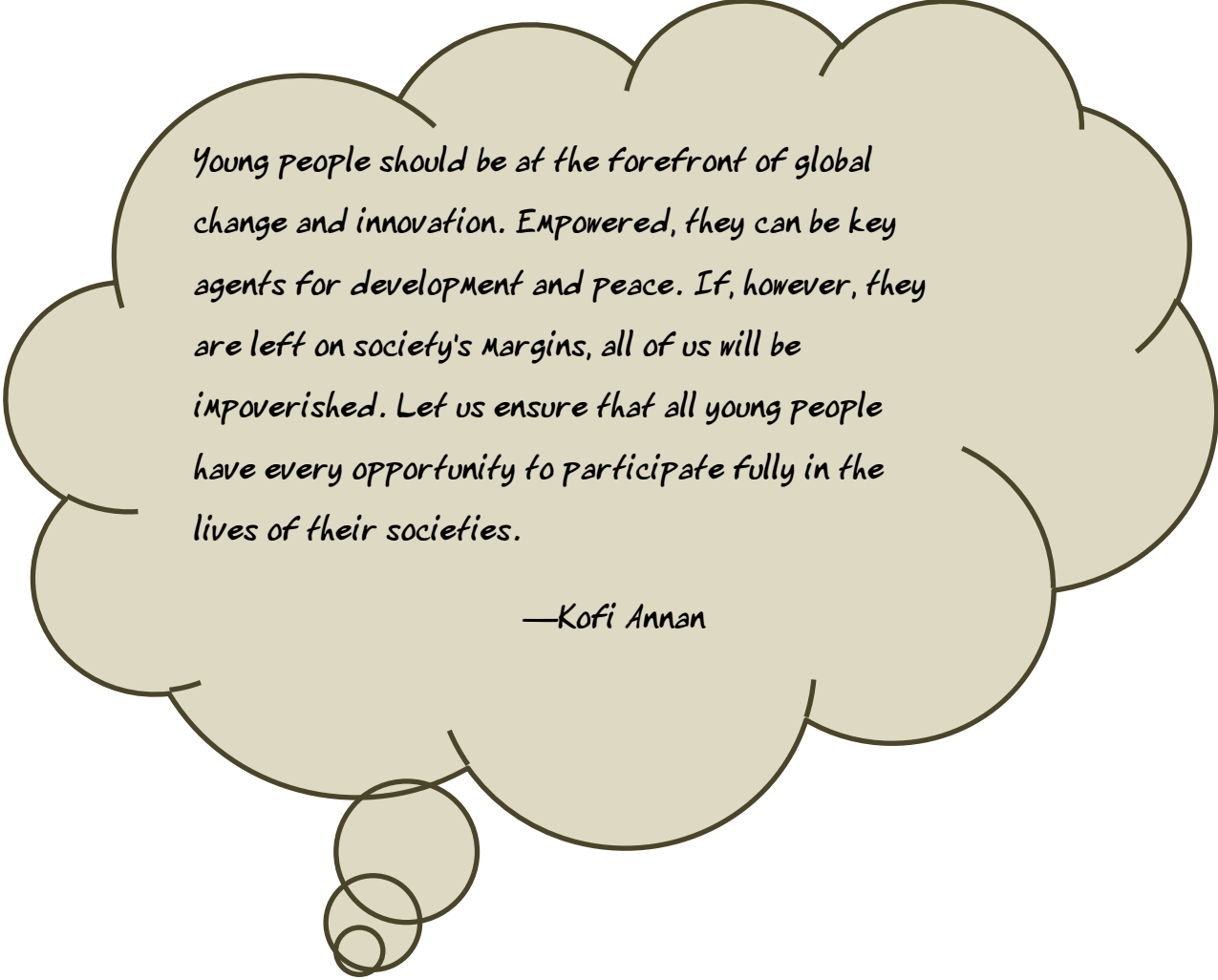


- 1. Accept Responsibility.** If you actually believe youth are unemployable, you are actually responsible for that condition, as well as for addressing it. If just 10% of all adults everywhere accepted responsibility for doing something different, youth unemployment would become rare around the world. No matter if you are a parent, a teacher, a police officer, business owner, politician, store manager, or simply a neighbor, you have a role to play. Read on to learn what that is.
- 2. Teach Young People About Mindsets.** From birth, teach all young people everywhere to be willing to learn. Build lessons in how we think into early childhood development programs, and mandate all educators teach about [learning styles](#) and [mindsets](#), and more.
- 3. Promote Practical Hopefulness.** Many adults have largely given up on young people today, whether they recognize it or not. Instead of piping false hope across social media and television, we have to promote practical hopefulness that engenders real action.
- 4. Create Partnerships.** As they enter their teen years, actively engage every young person in every community in an [equitable partnership with an adult](#), whether as a mentor, in an apprenticeship, or otherwise.

5. **Build Connectivity.** Throughout their youth, continuously connect and reconnect every young person [throughout their community](#) through active learning, volunteerism, and otherwise.
6. **Redo Education.** Re-envision the core curriculum of schools to focus on practical, applicable skill-based and knowledge-building learning, rather than large topical swaths that are seemingly devoid of practical applications to students themselves. [Meaningful Student Involvement](#) should be at the center of ALL education.
7. **Promote In-person Internet.** Weave together online identities with in-person identities. With the ubiquity of the Internet today, its increasingly vital that young people move seamlessly within their social networks, whether on the Internet or in real time.
8. **Foster Entrepreneurial Lifestyles.** Entrepreneurship is about more than work; its about life. More commonly than ever, society accepts that change is the only constant. Teaching young people to make the most of that is one of the best ways to make youth employable.
9. **Stop Fighting Change.** There's so much resistance to diversity, to people who aren't white or wealthy or male or straight or educated or accessible to the mainstream. We must stop fighting the impending changes our world inevitably holds for all of us, and instead embrace them ALL. We can guide and move some change, but at the least, we must simply accept it.
10. **Make Lifelong Learning An Accessible Expectation.** There is a lot of value to teaching oneself and learning what you want to, when you want to. However, in our increasingly commodified societies we're making lifelong learning more and more expensive and inaccessible. We should throw the doors everywhere open for everyone, all the day. Andrew Carnegie knew the value of this; we should acknowledge that's more important today than ever.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do is the first thing on this list: Accept responsibility, because from that place [we can change the world](#). [A lot of research](#) and [policy work that](#) has been done that supports my contentions; [read them](#) for more information.

Regardless of how you see it though, ending discrimination against young people is truly what is needed to make all youth everywhere employable today and in the future.



Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.

—Kofi Annan

Bright Idea

Invest in Youth



Green: Youth are fresh, energetic, hopeful and optimistic. The reality that they are the future is more true now than ever, along with another important point: Youth are the present, too! They are underexperienced, enthusiastic and zealous, and we need them to drive our economy. Invest in them in order to actualize their potential and yours; watch them build the future right in front of your eyes.

Gray: Many Western nations are starting to turn gray, with populations aging while their emerging generations aren't producing the populations needed to sustain these elders. At the same time, elders are withdrawing their support for youth. Stop the abandonment of older age people and younger age people by uniting them in a gray/green collaboration to build better economies.

Gold! About nine in 10 of the world's youth live in the developing world. This can be a golden chance for sustained growth and global unity. Successful and productive youth entrepreneurs and workers will make returns for years to come. In future generations, this cannot be overlooked; today it is essential, too.



7. How To Solve Youth Apathy

A lot of employers think youth workers today are apathetic. Reading the news, surfing social media, and watching tv and the movies leaves them with the impression that young people are shiftless, with no momentum to move forward into the brave new future that's waiting for them. Adults who around with youth everyday can be most worried, since our children, students, clients, and young employees can show our worst impressions are true.

What you THINK Youth Apathy Is

As workers, managers may think youth apathy looks like...

- Lack of appreciation for the job they are being hired for
- Dressing in inappropriate ways
- Not meeting basic performance expectations
- Showing a blatant lack of ambition for advancement opportunities
- Seeming indifferent to managers' expectations
- Not performing at the highest levels
- Consistently showing up unprepared or late for work
- Quitting

As consumers, businesses might see youth apathy as...

- Indifference to new products or services
- Lazy usage of products
- Lack of interest in paying more for premium products or services
- Non-loyalty to brands, services, products, or locations

As students, educators often see youth apathy as...

- Indifference to learning opportunities
- Not applying oneself in the classroom
- Consistently being late or skipping classes
- Treating the future in a lazy way

As children, parents may see youth apathy as...

- Not paying attention to present or future activities
- Walking away from opportunities parents present
- Zoning out with drugs, alcohol, sex, or electronic devices
- Lack of interest in the family or household

However, all of these characteristics are genuinely misdiagnosed. Instead of being an active choice deliberately made by young people, youth apathy is generally a conditioned response to a set of stimulus presented to them throughout their childhoods.

The way to solve youth apathy is to see what youth apathy actually is: A conditioned response that is trained into the hearts and minds of young people from the time they are small children. Responding to their feelings of disappointment, dejection, and stress, young people become apathetic to economics, either as employees or consumers. The way to solve youth apathy is to address these feelings.

Before you can address all the feelings that youth or adults have, you have to see how youth apathy happens. Following is an examination of ten ways.

