

31

YOUNG
LEADERS
SPEAK
UP

WHAT YOUNG LEADERS WANT – AND DON'T WANT – FROM OLDER ALLIES

A qualitative research study from CoGenerate and 31 young leaders
who are committed to working across generations for change

Supported by AARP
with additional
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The Eisner Foundation

COGENERATE

Overview

In March of 2022, CoGenerate (formerly Encore.org) commissioned NORC at the University of Chicago to find out what a nationally representative group of Americans think about cogeneration — a strategy to bring older and younger people together to solve problems and bridge divides.

[The research findings](#) were clear: 81% of survey respondents aged 18-94 say they want to work with different generations to improve the world, and nearly all agree that we would be less divided as a society if older and younger generations worked together.

Perhaps most striking, the generation with the strongest interest in cogeneration is Gen Z. Survey results show that 76% of Gen Z and 70% of Millennial respondents say they wish they had more opportunities to work across generations for change.

We wanted to dive deeper to better understand what's driving this interest among Gen Z and Millennials, particularly young leaders who have experience working across generations. **What exactly do younger leaders want from older leaders, allies and colleagues? And how do they believe intergenerational collaboration can be improved?**

With support from AARP, and additional funding from The Eisner Foundation, we set out to find answers.

Methodology

During September and October of 2023, CoGenerate conducted individual video interviews with 31 leaders from 12 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, ranging in age from 18 to 31. We looked for young people committed to and experienced in working across generations for change — leaders willing to provide honest, if not always easy, answers.

The young leaders are a mix of social entrepreneurs, activists and nonprofit leaders who are working on climate change, immigration, civic engagement, mental health and loneliness, gun violence, reproductive rights, influencer marketing, the creative arts and more. We sought diversity of many kinds, including gender, race/ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation and economic status.

After the video interviews were completed, we gathered 18 of the young leaders for an in-person focus group at AARP headquarters in Washington D.C., exploring key themes culled from the one-on-one conversations. We also interviewed three academic experts on generational issues for their thoughts and observations on younger generations and their ideas for how to improve intergenerational collaboration.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Generational conflict? Not always.
2. Personal connection before collaboration. Always.
3. No one wants to be dismissed because of their age.
4. Cash over compliments.
5. Young leaders aren't afraid to talk about mental health.
6. Productive conflict? Digital natives have few models.
7. "Paying your dues" isn't working.
8. The future of leadership is cogenational.

The young leaders we spoke with were positive, constructive and insightful. In many hours of conversation with them, we heard eight consistent themes.

1. Generational conflict? Not always.

We heard deep appreciation for older people who have walked alongside the young leaders, explaining the mistakes and successes of the past and helping them navigate challenging circumstances with the benefit of historical context. Some expressed frustration that younger generations are being stereotyped as ungrateful or uninterested in learning from elders. Nearly all recalled at least one transformative relationship with an older person who helped establish their appreciation for older generations.



“Older people expect our generation to not be interested in interacting with them. But there’s so much that we can benefit from talking about together. And if we never think the other group wants to speak with us, then we’ll never have those conversations.”

— Carly Roman, program officer at the Archstone Foundation

“If we don’t learn from the past, we’re setting ourselves up for failure. I think there’s enormous power in admitting that you might not know everything.”

— Emily Garcia-Green, chief youth development officer at BridgeUSA



2. Personal connection before collaboration. Always.

The young leaders we spoke with want to connect on a human level first, stressing the importance of coming from a place of curiosity, being vulnerable and authentic, and centering personal experience over facts and opinions. Many talked about identifying shared values and common goals, and validating other people’s concerns as ways to foster connection. Building trust up-front is no small task, but it’s arguably the most important.



“Maybe it’s from my community perspective as an Indigenous person, but if we don’t have a relationship at some basic level, then I don’t really want anything from you.”

— Loren Waters, filmmaker and casting director

“The only thing we have that’s inarguably valuable and true is our lived experience. That is the only way you can connect with someone on a human level. After you accomplish that, you can bring in your expertise.”

— Thanasi Dilos, co-founder of Civics Unplugged



3. No one wants to be dismissed because of their age.

The young people we spoke with want older people to listen, take their perspectives into account and recognize their value. Unfortunately, many of the young leaders shared experiences of older people minimizing or discouraging their contributions to important conversations. Older generations in America are predominantly white; younger generations are increasingly people of color. That can add a racial element to being overlooked.

“I’ve encountered older people unwilling to consider my perspective because ‘it’s the way it’s always been done’ or ‘it takes time and resources to make a change,’ or they don’t want to admit that what they’ve been doing isn’t very productive.”

— Emily Garcia-Green, chief youth development officer at BridgeUSA



“I’ve encountered older people who minimize the struggles of young people of color solely because they don’t have relatable lived experience.”

