



Elevating Youth Worker Voice

A Practical Guide for Organizations Supporting Young People in Their Transition to the Workplace

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Background

Work plays a critical role in the lives of young people, generating income for youth and their families, helping them develop skills, and benefitting their longer-term employment trajectories. Young people have much to offer workplaces and employers, yet they also hold less power than other workers. Building worker power and voice has emerged as a key strategy for improving jobs and work, especially following the pandemic, but little is known about how to bolster worker power and voice for youth specifically. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide a framework and examples of strategies for supporting youth in developing their power and voice. It aims to offer practical strategies to nonprofit organizations and governmental organizations supporting youth employment goals.

Who Are the Youth Workforce?

Early formal work experience provides long-lasting benefits for young adults, from higher wages to less time spent unemployed over their lifetimes (Baum and Ruhm 2014). Unfortunately, youth do not have equal opportunities when it comes to this important step towards their future careers. For instance, data from the census bureau's 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation reveals that among those ages 16 to 19, white youth are formally employed at a rate 15 percentage points higher than Latinx youth, 16 points higher than Black youth, and 21 points more than Asian youth. Furthermore, over two-thirds of young workers are from higher-income households (Spievack and Sick 2019).

It is even more critical for young people in low-income families to be able to access quality job opportunities—not only as an entryway to a strong future, but also as a way of meeting their current needs. Youth as young as 12 years old often play important economic roles in families that struggle to make ends meet (Popkin, Scott, and Galvez 2016). First, they try to look for a conventional job. If they cannot find one, they try to make money under the table (e.g., selling candy, styling hair, doing odd jobs), and if they cannot make enough money doing those things, they find other ways to earn money that may put them at risk. It is imperative that policymakers, employers, and practitioners seek to ameliorate these disparities.

As of July 2023, an estimated 21.6 million young people between the ages 16 and 24 were formally employed in the United States.¹ Youth employment tends to spike in the summer months when students are not in class and recent graduates seek permanent employment, but this varies by demographic. In July 2023, the total employment–population ratio for 16- to 24-year-olds was 55 percent. There is little difference between men (54.9 percent) and women (55.1 percent). However, there is a striking difference between white youth (62.6 percent) and Black (53.5 percent), Asian (49.8 percent), and Hispanic or Latinx (57.5 percent) youth.

Young workers (ages 16–24), both before the COVID-19 pandemic and now, are largely employed in the leisure and hospitality industries, retail trade, and education and health services.² Since these are mostly

face-to-face jobs, young workers faced the highest job losses of any age group during the pandemic recession (Gould and Kassa 2020). Global data suggests that workers in this age group are more likely to be involved in informal employment compared with older workers (Chacaltana, Bonnett, and Leung 2020). A Pew Research survey reveals that three-in-ten 18- to 29-year-olds have earned money via an online gig platform, as compared to 16 percent of US adults overall (Anderson et al. 2021). Young workers in these jobs tend to be more precarious given the inconsistent nature of the work and lack of labor protections.

Young people experience a lot of challenges on the job. Firstly, federal law “only protects people who are 40 or older from age discrimination at work.”³ Add in the recent increase in child labor violations and loosening of legal protections, and young workers are at an elevated risk of exploitation and job-related injury (Sherer and Mast 2023). The CDC notes that “middle and high school workers may be at increased risk for injury since they may not have the strength or cognitive ability needed to perform certain job duties”.⁴ In 2020, the rate of work-related injuries treated in emergency departments for workers ages 15 to 24 was “1.5 times greater than the rate for workers 25 years of age and older.”⁵ Despite this, early work experience is still incredibly valuable for youth development, provided that safe working conditions are enforced.

On a psychological level, younger workers (ages 18–25) report feeling unsupported in the workplace at a greater rate (45 percent) than those 44 years and older (11–25 percent).⁶ Although many Gen Z and Millennial workers appreciate the flexibility of working from home that was popularized early during the COVID-19 pandemic (Deloitte 2023), they also report a decline in “feeling cared about, having someone who encourages their development, opportunities to learn and grow, their opinions counting, and having a best friend at work.”⁷

Younger workers also tend to value certain aspects of job quality differently than those over 25 years old. For example, younger workers prioritize purpose, mission, and advancement over benefits (Scott and Katz, 2021). Millennial and Gen Z workers are extremely concerned about the high cost of living, followed closely by unemployment and climate change (Deloitte 2023).

Although the vast majority of youth support unions, only 5.3 percent of workers ages 16 to 24 are represented in collective bargaining (AFL-CIO 2022). All in all, these statistics reflect the precarity that many young workers feel in their current jobs and as they look ahead to their financial future (Deloitte 2023). The following sections of this toolkit help us define how youth worker voice is unique and what can be done to support it.

What Is Worker Voice?

Worker power enjoyed a period of strength during the recent Great Resignation and the tight labor market. However, as these conditions are temporary, so too are the gains workers have made. The COVID-19

pandemic contributed to dramatic shifts in the employee–employer relationship, making now a great time for companies to embrace a broader and stronger vision of worker voice.⁸

Many definitions of worker voice exist, but a central tenet is autonomy. Voice can be deployed to influence many components of job quality, including working conditions (schedules, hours, safety, culture), job design (job tasks, advancement opportunities), and benefits (healthcare, retirement, transportation) (Loprest, Katz, and Shakesprere 2021).

For many, worker power brings to mind images of unions, strikes, and collective bargaining. While effective, one should not dismiss other models, including collective employee ownership and worker councils (Loprest, Katz, and Shakesprere 2021). Employer-led models, such as meaningful engagement, frontline employee empowerment, and open-book management, can also be used to facilitate and elevate worker voice.