10 Ways Youth Apathy Happens



When we consider how youth apathy happens, we have to think about the entirety of the lives of young people. Following are 10 ways youth apathy happens. They reflect the whole lives of young people, and consider the depth, breadth and potential of youth right now. Youth apathy happens when...

1. **Growing during Childhood:** As children, all of people have natural inquisitiveness and are deeply engaged in the world. They use this inquisition to gain skills, and our engagement builds relationships with the people, objects, and activities they are part of.
2. **Living at Home:** While being raised by parents or caregivers of all stripes, the natural desires young people have are channeled towards accomplishing adults' goals in addition to their own. The best of these experiences ensures young peoples' investment in the process and ownership over the outcomes. The worst is indifferent to their responses and to the resulting apathy exhibited.
3. **Attending Schools:** The willingness of youth to learn effectively intrudes in teachers' agenda as they work to narrow our imaginations and limit our interests in order to meet prescribed agendas.
4. **Buying Things:** Young people take their inherent optimism with them into the marketplace with relative ease, saving change or earning allowances in order to buy a new toy or cool shoes.
5. **Receiving Money:** As we want to acquire more things and experience increasing desire for independence, we seek to acquire more money. Some get jobs while others simply ask.
6. **Getting Jobs:** Many young people are not hired for jobs, soon after experiencing their first brush with substantive apathy.
7. **Feeling Disappointed:** As they cannot afford the products they're advertised, more young people develop more apathy. If they can afford the things they're told they should want, young people can develop indifference for the value of things. Filling up their lives with

material possessions, they disregard or don't know how to meet their emotional, psychological, or physical well-being, consequently becoming apathetic about themselves.

8. **Cashing Paychecks:** When they get their first job, the paychecks of many young people are sucked away into paying for their lifestyles, whether they receive money from parents or are barely scraping by on their own. This increases youth apathy by incapacitating their abilities to make a difference in their own lives.
9. **Paying Taxes:** In schools and homes where the government is portrayed as evil and paying taxes towards the public good is seen as stupid, young people can feel increasing amounts of apathy. At this point, engaging in the public good can actually build youth apathy and disregard for the larger world they live in.
10. **Feeling Left Behind:** Increasing amounts of adult indifference to the health and well-being of young people is only promoting youth apathy, as they follow role models of all stripes and meet the expectations (or lack thereof) for them.

As Maya Angelou wrote, “We are all creative, but by the time we are three or four years old, someone has knocked the creativity out of us. Some people shut up the kids who start to tell stories. Kids dance in their cribs, but someone will insist they sit still. By the time the creative people are ten or twelve, they want to be like everyone else.” This is the root of youth apathy.

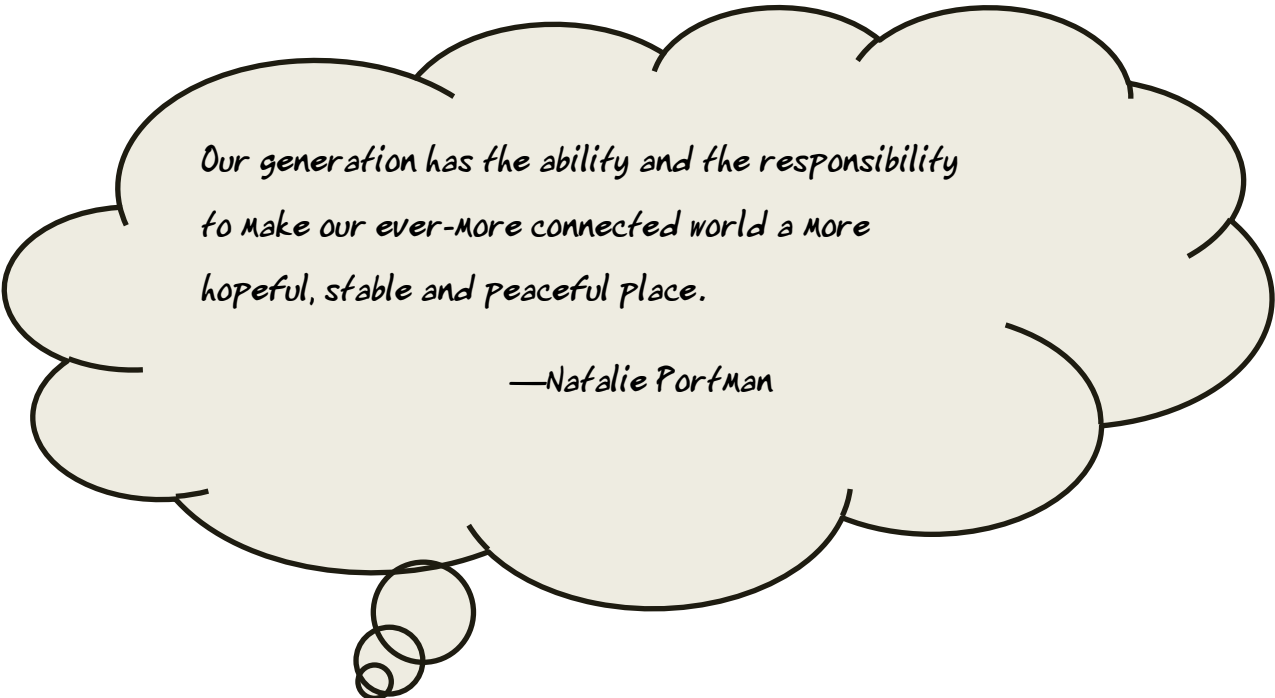
Solving Youth Apathy

Solving youth apathy requires that we engage every young people in as many places as we can, as frequently as possible. Through my research and practice over the years, I found the following Cycle of Engagement emerging almost anytime people say they feel an activity solves apathy. Going through the Cycle can be intentional or coincidental, but as I've taught more people about it, more people report more success in engaging others. This means that youth apathy can and should be intentionally challenged.

Youth apathy is not an unsolvable issue. It requires strategy though, and here is what I've laid out in so far in this book:

- **Acknowledge** what you think youth apathy is.
- **Recognize** what youth apathy actually is.
- **Identify** the places and ways youth apathy actually happens.
- **Design** a conscientious strategy for promoting youth engagement.
- **Commit** to continually challenging youth apathy.

Only when we take these steps can we actually make a difference in the lives of young people and throughout our entire communities today. Use the following Cycle of Engagement to help implement these points.



*Our generation has the ability and the responsibility
to make our ever-more connected world a more
hopeful, stable and peaceful place.*

—Natalie Portman

Bright Idea

Get Real About Costs



If your business, organization, school or community is going to earnestly promote youth engagement in the economy, it will cost. Here are some good things you can do to get real about the cost.

- Get information on funding sources from local public and private sectors.
- Find tips and strategies on how to access and sustain public and private funding, including developing effective grant proposals;
- Create innovative strategies for fundraising and soliciting support;
- Get assistance in developing budgets and using budgets to make projections;
- Find training and technical assistance on developing strategic financing plans;
- Secure assistance in developing evaluation plans and reporting outcomes;
- Create strategies for building community support for youth engagement; and
- Contact us for technical assistance on developing a business plan for youth engagement in the economy.



8. Youth Can Change the World

More people are doing more to deliberately change the world than ever before. They are creating jobs, building the economy, and circulating wealth in brand new ways that we can all learn from. Here are a two examples:

- **Coding for Millions:** Australian Nick D'Aloisio began teaching himself to code on computers before he was 15 years old. He built a few small apps, but launched a major app called [Summly](#). Last year, when he was 17, D'Aloisio sold it to Yahoo for \$30 million. In the process he hired dozens of programmers and made others wealthy, too.
- **Eco-Success:** At the age of 12, Charles Orgbon III founded a nonprofit called [Greening Forward](#). Six years later, his youth-driven, youth-led, and youth-imagined environmental organization is teaching young people across the U.S. how to make money through the green movement. His program has reached hundreds of communities across the country and helped thousands of students learn about the environment in a productive way.

The stories of people changing the world can go on for days, and as we all know, this has always happened. However, more than ever, its the youngest among us who are actually doing the most, and [have been](#) for more than 100 years—and throughout [all](#) of history: Joan of Arc, Mozart, and countless unheralded people under 18, 21, 25, and 35 have changed the world.

Youth are changing the world in ways we all follow all of the time, whether we're aware of that or not. While we routinely don't acknowledge them for doing it, the fact is that society is dragged forward chained to the heels of young people, today and throughout all times. There is a lot we can learn from them.

Youth Specifically can Change the World

Robert Kennedy famously summarized the ways young people change the world in a speech from 1967, saying, “This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease.”

It's important to move beyond clichés though, and towards a practical, responsive logic that shows clearly why and how young people are changing the world. Here are five ways that's happening right now.