— Denise Webb, co-author of *Why Aren't We Doing This! Collaborating with Minors in Major Ways*

4. Cash over compliments.

All of the young leaders we spoke with said they need financial support, introductions to potential investors, and opportunities to speak at events where they can further establish credibility. They also want fair compensation for consulting work. Some spoke to the illusion that social media can create, clarifying that having a lot of followers doesn’t mean they’re successful or that they have the money needed to sustain their work.

“I think a lot of adult allies look at young people as, ‘Aww, they’re so cute.’ It leads to this place where young leaders get complimented a lot but don’t get actual support and resources to sustain the work they do.”

— Brea Baker, racial justice organizer, speaker and author



“Who is funding adult-led organizations to integrate young people and youth voices in a meaningful way? Who are the funders that are pushing young people or solely youth-led organizations to collaborate with older generations and sustain the work they’re doing? That has to be the next step.”

— Thanasi Dilos, co-founder of Civics Unplugged

5. Young leaders aren't afraid to talk about mental health.

Much has been written about the mental health struggles of young people over the past few years. When we asked young leaders why they feel so anxious, many spoke about growing up with access to the internet, 24-hour news, social media — and a steady stream of global problems. Many took on additional stress when they decided to pursue leadership positions, and spoke of living with a fear of being “canceled” for making mistakes. The young leaders who are part of marginalized communities cited a fear of being “retraumatized” by older adults who may have maligned their identity in the past. These leaders also expressed a need for more culturally-sensitive mental health care in our country to better serve young people of color.



“We’re trying to grow up with the pressure to do press and be role models. I’ve seen and experienced immense burnout.”

— Dillon St. Bernard, founder of creative collective Team DSB and communications director at Future Coalition

“I don’t think older generations were given space to talk about their feelings and emotions and what was happening to them when they were growing up. They were just taught to survive. I think because they tend to minimize their own emotions, they can tend to minimize the emotions and struggles of younger generations.”

— Raquel Padia, program coordinator for Fresno EOC Generations Serving Together



6. Productive conflict? Digital natives have few models.

It can take a lifetime to learn when to speak up, assert a boundary, avoid people-pleasing, stop taking things personally, and disagree without damaging relationships. Many young leaders who have grown up online acknowledge that these are areas of development for them, and that having productive conversations across generational (and other) differences requires a lot of skill. Many spoke about learning to sit with discomfort, the importance of picking your battles, and not shaming or scolding people if they get something wrong.



“I think young people have come to almost expect a type of frictionless communication, where you don’t really have to deal with disagreement or conflict or accountability in real-time. You can act pleasant and then go on TikTok and put someone on blast and think that because it’s generating likes and comments, you’re making a difference. But that’s not actually creating meaningful change and it’s not factoring in the wisdom and experience of older people.”

— Chris Barnard, president of the American Conservation Coalition

“Disagreement is a productive tool. But young people aren’t learning it because most of the conflict we see is online. And there, it’s something we’ve learned to ignore.”

— Thanasi Dilos, co-founder of Civics Unplugged

7. “Paying your dues” isn’t working.

The young leaders we spoke with question the value of playing by the same rules their parents and grandparents played by, when the world they see and experience is so different. They are forging their own paths and working to define what success means to them. Many expressed frustration with older generations’ attempts to maintain the “status quo” when, from their perspective, it was never working well for all Americans to begin with.



“I wish that older folks could consider what we’re dealing with in this day and age socially, economically, and politically with more empathy and understanding, instead of expecting us to pursue the life path that they took. Things look different for us.”

— Allison Begalman, CEO of YEA! Impact and co-founder of the Hollywood Climate Summit

“People my age have resigned themselves to always being in debt, never being able to own homes. None of what you’re selling us is believable. Why play by your rules if your rules are going to have this kind of an impact?”

— Brea Baker, racial justice organizer, speaker and author

8. The future of leadership is cogenerational.

All of the young leaders we spoke with want to work with older leaders to co-create a better future. They see big-picture potential when older and younger people bring their complementary skills and talents to the table. Many noted that both older and younger people are fighting against ageism and for relevance. Some suggested this could be a hidden strength or an opportunity to connect more deeply. Others saw cogenerational leadership as an alternative to succession planning, allowing the workforce to retain the knowledge of elders while developing the talents of young leaders.



“The phrase that always got thrown at me was, ‘You are the future, you’re going to solve all the problems in the world,’ and it really rubbed me the wrong way. Don’t put that all on my shoulders, it’s an unfair burden to say one generation is responsible for solving problems that existed before we were even born. I’ve learned to say thank you, but let’s build this thing together.”

— Jordan Bowman, executive director at Journeymen Triangle

“I hear numerous leaders speak to the need for succession planning in their organizations and movements, but this feels quite transactional. “Rather than ‘succession,’ what forms of intergenerational leadership might we practice? What beautiful collaborations might emerge from cross-generational stewardship?”