Researchers at MIT fielded a survey of American workers that found substantial “voice gaps,” defined as “areas where workers believe they ought to have more influence and say at work than they do in reality” (Kochan et al. 2018). A majority of the surveyed workers reported having a voice gap in “benefits, compensation, promotions, job security, respect shown to employees, protections from abuse, and new technologies.” Additionally, more than a third of survey respondents experienced a voice gap in “training, employer values, protection from discrimination, and ways to improve how work is done” (Kochan et al. 2018).

There may be important generational differences though. A recent study of youth voice found that younger workers report more problems at work, are less likely to turn to formal channels (managers, human resources) to address workplace problems, and at the same time, are more satisfied with their level of voice at work; perhaps because of lower expectations than older workers (Ahlquist, Grumbach, and Thai 2023).

What Are the Unique Challenges for Youth?

The ways that youth express their voice, as well as how training providers, workforce intermediaries, and employers engage with it, vary in several ways from the working population at large. Perhaps most notable is the fact that youth are still developing. In many cases, they lack the communication, experience, and knowledge from which their older counterparts benefit. Young people work disproportionately in sectors with little union presence. And even when they are represented, it is rare for youth to be included in union leadership. Structural challenges, including ageism, racism, sexism, and ableism, are additional barriers that make it more difficult for young workers to safely express their voice and make positive changes in their workplace.

This toolkit features best practices for understanding and intentionally addressing these issues from the unique position of youth-serving organizations.

About This Toolkit

As outlined in the background chapter, young people face unique challenges in using their voice in the workplace as they start their careers. They need support and structure to empower them in that process.

A wide array of organizations serving young people are uniquely positioned to be allies to youth worker voice as they transition to their lives at work. This includes youth development organizations, nonprofits specializing in training and job placement, social enterprises that directly employ and then place youth, as well as workforce organizations that partner with training organizations. Organizations may exclusively serve youth or, alternatively, serve youth as an important segment of their target population.

All these organizations are differently positioned to support youth worker voice, depending on the role that they play. In order to provide them with guidance on how they might approach this work, we interviewed 27 leaders in the field in very different types of organizations, spanning the full range that serve young people. We also scanned the existing tools and literature in this space to offer supplementary information.

Insights resulting from this process are organized into four chapters:

- **Listening and supporting youth voice within your organization:** Describes ways that youth-serving organizations can embed youth worker voice into their own practice and operations.
- **Building youth skills to advocate for themselves at work:** Discusses ways that organizations can impart the knowledge and skills youth will need to successfully navigate the workplace.
- **Helping employer partners to make space for youth voices:** Identifies strategies that organizations working directly with businesses can use to select good partners and equip them with the tools they need to listen to young people.
- **Elevating youth worker voice in community conversations and policy:** Provides background on how to equip young people with the tools to elevate their own experiences in important policymaking conversations beyond the programs in which they participate.

Each chapter presents the overarching goals of these approaches, specific strategies organizations can use, as well as helpful tips and specific resources for additional information.

Listening and Supporting Youth Voice within Your Organization

From my experience, I've never had a setting like this that actually checked in with their people as much as possible. You can always grab somebody and they're willing to talk...A

lot of jobs you don't have that, you just have to rely on yourself.

—Young adult working at a social enterprise

Goals

Youth-serving organizations must model ways to make space for and value youth voice so that, as organizations, they can more effectively prepare youth for the workplace and cultivate these practices with partner employers. There are a number of strategies that organizations can employ to build youth voice internally, with the goal of creating an environment where young people feel heard and where their thoughts, opinions, and lived experiences help shape the organization and its programming in real ways. This creates a dynamic in which youth can learn and grow, and it helps young people develop expectations for what a healthy workplace culture should look like.

Key Strategies

In this section, we discuss several different strategies, including training for adult staff and other organizational leaders, inclusion of youth in decisionmaking and operations, and building in mechanisms for youth to offer regular feedback on their experiences.

Training Adults in Your Organization

The people working in your organization need tools and support to engage with youth effectively. Trainings can cover a variety of topics. We discuss several below.

- **Adulthood:** This consists of training to help adults in your organization challenge their underlying assumptions about young people.
- **Youth development:** General training on approaches to engaging young people can be a good baseline for everyone, including how to design developmentally appropriate programming and

communicate effectively orally and in writing with young people who may use very different language and hold different life experiences and points of view.

- **Trauma-informed practice:** Many organizations work with youth who have been directly impacted by trauma. Some suggest training staff in trust-based relational interventions and socio-emotional learning. This helps staff learn to unpack why young people might act out under stress. Training also includes social-emotional workshops to equip youth with strategies for defusing tension and managing emotional responses to workplace stress.

TIP

- Offer training to everyone in your organization who might be interacting with young people—not just ones who are involved in direct programming. This means the training should be inclusive of everyone, from board members and the executive director to the people who work in accounting, fundraising, and IT. Youth interact with many different people throughout their experiences, even if it's only in an elevator.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you want to learn more, several resources are available to help you develop content for these trainings.

- The Youth Advisory Board of the New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board recently put out *Dismantling Adultism Toolkit: How to Build & Maintain a Youth-Centered Organization*, which provides a number of resources for organizations confronting these issues.
- A variety of youth development resources are available through www.youth.gov, including the key principles for positive youth development and a tool on how to assess youth involvement and engagement.
- The National Network for Youth assembled a *Trauma-Informed Care Toolkit for Youth Service Providers* that provides valuable tools around this approach. The work stems from organizations working with homeless youth, but the approach is applicable to a wide array of youth-serving organizations.

Gathering and Using Regular Feedback from Youth

It's important for organizations to deliberately create space for youth voice in all aspects of their work. One of the most inclusive ways to do this is through building in a variety of feedback mechanisms. These may include:

- **On-one-one check-ins:** Many youth development and training programs have some element of case management or navigation. These touch points are a good opportunity to check in with participants

about their experiences, what's needed, and how programming or approaches might be better or different. Many organizations cross-train staff so that any of them are equipped to solicit and receive feedback from youth. One way of making sure feedback happens in these contexts is to have a set of questions for staff to use, with clear expectations about how and when to ask them.