- **Youth are in school.** Learning conformity through standardization, having their schedules delineated for them, and being forced to learn what others want them to teaches some youth to stay in line. For others, it's an excuse and even permission to get out of the box and think in radical new ways. They're learning about politics, they're learning about the real world, and they're launching their lives during *current* times, right now. Transforming education by demanding public accountability for public schools and forcing educators and education leaders to become responsive to the democratic citizens they're responsible to and for is ensuring these young people change the future.
- **Youth cannot vote.** The demands of democratic civic engagement overburden many adults, effectively preventing them from voting, becoming involved, and owning the political process. Since youth cannot vote, many are driven towards apathy and disregard for the system. Those lessons will be applied to many things throughout their lives, and for some, that is civic life. These young people are becoming enraged, motivated, and empowered to take action and deliberately pave the road to the future.
- **Youth are living in “my house by my rules”.** Homes and neighborhoods around the world are ruled by tradition and culture that routinely, systematically, and wholly takes

power away from children and youth. Growing up with the melancholic conformity of middle class suburbs, the deafening roar of poverty, or the privileged access wealth provides will each force a [percentage](#) of young people to deliberately seek to change the world throughout their lives. Warren Buffet was young once, as were Maya Angelou, David Gilmour, Dr. King, Napoleon, Da Vinci, Pho Khun Sri Indraditya, Julius Caesar, and Imhotep. All these world changers grew up in someone's house and sought to change the world later. Those seeds are always planted in our youth, just like they are still today.

- **Youth are connected.** Like no generation before, young people are connected to each other, often in ways adults cannot imagine. The mapping of human ecology has never been nearly effective in history as it is now, with the appearance and immutability of social networking and technology to support connectivity becoming as ubiquitous as it is. These connections are becoming more obvious than ever before, and while the benefits are still becoming apparent, today's generation of youth are growing up with it. Because of this, they are changing the world in ways we've never imagined.
- **Youth are able of acting beyond expectations.** As we age, most adults seek familiarity and ease. Growing increasingly distrustful of change, we latch onto consistency, segregation, and tight knit connections for our lives. Young people operate in ways that are counter to each of these, actively fostering and thriving within the unknown, the deeply entwined, and the actively frayed edges of social connectivity. Generation after generation, they are actively paving the road to the future because of this reality.

These may be obvious, simplistic perspectives on how young people are changing the world today. However, It can be hard to see what adults can do to practically do to make a difference themselves.

5 Easy Ways YOUTH Can Change the World



Parents, teachers, businesspeople, and adults everyday can help ensure that young people are paving the road to the future with five easy steps.

- 1. Keep forcing youth to do what adults want them to.** The more we cause children and youth to do what we want them to, the more likely more young people are rebel. If you want to change the world, do not allow young people to use their voices, disallow them from becoming involved in civic life, and force them to follow arbitrary rules based on negative adult assumptions rather than scientific realities. This will change the world by encouraging so-called “youth rebelliousness”, which is generally anything in defiance of tradition and adult-identified “acceptability”.
- 2. Smother youth with adult-created culture.** Promote young peoples' sense of inability and indifference by pushing music, clothes, movies, tv, and other adult-created culture throughout the lives of every young person. Push them to believe sub-cultures and identities are segregating factors, and encourage them to negate their own self-worth. This will change the world by forcing more youth to make media for themselves and for adults who don't buy into adult-created culture.
- 3. Limit the access youth have to technology.** If you're attending the average school or youth program today, you know its common to find rules against cell phone usage, classrooms completely devoid of computers for students, and limited Internet access throughout a lot of schools and nonprofit organizations intending to teach youth today. With the impending end of net neutrality, we will see the demise of free and unimpeded access to knowledge via the internet. If you want to change the world, continue to restrict youths' access to technology and prohibit their free access to information and resources. This will push them to further innovate in technology and free the boundaries of knowledge however they can.
- 4. Force youth to follow the rules created by adults.** Despite advances in science and clearly demonstrative examples of the contributions they make throughout society, for more than a century adults have clearly denied the increasing capacity of youth to self-manage and negotiate the world they share with us. Instead, we routinely infantilize youth, talking down to them, incapacitating and disenfranchising them with wholly discriminatory laws, policies,

and rules that reflect traditional assumptions. This causes young people people to actively dismantle age-based, race-based, gender-based, and other bias-based perspectives that limit growth around the world.

- 5. Stay away from youth.** Forced age-based segregation between youth and adults disallows young people from forming healthy, proactive, and equitable relationships with people older than them. This segregation is systematically enforced within schools, through after school and summer youth programs, throughout our business sector, and across governmental decision-making and policies. Dissatisfied by inept adult-driven, ineffectual economic choices, more young people will become more motivated to change the world in the coming years.

These steps are easy because they are already happening right now. If you want to ensure change the world, just let these steps keep happening!

Next Steps

My [career](#) is focused on working with adults and youth to build their awareness and ability to change the world on purpose. I believe that every conscientious adult has a responsibility to themselves, their families, and succeeding generations to take actual, practical, and positive action that changes the world, no matter how they do that. The list in this article *does not* represent that.

If you want to actually make a positive difference in the lives of young people, here are some simple things you can do right now:

- Read inspiring stories about [what kids can do](#)
- Learn how [discrimination against young people](#) affects everyone
- Form [youth/adult partnerships](#) at home, in your workplace, and throughout your community.
- Find out what you can do to [change schools](#) right now.
- [Engage youth](#) in changing schools, and in changing the world.

Whatever you choose to do, simply *do something*. Any action is generally better than no action, and with young people you actually can make a difference.

Bright Idea

Youth as Partners, Not Problems



Many businesses, schools, programs and organizations see youth as problems that need to be fixed. When they think about youth engagement, they only see negatives and challenges.

Seeing youth as partners means:

- **Recognizing** they have skills adults might not have.
- **Acknowledging** they have knowledge adults do not have.
- **Working** together to create strategic, meaningful and sustainable solutions to real problems in the economy.
- **Involving** youth in as leaders in research, planning, teaching and training, evaluation, decision-making and advocacy for youth engagement in the economy.
- **Empowering** youth to make decisions for themselves that adults have made for them—unnecessarily—in the past.
- **Enabling** youth to do things that adults haven't been able to, wanted to, or denied needing to do before.
- **Critiquing** approaches, ideas, strategies and assumptions from the past in order to learn from mistakes and take proactive steps towards success.

Build skills, exercise leadership, meet high expectations, form relationships and improve economies through youth engagement.



9. How to Engage Youth

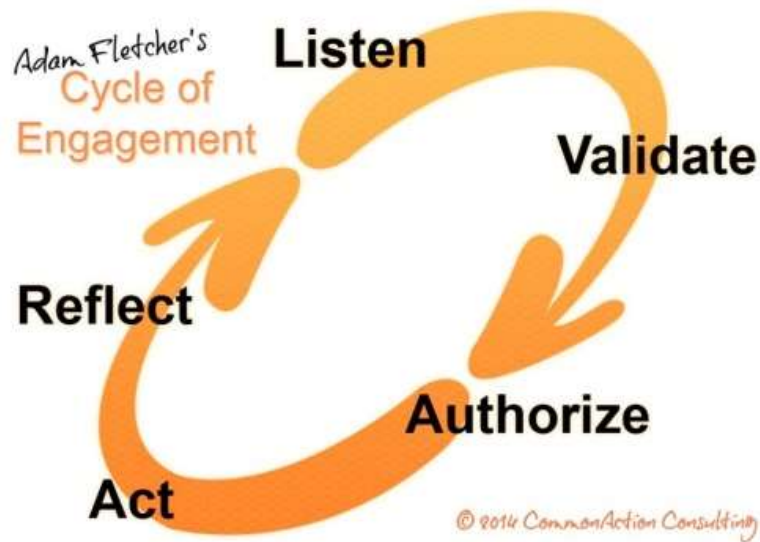
There is no silver bullet for solving youth apathy. After more than 20 years working in communities across the US and Canada to help youth themselves, employers, social workers, teachers, parents and others to overcome this issue, I am clear on that. I've studied the research, talked with the experts, and workshopped with youth, and nobody has one single answer.

Instead, there are dozens of ways to solve youth apathy. Each of these ways reveals a pattern though, and through my work I've discovered what it looks like.

Cycle of Engagement

Following is my Cycle of Engagement, an easy-to-follow five step process for forming sustained connections with young people that empower them to overcome apathy as workers, consumers, students, children, and citizens throughout our society.

Individually, these steps may currently happen throughout communities. However, when they do happen it is rare that they are connected with community development and less likely still, connected with one another. The connection of all the steps in this Cycle is what makes partnerships between community members meaningful, effective, and sustainable.



1. **Listen to Youth.** You know the drill: You're at your desk one day, working away at an important project when a young worker comes up to you really excited and says, "Hey, listen to this..." You tilt your head a little, and maybe lean towards them, but you keep doing whatever you were. You're not really listening, are you? You might be hearing them talk, and *you might even understand what they're saying – but you're not really thinking about it or feeling it.* The difference between listening and hearing makes the difference for defeating youth apathy, and that's where youth engagement starts—when young people have an actively engaged audience to listen to their ideas, opinions, experiences, knowledge, and/or actions. However, listening is just the first step; engagement requires more.
2. **Validate Youth.** You've heard people say it, and you might have said it yourself: "Oh, that's really nice." As managers, we try to say "nice" in just the right way, but to many young people it seems insincere. We think we are doing the right thing by encouraging them to move forward, but in our heads we really thinking about the time we fell flat on our face from the same approach. Instead of hiding our true thoughts, *it is our job to honestly validate what young people say or do by honestly reacting to it,* how we sincerely feel or think about it. If we think something will fail, we should say so to youth. Validation means disagreeing, or agreeing, or asking more questions, as honestly as we can. We shows respect for youth workers and respect them by explaining what we think and working together to search for alternatives.

