

Make Space at the Table

Foundations and nonprofit organizations should seize this moment to welcome young people as partners and valued peers in philanthropy and social change.

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By Wendy Wheeler

Several new studies point to a growing commitment to social responsibility on the part of young adults, with youth volunteering on the rise and students are going to the polls.

Foundations and nonprofit organizations should seize this moment to welcome young people as partners and valued peers in philanthropy and social change.

In spite of clear signs that young people want to make a contribution, many adults persist in think of them as problems.

Try saying to word "teenager" to someone and ask what it conjures up. Chances are people will think "lazy", "irresponsible", or a host of other unflattering words.

Well-intentioned foundations and organizations that seek to involve young people in advisory boards or other positions often discuss the challenges of these endeavors.

Many young people are ready and willing to work hard to on social issues. Often, the roadblocks are placed by adults who lack skills and training in youth adult partnerships.

By recognizing this -- and by learning how to work effectively with young people -- adults can build partnerships that strengthen nonprofit organizations and philanthropies.

Organizations and foundations can follow several principles to build successful youth-adult partnerships:

* Don't expect more from a youth than you would from another adult. If a young person shows up for a meeting 15 minutes late, an adult might think, "Aha, a slacker." When a fellow adult shows up 15 minutes late, the same person might think, "That's understandable. They've got deadlines and pressures." So do young people.

* Treat young people as individuals; don't make one youth represent all youth. Young people understand that adults may carry negative images of youth and may generalize from the behavior of a few. Assure young people that you are interested in their individual opinions, and don't expect them to embody an entire population.

* Be careful about interruptions. For the partnership to work, young people must feel they are valued and respected. When interrupted by an adult, young people tend to stop talking. Both parties need to respect each other's right to voice opinions without criticism or censure.

* Remember that your role in a partnership is not to parent. The purpose of youth-adult partnerships is to give both parties a different way to relate to each other.

By investing time and leadership to make these partnerships thrive, we can benefit from the creativity, energy and enthusiasm that young people offer.

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