- **Small group discussions or focus groups:** Discussion groups are particularly good for brainstorming or design tasks. When assembling groups of young people to share their opinions, be purposeful about group design. Generally, more homogeneous groups create safer spaces for people to share. What matters may be different depending on your organization, but consider having separate groups for different genders, ages, or languages to maximize the odds that young people will feel comfortable sharing their opinions.
- **Regular feedback surveys:** Surveys can be great vehicles to reach a lot of young people your organization serves and offer them more confidential ways of providing feedback. There are several different ways to administer these surveys, such as via text message or email links to simple online surveys that you create.

TIPS

- **Only ask for what you will have the capacity to receive and use:** Never gather data just to gather it. Think of asking for feedback as a relationship-building exercise. If you ask too many questions with no capacity or willingness to act, you break trust with young people. Start with a few focused questions that you are committed to understanding and build from there.
- **Plan how you will use feedback from the beginning:** Before you ask for any feedback, plan how you will share and use the information. For example, are you sharing with the staff of a particular program; the board? Is there a particular timing or meeting that makes sense? How about integrating the information into performance reviews? Consider where information can help inform decision points and tailor the timing and scope of feedback collection accordingly.
- **Plan how you will close the loop with youth:** Young people want to know what happened as a result of their feedback. Think carefully about the best ways to do this—it could be one-on-one, but it also could be part of a larger communications strategy, depending on the situation.
- **Calibrate the way you ask for feedback with the questions you're asking:** Use anonymous surveys for things that require honest and sensitive feedback. Also, make sure that the staff engaging young people do not have a personal interest in the feedback. For example, don't have case managers ask for feedback directly on their performance, or have a program manager ask for feedback on their program. It's easier for young people to offer feedback to someone who feels more neutral.
- **Value youth contributions:** Whenever possible, thank young workers for being open to sharing their insights with gift cards or other types of compensation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Listen4Good**, a signature initiative of the Fund for Shared Insight, offers expert tools, coaching, and resources to nonprofits seeking to build client-focused, equity-based feedback loops to help them listen and respond to the people at the heart of their work. Several of the organizations interviewed for this toolkit used these resources to build feedback loops into their own practice.

BOX 1

Building in a mechanism for youth to proactively address program challenges and propose solutions

Hopeworks is a social enterprise based in Camden, New Jersey, that trains young adults for careers in tech by directly employing them to offer these services to local businesses. All participating young people are trained in the organization's signature Systems Check—any young person can call a facilitated conversation to address issues that arise with other staff or students within the program. To make sure that youth are using that mechanism, Hopeworks tracks how often it is used and does re-training if they see fewer youth initiating systems checks. In addition, to ensure that youth feedback actually leads to results, Hopeworks systematically tracks how often young adults present ideas, how often those ideas are surfaced at meetings, and how often they are adopted. This helps the organization stay accountable to youth, and fosters relationships where they trust their feedback will be valued.

Including Youth in Decisionmaking and Operations

One way to ensure that your organization is actually responsive to the input it seeks from young people is to include them in decisionmaking processes in partnership with adults. This can take various forms:

- **Board membership:** Some organizations designate a fixed number of seats on their board for youth who may be current participants or alumni. This ensures youth input on the strategic direction of the organization. This practice can be institutionalized by embedding these requirements in your organization's bylaws.
- **Staff meetings:** Another option for organizations is to allow young workers to sit in on staff meetings where everyday decisions are made. This helps ensure a youth perspective on how to improve everyday operations.
- **Recruiting young people to work on your staff:** Alumni from your programs have unique insights from being participants themselves. Having them on your staff embeds youth voice into your operations. They may also be able to facilitate and make space for the voices of the young people in your program in a different way than other staff.

TIPS

- **Be thoughtful and transparent about your selection process:** In most programs, there are many young workers but few opportunities to be directly involved in decisionmaking. Share transparently about the process you will use to select youth, and how they can express interest in playing these kinds of roles. Also think through how you might set up terms of service and rotations to provide opportunities for participation for more young people. It's also important to make sure you are providing the other opportunities for input and feedback described in the previous section of this chapter.
- **Value youth contributions:** Whenever possible, provide an honorarium or stipend to value youth for their time and contributions.
- **Provide adequate training and support for youth:** These spaces may feel unfamiliar for young people. Provide an overview of the goals of the body, the process for decisionmaking, the roles of the people present, and what they should expect from others. Some of this training may also overlap with the kinds of training described in the later chapter on elevating youth worker voice in community conversations.
- **Remember to train the adults:** Make sure the adults serving alongside youth have undergone the kinds of training described earlier in this section and are attuned to the value youth contribute and how to make space for their voices and opinions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Community Tool Box by the University of Kansas has a great chapter on [Including Youth on Your Board, Commission, or Committee](#) which includes very detailed guidance on how to think through your organization's approach to this strategy.
- Additional insights can be gathered from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's resources on [authentic youth engagement](#).

BOX 2

Innovative ways to leverage young adults' unique skills on your program team

The Center for Employment Opportunities provides access to immediate transitional work upon enrollment, individualized job coaching, and job training to people who have recently returned home from incarceration, the majority of whom are on probation or parole. More than half of program participants are young adults between the ages of 18 and 30. In addition to robust feedback loops, the CEO has made a commitment to hiring and developing alumni to serve key roles within the organization. More than a third of their staff are formerly incarcerated themselves. In addition, many youth alumni serve as peer support specialists who work with participants on barrier navigation and referrals and facilitate peer support groups once a week. These specialists receive a small stipend for this work.