3. **Authorize Youth.** Authority is an awesome word that can be intimidating for many people, no matter what their ages. *W* When their skills are built and/or they've gotten positions that insist they rise to the occasion, young people can become active in defeating their own apathy. Managers, parents, and others can provide practical steps towards actual engagement for all youth, instead of just words. As well as the skills, we must involve young people in applicable, practical activities that are actually powerful, purposeful, and rewarding, whether at work, in school, at home, or throughout the community. As they overcome apathy by applying their new skills to practical action, youth gain the authority to make a difference.
4. **Take Action.** Youth engagement does not just *happen* and youth apathy doesn't just go away; instead, those must be a goal that is *actively* worked towards. Taking action requires young people to work together with adults to make the space, place, and ability for change. That can happen at school, in the workplace, at home, and throughout their lives. Action can— and should— look different everywhere: from identifying the challenge, researching the issue, planning for action, training for effectiveness, reflection on the process, to celebrating the outcomes, youth engagement is a totally flexible tool – but it's purpose is not. The purpose of youth engagement is always to create, support, and sustain powerful, purposeful, and meaningful communities for everyone to belong to. ***An important caution: action is usually seen as the most important step in this Cycle.*** Unfortunately, this makes positive outcomes the most important thing. For many issues, positive outcomes rarely come, or if they do, not as immediately as people would like. For many people, the next step can be the most important component of engagement.
5. **Reflect.** Reflection may be the most important ongoing step to solving youth apathy, and for engaging anyone anywhere at any time, especially youth. When young people critically evaluate and analyze their workplaces, schools, homes, or communities, learning becomes a vibrant, intricate, and powerful tool for engaging them. ***Reflection activities used should be appropriate for diverse youth,*** whether that's simply talking, or writing, acting, creating collages, and building activities. Once you have finished reflecting with your young workers, students, or other young people, take the lessons you've learned and use them to inform next listening activity you do with youth. That completes the Cycle and shows everyone that solving youth apathy requires ongoing effort.

Summary

Through my years of implementing and examining others' implementation of this Cycle, I've discovered a few things that are essential to challenging youth apathy, no matter how it happens.

- **We ALL Need Motivation.** Engaging young people without a reason or a cause is pointless. This is why the greatest marketing of our day focuses not on brands or bargains, but on movements. The greatest purpose we can have is the social good, but whatever you're seeking to do, let young people know the purpose.
- **Engagement Requires Repetition.** Going through all the steps of the Cycle once with intention leads to young people becoming engaged once. Going through it several times builds engagement, along with trust and respect, and continuously challenges youth apathy.
- **Making Meaning Solves Apathy.** Activities have to be meaningful to be engaging. When working through the Cycle, understand that people will be used to meaningfulness and won't settle for less afterwards.

The Cycle of Engagement is meant to provide employers, parents, teachers, and others with a clear process for engaging youth throughout our communities. The most important take away from this Cycle is that solving apathy requires more than simply hearing, checking-in, or talking to them. Solving youth apathy requires youth engagement, and youth engagement in the economy requires a commitment to *movement*. This Cycle shows how that can happen.



10. *Adults are Needed*

Staring at the options on the website, Joanie saw there wasn't work she wanted to do. Chastised by her parents for not having a job, it was the summer before college and she was getting desperate. Suddenly, two ideas in her mind clicked and she began thinking about what she could do: After selling the bracelets she'd been making for her friends at school over the last year, she could sell them online to people she didn't know.

Joanie took out her notebook and wrote down the idea. Then she tweeted it and facebooked it to her friends, and waited for their responses. Receiving immediate and overwhelmingly optimistic responses, she built a quick website and started sharing pictures of her wares across the social media circles she already used a lot. Within a week, Joanie sold enough to pay the rent her parents insisted on for the entire summer; within a month, she had enough money for the used car she wanted to buy.

This is not an exceptional story. Instead, it's an increasingly common tale that doesn't surprise you. You have read the stories, heard the experiences, or even lived a life that is similar to this. The challenge is that whatever you've heard, read or lived isn't exactly the life of Joanie. Her life is uniquely her own, and nobody has ever had identical circumstances to live by.

Our responsibility as ethical adults is to consider the realities you face today. This section proposes that adults are needed in the lives of youth.

Are Youth Stuck?

Maybe young people today seem stuck. It is easy to think so when we look at the record:

- Staring at the want ads and peeling through the Internet gives them few job leads.
- There is honestly nothing there that fits their interests
- Few available jobs fit the skills and abilities they have.
- Pressured by their parents or desires or friends or self-responsibility, many young people apply for these jobs anyway. They carefully fill out applications, choose the best references, and are prompt and attentive to the details in front of them. Despite a few good interviews, they don't get job offers.
- Older people are taking and holding onto any decent jobs once available to youth.
- The oldest workers are staying in the workplace longer, staving off retirement as long as they can.
- If they do decide to take a job, young workers often find out its so micromanaged or boring that they can't stand to be there after only a few weeks or months.

Reading that list, if you are thinking that this has happened to you too, no matter what you're age you must read on.

This is not an exceptional circumstance; instead, its the way it is for most young job applicants today. The economy is different now than ever before. Despite putting their “best foot forward”, they are routinely rewarded with indifference or purposelessness by workplaces.

All the missed jobs and poor experiences show youth that their formal educations are seemingly irrelevant, whether they have a master's degree from a major university, a high school diploma from a public school, a GED from the district, or a trade school certificate from the local community college. In the meantime, they are struggling to meet bills—rent or student loans or consumer debt—and they are learning early that asking family and friends for money is exhausting and defeating, to say the least.

Failing Ourselves

Growing up in cultures that treasure the [Bootstrap Myth](#), many young people today either feel conflicted by their apparent failures as workers when they can't get a job or find one worth keeping. This promotes the supposed [youth apathy](#) that many adults accuse them of.

Worst still, adults actually blame young people themselves for this situation. Raised in homes with nurturing parents, taught by educators determined to meet hyper-rigorous state and national standards, and supported by high functioning organizations in all kinds of communities, more youth are more successful as high ability members of society than ever before. As a mass, young people around the world today are operating in pinnacle mode, representing the very best potential of humankind. Pinnacle mode is the continuous operation in the (currently) highest status. For youth of all socio-economic classes today, that looks like this:

- High connectivity among peer groups
- Acceptance of diverse lifestyles, cultures, orientations, and ways of being
- Pragmatic critical consumption focused on a “show, don't tell” mentality
- Conscious, deliberate and fearless interdependence

Unfortunately, previous generations have not managed to keep up with the developments we have put into motion. Instead, we habitually name-call youth today, condemning them and blaming them for the problems we've foisted on their shoulders. Some have gone so far as to name a “[youth entitlement epidemic](#)” because they reflect the very values we have been teaching them for more than 30 years.

We taught this, and we succeeded. But instead of creating new ways of being to respond to the changes we promoted, a lot of business owners and supervisors and parents and teachers and others are running around like Henny Penny, [screaming](#) about the end of the world. We say that youth have excessive personal liberties, overly accessible social lives, too high self-esteem, too low self-esteem, and so on. We claim that the same titles of “jocks, nerds, misfits, achievers, slackers, and leaders” from their youth still rule the lives of young people today. Maybe more than everything, adults say the world is falling apart and that youth are not capable of inheriting the messes we've made.

Rather than building new societies filled with deftly operating big businesses supported by smoothly innovative smaller businesses filled with superbly educated employees from every

socio-economic and racial group and with people of all different sorts of abilities, as a whole we are doing business the way its always been done and hoping for a different outcome. We are attempting to shame a generation of young people for being what we taught them to be instead of accepting responsibility by creating the opportunities they need in order to fulfill the grand ambitions they have as a result of their upbringings.

Manned missions to Mars, wireless energy, printable organs, connectivity, instantaneous recycling, and predominant green technologies may be on the horizon, but young people today are going to take us there whether we like it or not.

We are hoping that the highly effective, highly empowered youth workers of today and tomorrow will simply merge directly into our broken workplaces, appease incapable and outdated managers, and succeed where previous generations have failed. We—adults of all ilks, including employers, supervisors, parents, educators, politicians, and others—are failing ourselves *and* our youth today.

But there is an alternative.

Rising To The Challenge

Youth are growing tired and anxious from waiting for us. Challenged by the lack of opportunities that match their interests, skills, and abilities, a growing number of young people today are taking control of generating income by creating their own revenue streams. Like the generations of a century ago, they know they can't rely on the corporations to hire them and the mom-and-pop businesses are closing every day. Right now, young people are [coming up](#) with new business models, founding new organizations, and generating capital in startlingly innovative new ways.

A lot of adults quickly counter this reality, saying that self-employment is not for everybody. They'll suggest that only the Mark Zuckerberges and Bill Gateses of the world can be successful entrepreneurs. Whether they know it or not, with this line of judgment these adults are actually enshrining the meritocratic perspective ruining our economies today and actively preventing today's youth from succeeding.

The fact of the matter is that entrepreneurship can be as simple as making bracelets to sell on Etsy, as challenging as writing short novels to share with friends, or as complicated as

building apps for the masses. Here are several forms of youth entrepreneurship that are actually happening today:

- Food production and distribution
- Web design, including websites and blogs
- Graphic design for print, t-shirts, and online
- App building
- Product creation and sales
- Cleaning and maintenance

There are literally thousands of examples across the internet of these ventures, all seemingly led by normal youth today, young people who are living, breathing examples of the “every youth”. Many of their companies required little or no startup funding and resources. Its as if all young people everywhere could become entrepreneurs.