— Serena Bian, special advisor to the U.S. Surgeon General



RECOMMENDATIONS

The young leaders we spoke with weren't shy about offering suggestions for how older people can up their cogenerational game. Here are nine.



Listen.

When trying to build bridges and trust, listening is almost everything.

“Listen to others with the same fiery passion you feel for being heard.”

— Sophie Beren, founder and CEO of The Conversationalist, a platform and movement empowering Gen Z to unify through difficult conversations



Be optimistic.

No one needs “toxic positivity,” but a belief that we can make a positive difference goes a long way.

“Keep an open mind for how things could be better. Share your past experiences and learnings but don't dismiss possibilities for the future. The world has changed so much in the last 50 years. Maybe what didn't work then could work now. Don't bring pessimism.”

— Natalie Green, communications strategist working in reproductive rights



Embrace humility.

Be honest about what you don't know; share what you do.

“Self-awareness is really important for our generation but it can actually go too far, where we're self-absorbed. I'd love to see more self-awareness from older people and less self-absorption from younger people. To have everyone embrace humility.”

— Jordan Bowman, executive director at Journeymen Triangle



Build relationships first.

Relate to young people as peers. Start conversations about human experiences. The partnership can follow.

“I worked closely with a colleague in leadership who was 40 years older than me. We chatted about everything because there was an understanding there. They did the work, so when they were speaking, I was listening. And they trusted me, too. We built power together.”

— Dillon St. Bernard, founder of creative collective Team DSB and communications director at Future Coalition



Don't tell young people they are your hope for the future.

They are likely to feel pressure and resentment if you don't also convey a shared sense of responsibility.

“When I think about the people I’ve been in relationship with who are harmful, it’s adults who are putting their own hopes and aspirations on young people. I worked with someone for a while and they were a big part of pushing me to be more of a public voice in the climate movement. For them, there was a lot of ‘I wish I could have done this when I was younger’ and ‘I wish someone told me to do this when I was younger.’”

— Katie Eder, founder of Future Coalition

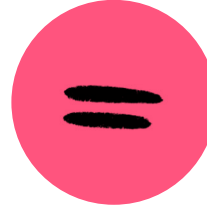


Create safe spaces.

Be aware of the need for emotional and physical safety and for the chance to make and learn from one's mistakes. Talk about how to handle conflict in advance.

“If I didn’t understand something people were talking about during a conference call, I’d follow up with a call to this one older adult I’d developed a relationship with, and they would explain it to me while still seeing me as a partner. That’s the ideal – you’re safe to ask questions and be vulnerable, regardless of generation.”

— Eve Levenson, reflecting on her time working on gun violence prevention

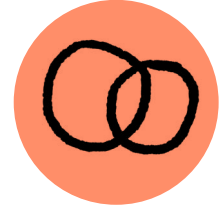


Don't assume young people want to be mentored.

Unsolicited advice is never welcome. Build a relationship first, then respond to requests or ask before offering an opinion.

“Don’t approach the relationship as a mentor but rather a partnership to foster collaboration. I would love for age not to be a barrier between two people. Remember, you’re speaking to another human, have an open mind. This is an opportunity to learn.”

— Nonya Khedr, grassroots advocacy coordinator at Amnesty International USA

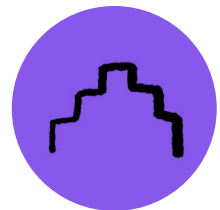


Offer real help to young leaders whose goals you share.

Young leaders need introductions, opportunities, money for their time, and financial support for their cause.

“Have a budget and don’t ask us to do anything for free.”

— Allison Begalman, CEO at YEA! Impact and co-founder of the Hollywood Climate Summit



Don't just share power.

Co-create it. Give young people authority commensurate with their responsibility and the power to affect change.

“If you are in a position of power, be intentional as you age about identifying ways to transfer knowledge and support the next generation.”

— Brea Baker, racial justice organizer, speaker and author

Conclusion

Not all young people are committed to working across generations for the greater good, but we've chosen to listen to and learn from those who are. We hope their words spark conversations and spur change.

We encourage you to discuss this report with older and younger people in your life. What resonates? What changes can you make to age-integrate your life at work, on campus, in your place of worship or where you volunteer? How can you share the power you have? How can you bring cogenenerational strategies to all you do?

We hope to follow this report with its counterpart, a study asking older leaders what they want, and don't want, from younger allies. We hope to bring older and younger leaders together to talk, learn from one another, and lead a movement to co-create a better future. We invite you to [join us](#).

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About CoGenerate

As one of the nation's leading social-impact organizations dedicated to making the most of our increasingly multigenerational society, CoGenerate brings older and younger people together to solve problems, bridge divides and co-create the future. We are working toward the day when generations come together for mutual benefit and social impact in every area of our lives — at work, in school, in faith-based settings, in social-change efforts, and in the communities where we live.

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