Takeaways

This chapter offered strategies that organizations can employ to value and empower youth voice within the context of their own programs and operations. When assembling your own approach, remember to

- equip your staff and other adult collaborators with the knowledge and skills to elevate youth voice;
- be deliberate in how you ask for feedback, how you use it, and how you demonstrate that what young people shared mattered;
- look for opportunities to include youth voice in the spaces where decisions are made; and
- value/compensate young people for their contributions.

Building Skills for Youth to Advocate for Themselves at Work

It puts you in a position where you have to get out of your comfort zone and learn how to speak to people [at work]. It's all about self-control, having that social awareness.

—Youth participant in workforce training program

Goals

At the end of the day, young people will leave youth-serving organizations and enter a variety of diverse work environments. Youth organizations cannot control conditions for youth on the job, but they can help equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to use their voice and navigate complex situations and work environments. This chapter discusses strategies that organizations can use to effectively prepare youth for the workplace.

Key Strategies

Organizations working directly with youth can employ various key strategies to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need. These include training on workplace rights; communication, self-advocacy, and workplace realities training; modeling workplace communication; and post-placement coaching. We discuss each of these in turn.

Training on Workplace Rights

Leaders highlight a wide array of basic workplace rights trainings that can be helpful to inform young people of what their rights are on-the-job.

- **General know-your-rights training:** At the most basic level, it's important for youth to understand wage and hour laws, and their rights under state and federal law. This includes helping them identify wage theft, gather evidence, file complaints, and take action directly at the workplace.
- **Health and safety:** Many young people work in industries where they face risks to their health and safety. Good training covers how to identify health hazards, risk factors, accidents, falls, and extreme heat, as well as informing workers of their OSHA rights and how to file complaints.

- **Special laws regulating youth employment:** There are federal and state laws that govern employment and working conditions specifically for young people, including the nature of the work performed and the number of hours appropriate for different ages.
- **Equal opportunity:** Youth also need training on workplace protections against employment discrimination where an employer treats an applicant or employee less favorably merely because of a person's race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or status as a protected veteran.
- **Navigating hiring processes with criminal records:** Some organizations partner with outside legal entities to educate youth about background checks, what to disclose when, strategy around conviction question, how to craft their narrative, their rights during the interview process, "Ban the Box" legislation, and how to access legal support if they need it.
- **Immigrant rights in the workplace training:** Immigrant youth may also benefit from understanding the laws that govern employment for workers with different immigration statuses, and how to navigate these issues.

TIPS

Youth organizations may not have the expertise to run good trainings on these topics on their own.

- Look to partner with workers' centers and other local labor rights organizations on these kinds of trainings.
- Local and state governments also often offer information on workers' rights on their websites.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You may find resources to leverage in these trainings from a variety of sources:

- [Coworker.org](#) provides "know your rights" resources on topics including wage theft, surveillance, and workplace organizing.
- Youth.gov's [Youth Health and Safety at Work](#) resources can be used to inform youth of their federal and state rights in the workplace.
- The US Department of Labor has a basic fact sheet on discrimination at work here: [Know your Rights Workplace Rights \(dol.gov\)](#).
- More information on rules and regulations for youth employment can be found here: [Rules and Regulations for Youth Employment | Youth.gov](#).

Communication, Self-Advocacy, and Workplace Realities Training

In addition to the types of training around workplace rights described in the previous section, it's important to equip youth with additional knowledge about what to expect in the workplace, and how to communicate effectively, such as the following:

- **Equity and structural realities of the workplace:** Many leading youth organizations are very deliberate about preparing young people for the racism and bias they may encounter in the workplace and about teaching them how to identify and deal with microaggressions, tokenism, and other problematic experiences in the workplace.
- **Workplace norms:** Consider setting youth up with the employee handbook for their new employer and help them walk through it and understand the policies and procedures that will affect their work. In addition to the workplace rights trainings described above, this also helps youth understand how to identify moments when something needs to be brought to a supervisor or HR office.
- **Payday basics:** Teach young people how to look at their paycheck and make sure it looks right. Are the right number of hours included? Are the deductions appropriate? If not, use this as an opportunity to teach how to address this at work.
- **Written communication at work:** Some organizations offer contextualized training on how to frame issues clearly in written/email communication to teams and managers. Youth practice standardizing email language, minimizing slang, and properly documenting interests, concerns, and issues in a professional manner so that management are aware of them.

BOX 3

Innovative training on how to navigate complex dynamics at work

Per Scholas, a national nonprofit organization, provides youth with rigorous training for tech careers and follows their journey to secure positions with industry-leading employers. The Learner Support Team recently created a trauma-informed workplace training to help youth navigate common scenarios at work. Topics include workplace trauma, balance, boundaries, resources for coping, with uncomfortable situations at work, and meditation. The training teaches youth about the effects of workplace trauma like insomnia, isolation, and panic attacks, and offers statistics on the prevalence of these effects to help people feel less alone. A big emphasis of the training is learning how to set boundaries without feeling guilty.

Modeling and Coaching Healthy Workplace Communication

Many youth organizations work with young people on oral communication, helping them figure out how to communicate effectively about basic things like negotiating schedules or sick leave, giving and receiving feedback on performance, and elevating workplace violations. There are several different ways organizations do this.