So if every youth *could* be starting businesses, why aren't they? They want adults to be allies and partners with them. These relationships are called Youth/Adult Partnerships, and activating them throughout society could revolutionize youth engagement in the economy.

Engaging Adults as Allies

Following are some of the adults who can be allies by forming Youth/Adult Partnerships. These relationships can foster youth engagement throughout the economy in many ways.

- **School Leaders** including teachers, principals, administrators, and student support staff.
- **Community Leaders** in groups like civic organizations, youth programs, and faith-based communities including synagogues, mosques and churches.
- **Government Leaders** such as state and local government officials like governors, mayors, council members, tribal leaders, police chiefs, and other agency officials.
- **Business Leaders** including small business, corporations, business organizations, and foundation executives.
- **Workforce Development Leaders** like workforce development councils, community colleges, trade schools, and others.
- **Individual Leaders** including parents, neighbors, and community members.

When these adults take responsibility for their roles in the lives of youth, they will be allies. Forming intentional Youth/Adult Partnerships this way can change the world!

7 Steps to Youth/Adult Partnerships

Like history has shown us over and over, both youth and adults have the ability to create powerful, sustainable economies that benefit everyone. However, creating positive relationships where youth and adults work together as allies can be hard. The following tips can be helpful when you are creating Youth/Adult Partnerships.



The following seven steps include tips and information that can help YOU create lasting and sustainable Youth-Adult Partnerships.

- 1. Know Thyself.** When youth and adults work together, they must face some key questions about themselves: Do I appreciate different perspectives? What stereotypes do I have about others? Do I judge people based on their clothes rather than their abilities? Why should I be open to working with youth or adults? Adults and youth must be willing to honestly address their stereotypes and preconceptions to work together effectively.
- 2. Speak By Listening.** All people, regardless of age, have the potential to be both teachers and students. Unfortunately, we are often too pressed for time, overly task-oriented, or limited by traditional roles, so we neglect to really communicate with one another. Young people must take a stand for positive change and demand that their voices be heard. Adults should step back and listen—*really listen*—to the concerns of youth.
- 3. Make It Meaningful.** All people, including youth and adults, need to feel that they are contributing to their communities. Youth and adults can work together to create meaningful and challenging opportunities throughout our economy. Respect both youth and adults, by thinking about schedules, transportation needs, and other commitments when planning meetings and gatherings. And don't forget to recognize everyone's efforts!
- 4. Spread the Wealth.** When youth are involved in the decision-making that will affect their lives, they become more capable, responsible, and trusting of adults. By working with young people, adults become more energized, creative, and insightful. Adults and youth who recognize the benefits of working together are great ambassadors to their own peer

groups. Spread the work – youth and adults who work as allies develop a broader base of support and build stronger communities.

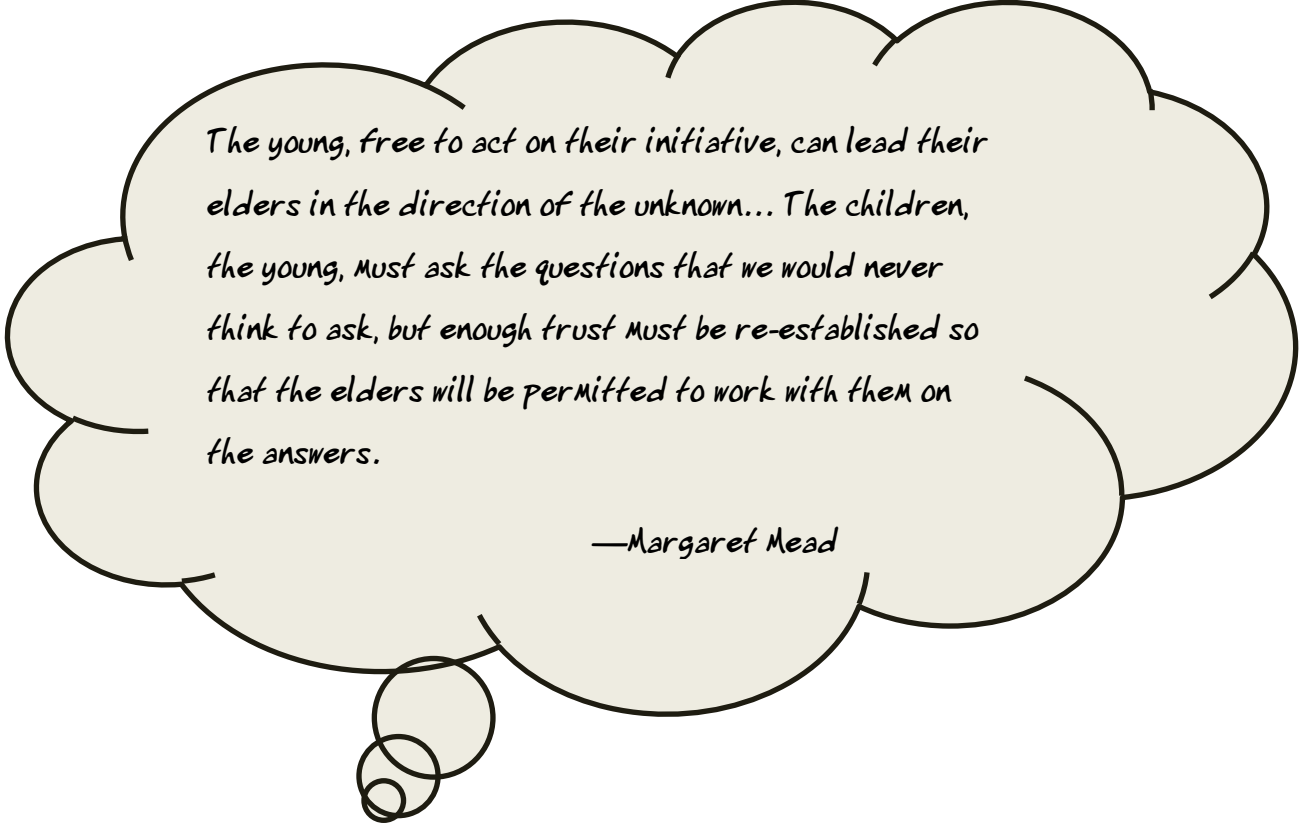
5. Check Yourself. Read through these questions and ask yourself if you're really ready to create Youth/Adult Partnerships.

- Do I respect and value the opinions of others no matter how old they are?
- Do I seek to involve a diverse group of people in my workplace, program, or projects?
- What is my motivation for working with youth or adults?
- Do I expect one person to represent the opinions of all youth or all adults?
- Am I willing to let go of some of my own control in order to share responsibility?
- Why do I want to work with adults or youth?

6. Take Practical Steps. Here are some practical steps you can take to build Youth/Adult Partnerships in order to support youth engagement in the economy.

- Build a team of youth and adults working together to build youth engagement in the economy.
- Show youth and adults that failure is not the end of the world. They need encouragement and support to learn from mistakes.
- Structure opportunities for reflection through writing and discussion. A key factor in effective leadership is the ability to learn from experiences and to apply them.
- Utilize former youth who worked in your business or program veterans or older peers in training roles for youth.
- Avoid tokenism by seeking to engage diverse groups of youth across many spectrums.
- Establish and maintain accountability between youth and adults.
- Set responsibilities at appropriate levels. If its too high, failure is guaranteed; if its too low, they may feel insulted and become bored quickly.
- Involve youth in the process of delegating responsibilities.
- Model the behaviors you expect from youth.
- Offer moral support, encouragement, and a little bit of wisdom, whether you're an adult or a youth.
- Help make connections with other supportive youth and adults in the business, business community, neighborhood, or school.

- Recruit youth and adults to help recruit other youth and adults to form Youth/Adult Partnerships.
 - Provide youth with access to supplies and the Internet if needed.
 - Provide adult supervision for youth and youth accountability at adult events.
 - Allow everyone involved to find the answers and make mistakes.
 - Make sure that activities and opportunities for Youth/Adult Partnerships are safe, supportive and appropriate for fostering youth engagement in the economy.
 - Provide training.
 - Help locate funding sources.
 - Communicate with parents.
 - Listen to each other and have fun!
7. **Take a Look Inside.** Ultimately, we all have to ask ourselves “What is the purpose of Youth/Adult Partnerships?” and “What is the purpose of youth engagement in the economy?” If we answer that we honesty and integrity, we may find that there are great motivations for this action. We may also discover that we have ulterior motives that aren't so great. Either way, the moral of the story is that we have to be sincere in our desire to engage in Youth/Adult Partnerships, or else they are bound to fail. Meet the task. Make change now.



The young, free to act on their initiative, can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown... The children, the young, must ask the questions that we would never think to ask, but enough trust must be re-established so that the elders will be permitted to work with them on the answers.

—Margaret Mead



II. The Entitlement/Entrepreneurship Formula

Young people are sitting on great ideas *right now*. There are a lot of hard working students who know they are not good at working for other people. There are other young people who know they are not doing as much as they could be. Still other youth want to work hard and get rewarded. Seemingly [everyone](#) agrees that it is time to do something about this.

I have run a series of small businesses for more than a decade now, and I've worked with some of the largest organizations in the world to promote entrepreneurship. Working with dozens of clients, students, and friends to start businesses and build organizations, I've learned a lot of what it takes to be an entrepreneur. Its different from any of those checklists for starting a business though.

