

WHAT **TEEN LEADERS** WANT – AND DON'T WANT – FROM OLDER ALLIES

CONVERSATION GUIDE



Last year, we asked 30 older leaders – each deeply committed to working across generations for change – what they want and don't want from younger allies.

This year, we turned our attention to the next generation of changemakers: 26 teen leaders from across the country, ages 12 to 19. Diverse in background, geography, and beliefs, these young people are already shaping their communities. They were eager to share what helps and what hinders intergenerational collaboration.

Their voices and insights are captured in *What Teen Leaders Want—and Don't Want—from Older Allies*, supported by the Bezos Family Foundation with additional funding from The Eisner Foundation.

We encourage you to use this guide and the accompanying video to spark conversation and reflection in your programs, classrooms or communities. The prompts and activities that follow are designed to help teens and adults listen to one another, learn together, and take small steps toward authentic partnership.

PARTICIPANTS

- Ideal group size: 6–10 people
- Mix of teens and adults
- Time: ~60 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Whiteboard or flip chart paper and markers (or virtual notetaking doc)
- Paper and pens for participants

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Share the video link and *What Teen Leaders Want* report in advance if possible
- Display or print the five Key Insights (the final page of this guide)

1. OPENING (15 mins)

Goal: Build trust and co-create norms.

Facilitator says: “We’re here to explore how younger and older leaders can work with one another. Today is about listening, reflecting and imagining how we can strengthen our partnerships.”

Story in My Pocket (10 min)

“Think of an experience you’ve had working across generations that surprised or inspired you. Share a picture that represents that experience.”

Invite participants to pull up a photo on their phone that connects to that memory. It could be from a project, event or even a symbolic image (like a sunrise, a team or a place). If they don’t have a photo, they can describe the moment instead. Have pairs or small groups share their story in 2–3 minutes each.

Group Norms (5 min)

Start with these two suggested norms and invite participants to add:

- Assume everyone has something to teach and something to learn.
 - Listen to connect. When someone shares, focus on what you can learn or feel with them, not on your own response.
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2. WATCH THE VIDEO (10 mins)

As you watch the *What Teen Leaders Want* video, keep these questions in mind:

- What stood out or surprised you?
- What feels affirming? What feels uncomfortable?
- Where do you see your own organization reflected—or not?

Then, play the video. Ask for one response to each of the questions above.

3. EXPLORE THE FIVE INSIGHTS (25 mins)

Goal: Reflect together on what these insights look like in practice – and surface simple, real-world ideas for action.

Facilitator says: “We’ve heard from teens about what they want and don’t want from older allies. Now let’s take a few minutes to think together about what these ideas look like in real life – in our own programs, partnerships and day-to-day interactions.”

Small-group discussion (20 mins)

- Split into mixed-age small groups.
- Assign each group 1-2 insights to discuss.
- Ask each group to capture 1-2 key takeaways and 1-2 practical tips for each insight on flip chart paper.

Insight #1: We're not your children.

“Adults sometimes only know how to relate to young people through the lens of their own kids, and that can get messy fast.”

— Kayla Pilgrim

- Where might ‘parent energy’ show up in our work?
- What does mutual respect look like in our program?
- How can adults shift from helping to partnering?

Insight #2: Listen. Period.

“Sometimes adults jump in with advice when all we needed was someone to hear us out.”

— Lucinda Mattingly

- What helps you feel truly listened to by someone from another generation?
- Assuming good intent, why might adults be jumping in with advice?
- What do you have to set aside – or practice – to really listen with curiosity?

Insight #3: Don't invite us for optics.

“Please don't invite us for optics. Bring us in to build something real.”

— Molly McAlvanah

- Think of a time when you were invited into something that felt more symbolic than real. What made it feel that way? How did it play out?
- What does meaningful participation look like in your organization?
- How could we redesign a meeting or event to allow all ages to be their authentic selves?

Insight #4: We'll match your energy.

“If you come in confident and real, we'll match that. That's how you build trust.”

— Kate Schenk

- Think of a time when someone's energy or tone shaped how you showed up. What did you notice?
- How can adults and teens signal openness or vulnerability in small ways?
- What would it look like for teens to help define team culture?

Insight #5: We want the power to change things.

“Sometimes we need a translator for how power works.”

— Laura Gomez

- **For adults:** What forms of power or influence do you hold? Are some forms obvious and others more subtle? What is hard about sharing power?
- **For teens:** What kinds of power or insight do you bring that adults might overlook?
- **For all:** What’s a project or decision where people could involve teens earlier in the process?

Gallery Walk (5 min)

Invite everyone to walk around, read each group’s ideas, and add a star next to ideas they love.

4. CLOSING (5 mins)

Facilitator says: “We’ve surfaced a lot of insights today. Lasting change starts with small, intentional steps. Let’s each make one small promise or challenge to ourselves based on what we’ve learned.”

Activity:

Invite everyone to complete this sentence on a piece of paper:

- “I will...”

Examples:

- I will ask teens what they need before offering advice.
- I will listen longer before I respond.
- I will invite youth into planning earlier in the process.

Closing circle:

End with each person sharing briefly:

- One promise or challenge they’re making and/or
- One appreciation for someone in the room.

***“It takes one match to start cataclysmic change.
That’s what a real conversation can do.”***

— Elijah Lee

WHAT **TEEN** LEADERS WANT

5 KEY INSIGHTS



1. We're not your children.

2. Listen. Period.

3. Don't invite us for optics.

4. We'll match your energy.

5. We want the power to change things.

COGENERATE