- **One-on-one roleplaying:** When young people have the support of individualized assistance from a job developer, these staff can roleplay different workplace scenarios so that participants can practice and build up their confidence.
- **Small group workshops:** Organizations that have a cohort model can get a lot of value from providing support in a group setting. Consider running small group sessions to explore workplace issues and provide space for youth to share their perspectives to their peers and explain how they would approach problems. It helps youth open up and understand that there are various ways to react to things, and each person brings different experiences.
- **Workplace simulation:** Organizations like social enterprises that directly employ young people can teach them a lot about what to expect in terms of healthy workplace communication with the ways they conduct team meetings and coach youth on how to handle these interactions.
- **Structured one-on-one check-ins:** This starts immediately after placement and often initially focuses on coaching the young people to manage up to their supervisor. For example, there may be issues with onboarding, and youth need to voice when the work is ambiguous and ask their supervisors to clarify roles and responsibilities at their next one-on-one. After the initial stage, youth organizations should strive to check in at regular intervals; some suggest using a series of specific questions, including things like, “How do meetings run? How do folks speak to you? How often do you see someone that looks like you?” Many young people blame themselves for challenges they are having and need the validation of a trusted adult and support to navigate those challenges successfully.

TIPS

- Teach youth to identify problems early on—timing is important.
- Consider maximizing diversity in small group workshops or workplace simulations to help youth learn to communicate with different kinds of people.
- Check-ins after placement are also great opportunities to get feedback on particular employer partners (see next chapter for how to use this information in conversation with partner businesses).
- Consider having dedicated staff for ongoing support after placement.

- Coach youth on how to identify an ally in management at work who can vouch for them, challenge the biases within the organization, and help them navigate the environment.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Child Trends put together a great [tip sheet](#) to prepare young workers to have important conversations with their employers.

BOX 4

Modeling how to give and receive feedback on the job

Year Up, a national nonprofit workforce development organization, offers tuition-free job training and access to internships with a diverse set of partner businesses. As part of its practice, youth participate in learning communities—or smaller cohorts or groups—in which they learn and practice on-the-job communication skills. The program teaches young people an approach for offering feedback: offer it in a timely way, lead with a strength, and follow with growth areas. Youth are also encouraged to avoid words like “but” that erase strength, communicate with specificity, cite examples, and offer ways to be helpful.

Takeaways

Preparing young people to navigate the workplace involves a number of different strategies. Be sure to

- arm them with sound knowledge of their rights in the workplace;
- teach them about the realities they will likely face, and help them orient themselves to workplace norms; and
- work with them to practice how to communicate and raise their voice effectively at work in ways that will ensure they are heard.

Helping Employer Partners to Make Space for Youth Voices

The conversations we have with employers are direct, talking about the populations they're working with and understanding their recruitment, onboarding, advancement practices and lift up effective practice.

—Workforce intermediary

Goals

Employers can support youth worker voice in a way that is consistent with positive youth development principles, creates feedback mechanisms, and remains profitable. To achieve this takes an intentional and ongoing effort to listen and put feedback into action. Whether you work directly with employers or have partners who play intermediary roles, these are helpful strategies to take into consideration. For those in the latter group, however, it becomes even more important to employ the strategies outlined in the previous section, so young workers are properly equipped to handle workplace issues.

Key Strategies

In this section, we discuss several different strategies, beginning with the work it takes to set proper expectations at the start of a relationship between the youth-serving organization and an employer partner. This is followed by trainings that support employers and their staff in counteracting age-based and other biases, as well as trauma-informed approaches to management. Lastly, we focus on strategies for gathering, packaging, and acting on feedback.

Vetting Employer Partners

It's important for youth-serving organizations to be mindful about the employers they choose as partners, both because of limited resources and for the well-being of young workers. Best practices for selecting partners include the following:

- **Being mindful of resources:** Smaller organizations might choose to be more selective when engaging employer partners, only leaning into those that are leaning into them. Otherwise, they risk

placing youth into hostile workplaces that are not open to change. Organizations with more capacity might consider including employers that do not yet have all the best practices in place, but have the right mentality. If you only work with those already doing everything right, you limit how much change you can make.

- **Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging:** Look for employers that already have diversity within their teams and a commitment to DEI practices across the organization. For employers that fall at the lower end of the pay scale, consider their mentality around training, advancement, and hiring those with barriers to traditional employment, such as criminal records.
- **Hiring practices:** Look for employers that have an ongoing entry-level hiring need that pays a living wage. This ensures that you and the employer can build a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship over the long term. You might also consider the employer's attitudes toward and opportunities for internal advancement, especially if the starting wage or benefits are less than desirable.

TIPS

- **Set expectations:** Make it clear that this is a *partnership*, not a one-off hiring solution. Invite employers to visit an open house, lead a workshop, or otherwise interact with the organization so both sides have a chance to see if the relationship is a fit. This is a good chance to get feedback from youth, as well.
- **Build a relationship:** It is helpful to have staff dedicated to vetting, developing, and maintaining relationships with employers. Strong, high-touch relationships often mean a greater reception to feedback and growth through referrals and word of mouth.
- **Identify advocates for youth at work:** One thing to look for in employer partners is someone who can serve as an advocate for youth but are not in the human resources department. This can help in creating a safer space for youth to elevate their voices.

BOX 5

The Knowledge House's employer scorecard

The Knowledge House is a Bronx-based organization leading coding and digital skills training for underserved young people. They use a scorecard with the following criteria to assess their employer partners. The Talent Partnerships Lead is the staff member who fills it out, and then works with the program team to ensure the right fit during a fellow's job-matching plan.

Opportunity: 1. Career development (cross-training, advancement, educational benefits) 2. Acknowledgement (internal and external recognition) 3. Engagement (community outreach, representation, recruitment)

Support: 1. Training (onboarding, supervisory training, employee training) 2. Internal assistance (peer mentors, financial counseling) 3. External assistance (child care, transportation, human resources)

Foundational: 1. Compensation (wages, financial incentives, benefits) 2. Fundamentals (safety, fairness)

Training and Supporting Employer Partners

It's important for companies who employ young workers to engage their management, staff, and HR professionals in trainings that equip them to communicate effectively and respectfully.