The Entitlement/Entrepreneurship Formula is my strategy for engaging youth in the marketplace. In three simple parts, it shows how all young people everywhere can be engaged all the time in creating, spending, and collecting wealth. Here are the parts.

Entitlement

It is popular today to address entitlement as a negative word. People think that youth entitlement is a bad thing, and that we should strip it from all young people everywhere whenever we can.

However, there are positive sides to entitlement, and that's what my Entitlement/Entrepreneurship Formula relies on:

- The sense that you are entitled to good rewards from doing good work is a good thing.
- The knowledge that we're entitled to work without embarrassment, harassment, and punishment is a good thing.
- The feeling that we're entitled to expect that what we can reap what we sow is a good thing.

In the Entitlement/Entrepreneurship Formula young people learn to identify and embrace this entitlement. They are taught to appreciate themselves, acknowledge their knowledge and abilities, and grasp the opportunities surrounding them

Entrepreneurship

Wikipedia says entrepreneurship is “the process of identifying and starting a new business venture and sourcing and organizing the required resources while taking both the risks and rewards associated with the venture.” This same ethic can be applied throughout life, and should be encouraged among young people. Schools engender risk-aversion in young people by routinely teaching them sameness, conformity, scheduling, standardization, and focusing on outcomes-oriented learning.

Infusing the lives of young people with the change most adults know is inherent throughout life is essential for the future. This means teaching entrepreneurial lifestyles that reflect the best and healthiest components of self-employment:

- Measure successful by focusing on what truly matters in life
- Learn from other people then adapt to do it your own way
- Maintain an [ethic of service](#) in everything you do

- Stay humble, ask for help, and help others
- Self-care is the key to success
- Remember that time is more valuable than money

Engagement

To be engaged in something is to have a sustained connection to it. Developing a sustained connection to the economy is part of growing up in today's world, starting very young with brand establishment for babies and zooming through childhood and the teen years through constant reminders and impositions that attempt to establish customer loyalty.

However, when a focused engagement (i.e. advertising, hiring, and training) focuses on simply on recipient/consumer roles, the economy of the practice is anemic. All activities with young people in the workplace and marketplace should focus on reciprocity and mutual exchange. Essentially, in this way all youth become *partners* in the economy. These youth/adult partnerships are marked by these traits:

- **Respect:** Respect is mutual, and if you give it, you receive it.
- **Communication:** Listen up, because an honest and open exchange of ideas is crucial.
- **Investment:** It takes time and requires investing in the future by accepting that youth are leaders in the economy today.
- **Meaningful involvement:** Count us in by acknowledging that decisions about youth should be made with youth.

When you use this formula in your business, organization, or home, you'll discover that the Entitlement/Entrepreneurship Formula can transform how, where, when, and why young people are treated the ways they are. More importantly, you'll see immediate benefits in terms of the bottom line.

Using the very things that challenge us most about young people today can help build our market and turn around economies around the world dramatically. Now that you understand my formula, you'll see why this time, its okay to recognize that we don't owe it to them, only. Don't we owe it to ourselves, too?

Bright Idea

See the REAL Barriers



Programs, classes, businesses and organizations that try to promote youth engagement in the economy often struggle with success. Here are several REAL barriers they may be facing.

- **Misidentifying the Problem.** Instead of seeing youth disengagement as the problem, these opportunities need to see how youth are already engaged. From there, they can design programs that counter that engagement with economically-minded opportunities.
- **Mistreating Youth.** By seeing youth as problems to be solved, these programs dismiss the power, positivity and potential of youth. Mistreating someone doesn't help them. Adults need to check their assumptions and reassess whether their priority is the youth they serve or their own egos.
- **Mishandling Opportunities.** If the future showed up at your doorstep, would you only tell stories about the past? Of course not—you'd want to find out what the future is like! Unfortunately, many adults treat youth as the past without seeing the future. Mishandling opportunities to build the economy is the biggest problem in youth engagement programs today.

Make programs that work for youth, and youth will make those programs work!



12. Don't Like 'em? Make Them Quit

“You are a lazy, unmotivated, and apathetic child of enabling, irresponsible, and largely incapable parents.”

“Being impulsive and irresponsible, I see that you're often reckless with yourself and your future.”

“You can't be trusted with the future you're going to inherit and you don't live up to your potential.”

Youth are a certain breed. Seen as young and naive, they are mostly inexperienced and often come into opportunities with eyes half-open and innocent. After they start, many hustle for a minute and then fall apart. Oftentimes, you're left needing ways to make them quit.

7 Ways to Make Youth Quit



Here are seven ways to make youth quit any job, program, class or other process.

1. **Tell Them They Suck.** By reading the above statements you've already found one: *Language*. One of the five ways to make youth quit is through your words, especially by using them to directly berate, demean, and disrespect young people.
2. **Demean Their Production.** Another way to make youth quit is through the *Outcomes* you share with them. Constantly tell young people they do nothing productive, show them how low their numbers are, or tell them they're screwing up their opportunities, their jobs, or the lives of others.
3. **Make It Mean.** Pitting youth against each other through mean-spirited *Competition* is another way to make them quit. By making one youth a leader of others, by spreading rumors or gossip about youth, or encouraging youth to talk about each other without working out their problems will make your leave.
4. **Make It Menial.** Consistently give youth menial, demeaning, and belittling assignments and tasks to get done. By showing them you think they're *Worthless*, you will make them quit quickly and completely.
5. **Tell Them They Don't Make a Difference.** Youth are more likely to quit when they feel *Irrelevance*, as if their contributions make no difference. Robotic indifference, general apathy, and emotionless responses are a great way to show young people that you just don't care. Simply make it known that their work is irrelevant, and they will eventually quit.
6. **Be Biased.** Tell youth frequently that if they were older, they'd understand. *Discriminating* against young people is completely legal, and many adults effectively use this to make youth quit. Make it explicit that their challenge is their age, and that age equals wisdom. Also, tell young people directly they're not old enough to understand.
7. **Act Brutal.** When adults lead youth, their *Actions* generally determine what happens. The ways you act towards and around youth clearly signal to them how to behave and respond. If

you want them to go, set a tone of failure, ambiguity, or disappointment in your interactions with youth. Think of it as “proactive negativity” by acting disengaged, dismissive, and disconnected, and youth will quit their jobs.

These seven ways to make youth quit can happen in any workplace or during any class—even throughout our communities or at home! They're effective for lowering self-esteem, challenging security, and ultimately, dismantling the hope a young person feels for themselves, their lives, and the future. Used individually, these five ways usually work; used all together, and youth are guaranteed to quit!

We All Do It

In my 20+ year career working with children, youth, and adults to change the world, I have constantly heard adults do all of these things *and more*. Employers, teachers, youth workers, parents, and even store clerks routinely take apart their opportunities to engage with youth by making youth quit from workplaces, classrooms, community settings, and home. We all do this, too, in a lot of different ways.

10 Habits of Adults Who Care

Adults who want youth around and select them on purpose do several things differently than others. Following are some of the habits of adults who care about youth and want them around.