- **Adulthood:** Training on adulthood helps employees identify and address prejudicial feelings and actions against young people. This is an essential step for any employer looking to truly listen to and engage their younger workers. In doing so, they may benefit from increased retention and new ideas. See the first chapter for more information on this type of training, including how it can be used internally for organization staff.
- **Effective employee engagement:** Creating a good workplace culture improves retention, motivation, and trust, which in turn empowers worker voice. Strategies include maintaining open dialogue between employees and management, asking for regular employee input on job design, and recognizing employee successes. Management should also take steps to educate employees on the business' key performance metrics (see resources on open-book management) and offer a direct stake in the business' success through employee stock ownership or another profit-sharing model. See the additional resources for a guide on employee engagement created by Pacific Community Ventures.
- **Cultural awareness:** It is important for anyone working with a young person to understand that they may come from a different cultural background. Building awareness around not just what is being said, but *how* it is being said, goes a long way toward creating an inclusive company culture where young workers feel supported.

- **Hiring practices:** Hiring practices are one of many places where discrimination crops up and reinforces systemic inequities. The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) and other organizations offer training materials and certifications for improving practices in this area, including Ban the Box, EEOC compliance, and guidance on when to take someone’s conviction into account.

TIPS

- Be patient. Changing mindsets takes time.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [This toolkit](#) by Talent Rewire provides strategies for engaging often-overlooked employees on the frontline.
- Talent Rewire also has [resources to support HR leaders](#) looking to change company culture and address the policies that keep systemic inequities in place.
- Pacific Community Ventures helps those looking to strengthen employee engagement, trust, and retention with [this guide](#).
- The National Center for Employee Ownership introduction to [open-book management](#) is a good place to get started.
- Child Trends also put together a valuable [tip sheet](#) for preparing employers to have conversations with young adults on the job.

Gathering and Sharing Feedback for Employers

It’s important for youth-serving organizations to maintain high-touch relationships with their alumni, especially during the first few months of their new job. Strategies for gathering youth feedback were discussed in depth in the previous section. Here, we focus on methods to share feedback and other relevant data with employer partners to maintain relationships and hold them accountable to fair and inclusive practices. The following strategies can help you deliver feedback that is constructive, confidential, and insightful:

- **Dashboards, data, and other feedback for individual employers:** Speak with young adults about their job placement regularly within the first 12 months. Consider asking specific questions such as, “How do coworkers speak to you? How often do you see someone that looks like you?” Collect data on job quality metrics including wage relative to the living wage, benefits (healthcare, PTO, retirement), overall sense of belonging, and autonomy over things like scheduling. Qualitative survey data can also help illuminate the struggles employees face outside of work that can affect their ability to show up and stay engaged. For example, a strict attendance policy may be doing

more harm than good, and it can have disproportionate impacts on workers who have unreliable access to transportation. Communication with employers can and should also be used to highlight the benefits of policy changes to the business, from increased retention to employee satisfaction.

- **Employer peer groups:** Bring employers together to share information, challenges, and best practices. When organizations are able to help each other and vouch for the benefits of taking worker voice seriously, change is more likely to happen. See box 6 for an example from Grand Rapids Source.
- **One-on-one:** A representative from the youth organization can act like a case worker for the youth and their manager. This involves regular check-in phone calls to build a relationship with the manager, who then feels comfortable communicating challenges and working on solutions.

TIPS

- Be mindful of privacy and safety concerns when addressing a specific complaint. When possible, bring general feedback to an employer so as to avoid singling out anyone by name or identifiable information.
- Be clear about what changes you expect you can make with the feedback you receive. And make sure the young worker is aware of and consenting to how the feedback will be presented to their employer. Will it be aggregated and anonymized or will they be named?
- Certain issues, such as a lack of cultural competency, require prioritization and swift action. If the manager is not receptive to feedback or training to ameliorate the situation, it is important to relocate the affected young person. Safety and respect are paramount.
- Data can be a powerful tool when making the case for policy changes to company leadership, but don't underestimate the power of a good story, too. Remember, young folks have lives outside of work that are just as important to understand and lift up.
- Expect that employers will have feedback for your organization and youth employees, too. Accept it with an open mind and use it as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship. Feedback on youth workers can help them develop professionally and support them in using their voice at work effectively.
- Make an effort to speak their language. For example, you can leverage hot topics in business news to open up a conversation on a certain policy or practice you want to address.

BOX 6

Helping employers understand how to improve

Grand Rapids Source is a membership-based organization that deploys resource navigators to assist and build relationships with company leadership and HR teams. They track data for each employer and share quarterly dashboards, reports, and an end-of-year deep dive into the data. Salesforce helps them collect information on demographics, wages, barriers, and case notes. Each company has one navigator dedicated to tracking and providing these insights, which allows them to develop a strong relationship over time. Another benefit of Grand Rapids Source's structure is that they can look across their membership for patterns, policies to spotlight, and opportunities for peer learning. The organization also brings together its employer members to discuss common challenges, promising practices, and success stories.

Takeaways

This chapter outlined strategies for engaging with employers that hire youth. From selecting your partners to delivering feedback, there is a lot to consider. As you build your own approach, remember:

- Stronger relationships with employers allow you to advocate for youth workers more effectively.
- Ask for permission before sharing or attempting to resolve an issue raised by a youth worker. Their consent, privacy, and safety should be a top priority.
- Use data to back your insights and recommendations when available.

Elevating Youth Worker Voice in Community Conversations and Policy

We change the narrative on the political landscape...Approaching policy levers from an equity perspective. We want young people to advocate on their own behalf—at state or institutional levels.

—Youth-serving organization practitioner

Goals

Previous chapters have focused on strategies to elevate youth worker voice within the organizations that are providing services to them and as they transition to work. Organizations working with youth can also elevate youth voice in shaping workforce initiatives and affecting change in public policies, including workforce system policies and policies governing other systems that impact youth lives. By giving young workers the opportunity to participate in these efforts, organizations can help to ensure that policies and programs reflect the needs of youth, but can also provide the chance for youth to exercise their power and voice when there are constraints to doing so in the workplace because of organizational or sectoral norms.