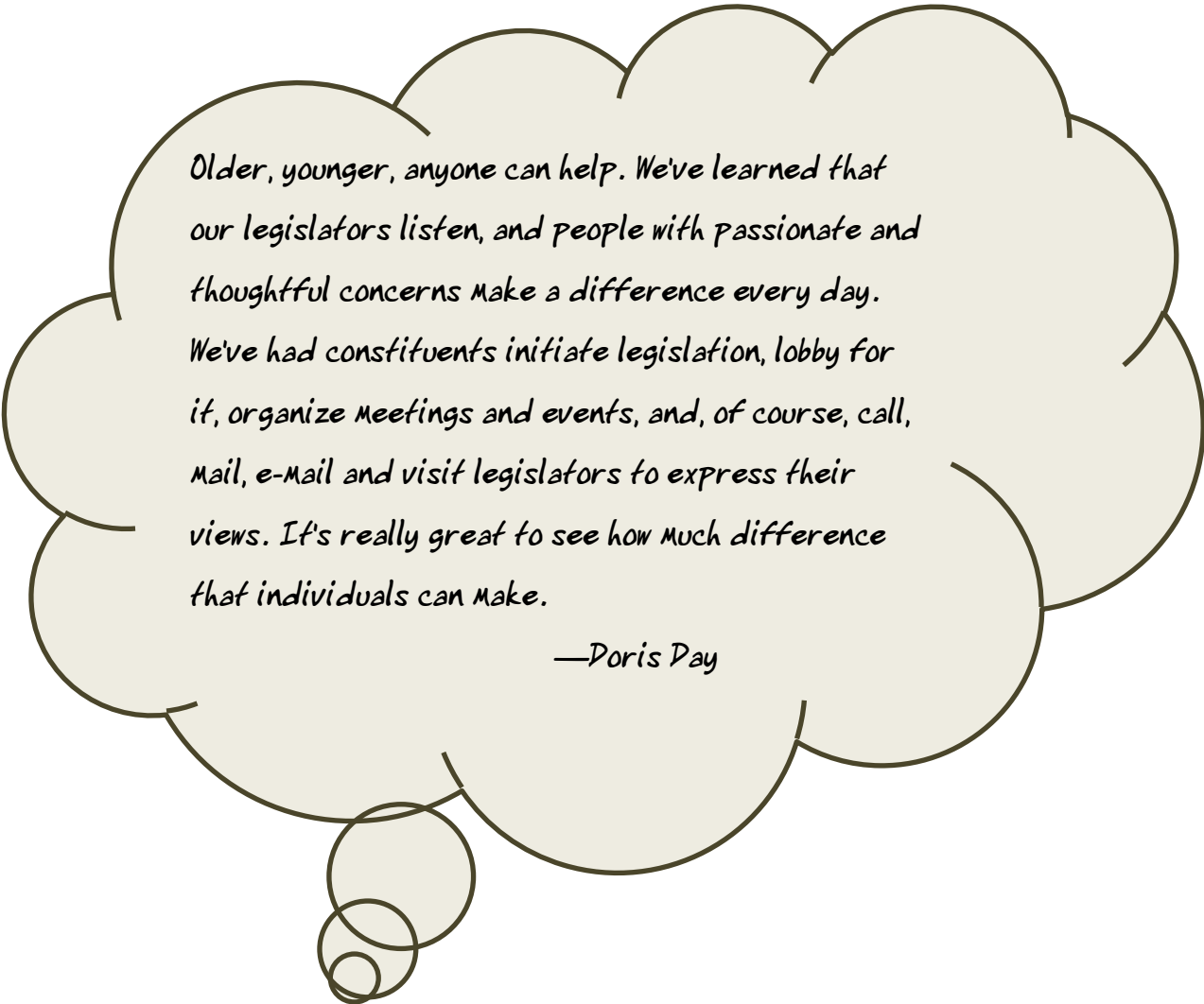


1. **Choose youth.** When you bring youth on board, do it on purpose. Don't just have youth around because they fill the slot, are cheap, or because they meet some kind of expectations by your supervisor. Do it because you actually care and want them there.
2. **Respect differences.** Don't assume that young people are going to be just like you, or that your job is to make a shadow out of any youth who comes through the doors. Young people are different than you - live with it. Respect your adulthood, and respect their youth. That means making space, listening to challenge, and building community intentionally.

3. **Learn with youth.** Pretending that you know it all can be exhausting to anyone, especially a busy manager, teacher, parent, or neighbor. Instead, be a co-learner who is exploring, examining, critiquing, building, taking apart, and creating together with young people. Don't do it *to* them or *for* them; do it *with* them or let them do it *on their own*.
4. **Communicate openly.** The old days of obfuscation, distraction, and deliberate alienation of youth and adults are rapidly coming to an end. Replacing them are transparency and accountability, zooming up from the youngest generations today towards the oldest. Politicians and bankers are learning this right now; many teachers and parents are moving in this direction already. Be plain with youth.
5. **Lift youth up.** Quit trying to secure your place on the totem pole, and the totem pole will ensure your place is secure. Do what's right and what's been done throughout all-time by lifting youth up through mentoring, teaching, and positioning them for success. Give them opportunities to learn and grow on purpose, and watch them bring YOU along.
6. **Meaningful involvement.** Sharing authority can be challenging for any leader. When you're working with youth, make room for them to influence decisions, create new things, and develop substantive connections to what, who, why, and how they are involved.
7. **Open doors.** The best adult allies to youth help foster new relationships for young people to move forward. Open doors by introducing young people to other adults, developing different activities, and creating incentives to move beyond where they can see themselves right now.
8. **Push the needle.** Don't allow young people to become apathetic, lazy, or otherwise complacent with their roles. Instead, push the expectations you have for them and yourself to do more, be better, and create change.

9. **Challenge them.** Create opportunities for meaningful, substantial challenges that build young peoples' skills, knowledge, and abilities. This could mean training or development, but could also be new assignments, activities, and outcomes.
10. **Trust.** Build mutual trust with young people by giving them the trust they deserve, not because they're young but because they are *humans*. We have to build trust between generations and allow each other to have camaraderie, community, and belonging. Adults are responsible for engendering this with youth; not vice versa. Take responsibility by trusting them, and letting them trust you.

If you care, if you want to make a difference in the lives of youth and the future that we're all going to share together, you'll move past making youth quit and start showing ways you care.



Older, younger, anyone can help. We've learned that our legislators listen, and people with passionate and thoughtful concerns make a difference every day. We've had constituents initiate legislation, lobby for it, organize meetings and events, and, of course, call, mail, e-mail and visit legislators to express their views. It's really great to see how much difference that individuals can make.

—Doris Day

Bright Idea

General Ways to Engage Youth in the Economy



Here are some general ways businesses, schools, programs and organizations can promote youth engagement in the economy.

- **Real Work:** Give youth real work to do with engaging hands-on jobs to do, something with short-term goals and the potential to make a difference in the economies of youth and their communities.
- **See Experts:** Adults can treat youth as expert consultants and ambassadors. Let them know you *really* want to learn from them, and listen to what they have to say about local youth and the economy as well as what they know about youth engagement.
- **Form Partnerships:** Create and foster strong youth/adult partnerships where youth can mentor adults, and adults can mentor youth. Give each partner someone they can admire and emulate, and around whom they can be themselves.
- **Make It Matter:** Give them alternatives to attending long meetings or irrelevant trainings, such as serving on an active subcommittee with finite, tangible goals.

Youth engagement already happens—your job is to help that become more obvious.



13. We Have to Teach Youth

Surveying the state of the nation today, many adults have taken to lambasting young people. Blaming youth for protests and riots, slamming young people for not being employed, and railing against them for dropping out of high school or becoming involved with the legal system seems to be a new norm in the media and among community members. If you actually want to change this, YOU had better teach youth.

Over the last fifty years, adults have gotten further and further away from youth. Instead of seeing them at the store, worshipping together in faith communities, or performing through sports, culture and other activities, a chasm has separated youth from adults. That hallowed institution of adults teaching youth about the workforce, apprenticeships, have waned in the poor economy; even when they were in full effect, they aged up to ensure that young workers couldn't access them.

Youth loose when adults are not substantively involved in their lives, and substantively means more than razing the barista at the coffee shop; different from citing youth for vandalism; and other than chastising your own children for not following parental direction.

YOU Can Teach Youth

Being substantively involved with youth means stepping into their lives as a role model, mentor, ally, or partner. Let me break these down.

Be a role model. If you want to teach youth, be a role model to them on purpose. Identify your purpose, name your values, and live with integrity by holding yourself to those. While you're doing that, show young people how that is done. Show your own kids or other peoples' children how you stay true to your truth, and live the way you want to see them live. This is the most passive way to teach youth, and it matters.

Be a mentor. A mentor to youth does not have to join a program, wear a special t-shirt or wave the flag for a certain cause. Instead, a mentor actively demonstrates their commitment to themselves and others through active interactions with youth, making themselves available on a regular basis to facilitate informal learning in a non-threatening way. Regularly having coffee, having a youth come to your office to simply hang out with you, and showing a young person the ropes can make you a powerful mentor and meaningful role model.

Be an ally. Going one step beyond mentoring and role modeling, the ally stands up with young people to be an engaged, supportive adult in the life of youth. They teach young people by standing up for them, challenging them and engaging them together in meaningful ways that teach youth. They are not arbitrary or occasional; instead, allies are active, interactive, empathetic and deliberate. They are also named: You cannot say you are someone's ally; instead, you can only work towards this role and let the youth you're allying with know what an ally is. They will tell you you're an ally when its time.

Be a partner. As all good businesspeople know, partnerships aren't always 50/50 splits of power. Instead, they are mutually beneficial relationships focused on meeting unmet needs. Youth/adult partnerships are intentionally formed relationships focused on meeting real needs in pragmatic ways. They are focused on communication, respect, trust and meaningful interactions. They are the pinnacle of healthy, positive and supportive role modeling, mentorships and allyships between adults and youth because they hold the prospect of equity over equality to successful foster responsible roles for everyone involved.

If you are genuinely concerned for the present and struggling to make sense of the future, you had better teach youth. The roles outlined above are ways that you can make a difference right now.

10 Steps to Teach Youth



Following are ten steps you can take to form the relationships cited above.

1. **Acknowledge youth.** Begin by acknowledging that youth exist. Right now. Start anywhere you can, and expand everywhere you can. That might mean greeting your young employees on purpose, having a real conversation with your own kid, or holding a youth roundtable for your community.
2. **Build your commitment.** Be genuinely committed to youth. Go beyond just listening to youth by sitting with them, working with them and learning about them - from them.
3. **Create interest.** No matter who you serve, how you serve them, create interest among other adults for youth. Talk with people, share thoughts and ideas, and watch the momentum generate and move ahead, rapidly.
4. **Position youth.** Put youth in sustained opportunities to interact with adults in real ways, whether that's just you personally or others too. Share power, build support and make new pathways to teach youth.
5. **Teach youth outright.** A lot of adults think youth are don't want to learn from them, or resist them. Make opportunities to teach them outright. Show youth there's nothing wrong with being an adult and sharing your knowledge. Stop thinking they are you - they're not!
6. **Open spaces for youth.** Whether you're a parent, church attendee, business manager or community worker, open spaces for everyone- adults and young people- to teach one another and be acknowledged for what they're sharing. Create environments and cultures for full youth-adult partnerships by creating environments and cultures for full youth-adult partnerships.
7. **Go to youth.** Talk with youth where they're at right now and have earnest conversations with them instead of insisting they come to where you are. Stop being threatened by the spaces young people occupy without our control. Practice releasing control and just be with youth.