Key Strategies

In this section, we discuss several different strategies, including engaging youth in research, establishing community advisory groups, providing leadership and advocacy training, and supporting youth as representatives in policy and sector initiatives.

Providing Leadership and Advocacy Training

One way to support youth worker voice is by training youth in policy advocacy. A key reason that workers need to be supported to exercise their voice and power is to help improve wages and working conditions in sectors and occupations where many young people work. Although it might be difficult for youth to exercise their power in an individual workplace, there may be more opportunities for empowerment through collective action.

Several organizations we interviewed were advocacy organizations at their core, so providing organizing training to youth was central to their mission (see box 7). Others were primarily workforce development organizations with the mission of preparing people for jobs, but they still saw the importance of providing youth constituents with avenues for building these skills. One organization saw youth organizing work as a way to help participants explore a potential career pathway.

Training to prepare youth for advocacy and policy work could include the following:

- Leadership development
- Public speaking and communications
- Advocacy and organizing
- Media engagement
- Public policy

Training can be offered directly or through partnerships with other organizations.

TIPS

- Youth-serving organizations can consider partnerships with worker centers in helping youth build leadership, organizing, and advocacy skills. These partnerships can provide opportunities to leverage the expertise of others in the context of scarce resources and to expand collective action.
- Internal meetings can provide an opportunity for youth to practice public speaking and presentation skills. Public speaking is something many people fear, so providing a safe space to build these skills can be helpful.
- In addition to training, organizations supporting youth can give youth interested in public-facing work the chance to shadow staff or students who are more experienced before engaging in this public work themselves.

BOX 7

Training youth on collective action and worker advocacy

WeCount is a membership organization that serves as a worker center for immigrant families in Southeast Florida. It primarily works with Latin American workers in the construction industry, domestic work, and agriculture. A key part of the mission is to build the power of workers, and this is reflected in the variety of ways workers are involved in the organization (as discussed in previous chapters). Embedded in every training is the importance of collective action, organizing, and member recruitment. In the words of Oscar Londono, the organization's executive director, "It is not just about education, but also helping people to be better leaders, organizers and activists." As part of this, WeCount developed worker committees in the different sectors in which they are engaged in organizing and advocacy work. For example, they have a "domestic workers committee" (nannies and housecleaners) and an "outdoor workers committee" (construction and agriculture). These committees come together biweekly or monthly for leadership training, organizing training, and political education. Leadership training includes discussion of the characteristics and values of a leader, how to identify a potential leader within your network, and how to build support and momentum.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are resources to support skill development in this area:

- Advocates for Youth (2013) developed a [Youth Activist Toolkit](#) to equip youth with the tools and strategies to be a community organizer and bring about change in the lives of community members, states, and the country more broadly.

Engaging Youth in Research

One way that youth can play a role in policy conversations is by gathering data that helps policymakers or local leaders to understand the challenges youth face and their needs. A variety of strategies for "community-engaged research" can be deployed when focusing on empowering and improving outcomes for youth. They include the following:

- **Defining research questions:** Organizations that work with youth can assist in developing the overall questions that guide the research. For example, if a program had steep dropout rates during the fourth month, they could gather youth in the program together to examine the data and figure out what the program might want to explore further through a survey or focus groups.
- **Designing data collection instruments:** Programs can use surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather insights from students. Youth can provide input on what questions to ask, can help to edit questions to make sure they will be understandable to respondents, and can test surveys and

interview protocols. Box 1 provides an example of how one organization engages youth in developing, fielding, and analyzing surveys.

- **Collecting data:** Youth engagement can include being responsible for field surveys, conducting interviews, or leading focus groups. Surveys are a good way to gather consistent quantitative and qualitative information across a group of people. When surveying youth in person or on the phone or conducting individual interviews, it can be helpful to have youth participants engaged in the work because respondents may feel more comfortable talking to someone they can relate to. Focus groups are a way to gather insights from a group of youth, and similarly, there can be advantages in having someone from the community lead these data collection activities.
- **Analyzing data:** When conducting research, a key part of the process is engaging youth in the analysis of results. One strategy for doing this is using “data walks”, where community members gather to review data and information that have been collected and then are asked what that data means to them, their family, community, and policy.

Conducting research in partnership with youth enhances the development of strategies and programs that are reflective of youth needs, while also providing opportunities for youth to build valuable skills.

BOX 8

Fielding sector-wide surveys to understand work experiences and shape advocacy agendas

One Fair Wage is a national organization focused on improving wages and working conditions in the service sector, including through the elimination of all subminimum wages. Although not exclusively focused on youth, the prevalence of youth in the service sector means that young people are a large constituency for One Fair Wage. The organization uses data to try to bring about changes for workers and engages youth as key partners in data collection.

In partnership with youth, One Fair Wage develops worker surveys that are fielded to thousands of workers on topics such as sexual harassment, subminimum wages, worker health and safety during the pandemic, and low wages more generally. The organization trains youth workers on how to conduct these surveys and provides support on fielding the surveys. On the benefits of engaging youth in gathering data for advocacy efforts, a staff member said, “First, you get data as to the real problems they’re facing, their concerns, their priorities. Things will come out of that that no one of us would be able to guess. Two, through the process of training to conduct the survey, you develop incredible leaders. As organizers, we find that incredibly helpful. They then lead change in the industry. A survey helps develop leaders and allows you to educate policymakers and employers.”