8. **Develop opportunities for youth.** In every city in every community across the United States and around the world, youth need real activities that integrate and ingratiate them with adults. Encourage adults to sustain their commitment to expand youth engagement instead of simply trying and then stopping.
9. **Enforce youth knowledge.** Every piece of interactive technology in the lives of youth reinforces their knowledge, whether we're thinking about Wikipedia, iTunes, the Playstation, or other tools. They give youth experiences where they feel powerful and knowledgeable. Adults need to reinforce this knowledge and build on it outside of technology.
10. **Sustain connections.** Its vital to keep youth connections with adults active and alive. Share the benefits of connecting with youth, and encourage other adults to help make the genuine case to youth for why they should be connected with adults.

When adults take these steps, we can teach youth on purpose. Stop being afraid, start being active, and let's make a difference in the lives of youth and throughout the future of our communities!



14. The Future

Hope for the future actually rests in the truth behind the fifth lie employers tell youth today. Creating their futures by working with truly supportive adults—including parents, educators, youth workers, and others—young people today are literally making the future they want to live in. Its not a utopia or some grandiose vision that all young people are working towards though, and I'm not advocating that only youth create this future. I am suggesting that we all work together towards a realistic future that works for everyone.

7 Ways the Future Will Be Different

The ways that things are today are different from the ways they are going to be. Here are seven ways the future will be different.



1. **Engaging:** The future will be engaging for anyone, anywhere they want to be engaged. This will happen at home, schools, throughout communities, in government, and the economy.
2. **Connecting:** Tying together more intentionally both online and in-person, we're going to experience a resurgence of The Commons in bold, bright new ways. These are the public spaces we all share, and more than ever, young people will be recognized as central to the health and well-being of The Commons.

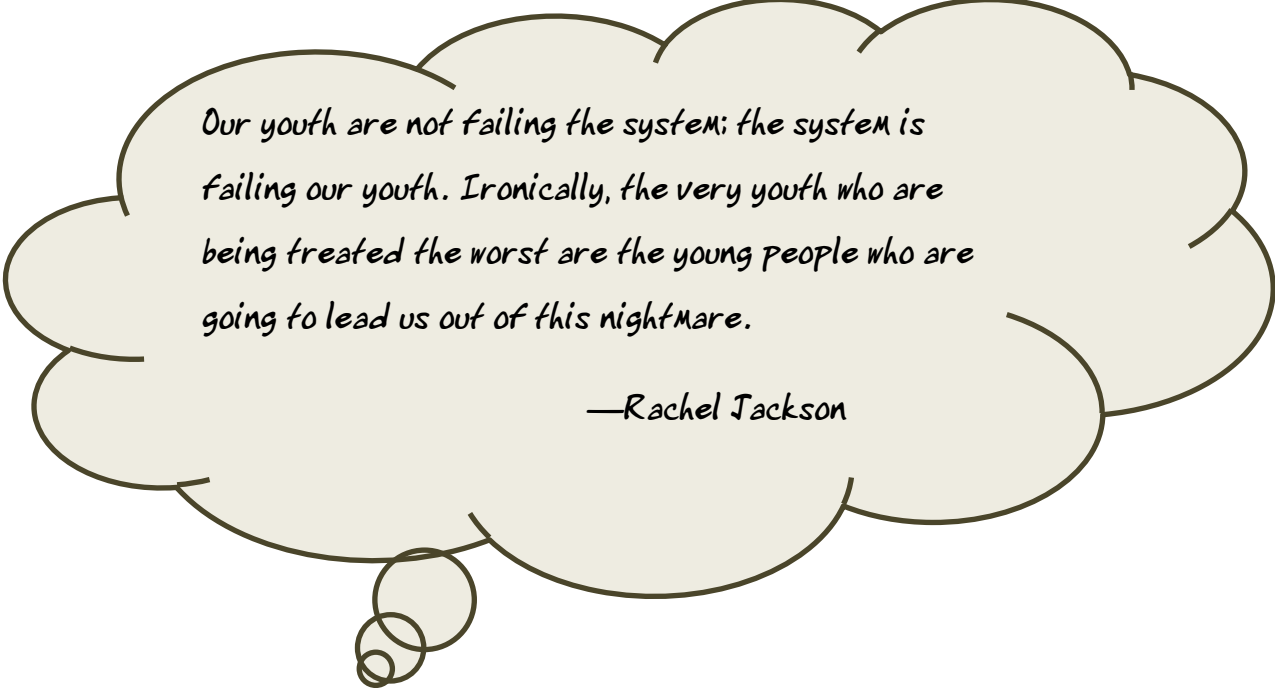
3. **Empowering:** Instead of isolated incidents benefiting a few people here and there, everyone will experience increasing amounts of ability and authority throughout the entirety of their lives. Starting when they're infants, all people will become more educated, engaged, and empowered throughout their lives.
4. **Cooperating:** Seeing the economic and social benefits of conscientious and mutual relationships with everyone around us, we will become more driven towards cooperative action benefiting everyone involved. The implicit and explicit ways we work together will be recognized more, and the value of all human interactions among every human will be seen with utmost importance, and everyone will learn how to cooperate more effectively.
5. **Processing:** With constant emphasis on outcomes overwhelming more people more frequently, new stock will be given to processes with more services providing more people the pleasure of getting there, rather than just arriving.
6. **Diversifying:** Entwined cultures will drive elevated social conditions affecting more people, effectively incentivizing integration anew.
7. **Liberating:** Freed of the shackles of offices and bosses, more people will feel more capable of living easily, moving quickly, and collecting freely with others they're genuinely interested in, rather than stuck with.

Our future workplace is bound to become more embracing, more honest, and more hopeful than what young people face today. This is because youth today are making the world they want to live in. As responsible adults, we should do no less than fully empower them to make this future together with us.

What are YOU doing to create the future, today?

Questions to Consider

- What opportunities are there for youth engagement in the economy through your workplace, program, organization, school or community?
- What does youth engagement cost?
- How is youth engagement funded?
- How is youth engagement financed (e.g., parents, building partnerships, government sources, making better use of resources, etc.)?
- How is youth engagement in the economy sustained in your community?



Our youth are not failing the system; the system is failing our youth. Ironically, the very youth who are being treated the worst are the young people who are going to lead us out of this nightmare.

—Rachel Jackson

Bright Idea



Personalize Every Approach with Youth

Debating the efficacy of the youth engagement is a sidebar conversation. Deeper economic ability and success happen in the presence of real youth engagement, transcending piles of money. Youth engagement is muted by business talk, disrespectful communications, too many “thou shall not” signs, workplace rules designed to enforce compliance rather than collaboration, a laundry list of tasks, and a thousand other remnants of industrial herding. High-performing organizational cultures and neuroscience tells us that fear and control limits everyone’s brain. Wondering, questioning and creativity come from the front part of the brain, the part activated by the feeling of “connectedness” and stimulated by mentorship and communal care. Youth/Adult Partnerships are personalized, and they provide that feeling!

Resources

The Practice of Youth Engagement—The result of more than twenty years study and work, this book shares essential lessons, powerful examples and deep insight for newcomers and longtime practitioners. More than an introductory guide, it delves into the meaning, activities and outcomes of youth engagement. It provides slicing analysis and strong tips that can benefit any parent, youth educator, social worker, teacher, or other adult who wants to effectively work with young people. (294 pgs, 2014) \$29.95 at <http://amzn.to/1tJwpwU>

The Freechild Project Youth-Driven Programming Guide—This guide is an introduction to youth-driven programming for nonprofits, government agencies, and other youth-serving organizations. The booklet gives a definition and compares approaches, and then provides planning tools, evaluations and assessments, and more. It includes the Ladder of Youth Voice, rubrics for assessing youth-driven programming, and links to examples and resources that readers can explore on their own. (38 pgs, 2013) \$14.99 at <http://amzn.com/1482607727>

Find other books by author Adam Fletcher, including curriculum, program guides and free ebooks, as well as Adam's other services, online at <http://adamfletcher.net>.

Bring Youth Engagement to Your Community!

Here are three ways THE FREECHILD PROJECT can support you in bringing youth engagement to your business, organization, school, conference, or community:

1) Explore THE FREECHILD PROJECT online. FREECHILD offers dozens of publications, resource collections, and more for young people and adults. They focus on youth engagement, youth voice, and social change led by and with young people. Almost all of our resources are free on our website, with a few available from popular booksellers. Visit www.freechild.org

2) Bring THE FREECHILD PROJECT to You! Many communities like bringing our Train-the-Trainer program to them. This enables FREECHILD to customize the training and expose an unlimited number of participants. FREECHILD offers one, two, three, and seven-day in-house trainings. We charge a flat fee of \$2,000 per day plus travel expenses and participant materials. Materials cost between \$25 and \$100 per participant.

3) Arrange for THE FREECHILD PROJECT to Present a Special Institute. FREECHILD is available to come to your community and deliver an exciting three- to seven-day youth engagement institute. Every participant starts a youth engagement program, designs action plans, determine goals and objectives, identifies ongoing measures, learns to find useful tools, and designs additional materials. Everyone receives a certificate, materials, and more. Costs range from \$750 to \$1,500 per participant.

To learn more about THE FREECHILD PROJECT programs and resources contact

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