TIPS

- **Compensate youth for their time:** It is critical to allocate resources to pay youth for time invested in data collection activities. Funders should encourage inclusion of youth in research activities and allow funding to be spent on compensation.
- **Provide training and resources to support quality data collection:** Youth who are engaged in research can benefit from training on how to conduct research, including ethical treatment of human research subjects, and how to protect data privacy. Local universities or colleges sometimes offer free training on these topics.
- **Engage youth in all aspects of the process** from study design, data collection, analysis of results, and programmatic change.
- **Make clear how research will be used:** Do not engage youth in research for research's sake. Communicate clearly about how information will be used and then use it to make changes to programs or practices in ways that benefit participants, students, or workers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are a variety of resources to support community-engaged research. Some of the resources below focus on a broad audience and may need to be adapted to research efforts focused on youth. Examples include:

- The Urban Institute developed a [Community-Engaged Methods Guidebook](#) that provides guidance on how to build community partnerships, engage community members in survey work, and how to conduct a data walk. One resource focuses specifically on [Youth Engagement in Policy, Research and Practice](#).
- The Aspen Institute developed two resources to strategies to elevate worker voice at work: [Worker Voice and Employer Engagement: A Guide to Focus Groups \(aspeninstitute.org\)](#) and [Worker Voice and Employer Engagement: A Tool for Conducting Surveys \(aspeninstitute.org\)](#).

Supporting Youth as Public Experts, Spokespeople

Research offers an important way for youth to contribute knowledge to inform the design of initiatives and changes to public policy. Additionally, youth can be given the opportunity to serve as public experts or spokespeople. This can include:

- **A mayor's office or city council** can convene a **standing advisory group** to focus on workforce policy, a policy initiative, or a particular subpopulation of youth in a city or county.

- **Organizations that serve certain subpopulations** of youth can **advise local governments** on how to create advisory group structures that allow for diverse and authentic engagement of youth, make it easy to participate, and create a safe space for their involvement.
- **A workforce development board or regional sectoral initiative** can create a **position for a youth** representative or opportunities for youth to serve on subcommittees of the board.
- **Youth** can serve as **panelists or speakers** at conferences focused on youth, workforce development, and employment issues, policies, and programs.

Several of the organizations we interviewed worked to identify youth who showed interest and were a good fit for these public roles, while also providing them with training and preparation on how to communicate effectively. See box 2 on page 10.

BOX 9

Supporting youth to be public voices on issues that affect them

Engaging youth in a mayoral advisory board: The Hartford Youth Advisory Board was created with the purpose of helping youth develop civic leadership skills while also contributing to local governance. Members are ages 13 to 18, and are nominated by their schools, community groups, family members, or themselves. Selection is based on demonstrated leadership skills and community involvement. The role of the board is to conduct a continuous review of youth and young adult challenges and opportunities. The HYAB will develop and present recommendations to the Mayor and DFCYR on issues affecting young people in the City of Hartford.

Supporting youth as panelists and policy advocates: iFoster is a national nonprofit organization founded in 2010 serving children and youth in the foster care system and those aging out of foster care. It seeks to involve youth who are interested in panel discussions that happen at community meetings and in policy conversations. The organization provides preparation in the form of bootcamps that prepare youth for presenting in those public spaces where students get help in figuring out the points they want to make, how to make the presentations “pithy,” and so that youth are “seen as subject matter expert and not as a token.” One thing staff have found important is getting youth involved in areas that are of interest to them—for example, pregnancy and parenting or racism in the workplace. “They have lived experience, but they’re also able to articulate their recommendations for going forward, so we prepare them for it,” shared a staff member. The key is helping youth practice. “Once they’ve done this enough times with us, then they can continue doing it once they’re not with us anymore.”

TIPS

- **Compensate youth for their time:** We heard from respondents that it can sometimes be difficult to pay people for their time. Human resource or contract processes may prohibit one-time payments

or require that those compensated be employees. There might not be enough resources for grant-funded programs to pay youth. City agencies, workforce boards, and other organizations can consider issues of compensation from the start of a proposal process, program, or initiative to overcome any potential roadblocks.

- **Create rotating positions:** To ensure that youth are not overburdened with public engagement work, create rotating positions, make advisory board service time limited, and engage multiple youth in conference presentations. This can also help promote representation of diverse perspectives and experiences.
- **Provide appropriate support and training:** In the beginning of this chapter, we talked about providing youth with training in a variety of areas. This training is essential if youth are going to be able to contribute effectively to policy conversations and feel respected and supported.
- **Make participation convenient:** When scheduling is at an organization's discretion, consider holding advisory board meetings and conference sessions at times and locations that are easy for youth to access. If not conveniently located, organizers can pay for and facilitate travel.

Takeaways

Young workers can get involved in efforts to improve programs and policies in many ways. Keep the following points in mind when focusing on youth power:

- Elevating youth voice in community and policy conversations can be one way to build power and make changes that benefit youth workers, while also building critical skills for exercising power.
- When youth work in sectors or workplaces where there are limited opportunities for workers to exercise their voice, youth-serving organizations can facilitate opportunities and provide support for contributing to sector and policy conversations in the community, at the state level, or nationally.
- It is critical to pay workers for their engagement in policy conversations and research. Governments and philanthropy should consider ways to put in place structures for compensating community members from the start of initiatives.

Conclusion

Youth were hit especially hard by the pandemic with work stoppages and school closures. In the coming years, they will face worsening climate change impacts, AI-driven disruptions to the economy, and other issues of which we are yet to become aware. It is often said that youth are the leaders of tomorrow, but if we are to build a more resilient and just future, they ought to be recognized as leaders today.

This toolkit outlined strategies for youth-serving organizations, employers, and youth themselves to elevate their voice as workers and citizens. From company culture change to larger policy decisions, these actors can contribute to a more inclusive economic future for the benefit of all.

Notes

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Errata

This toolkit was updated October 17, 2023, to correct a typo in the acknowledgments section on page 33.

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