



Minding the Generational Gap

Strategies to support multi-generational collaboration in volunteer and staff relationships

WRMC 2025

Presented By Lisa Schott





Overview

- 01** 90-minute interactive session
- 02** Focus: Navigating generational dynamics between volunteers and staff
- 03** Objectives:
 - Identify how generational norms impact communication and risk
 - Analyze failure vs. ideal generational interactions
 - Co-create field-ready strategies



Collaboration Norms

- Bring and assume best intent; strive for positive action.
- Listen deeply; make space for others.
- Stay curious; speak from your experience.





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meaningful outdoor
experiences

Cultivate and sustain
a robust, welcoming
community

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People to the
Outdoors**

Protect critical
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and the outdoors

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to the outdoors



49,000+
MEMBERS



3,000+ ACTIVE
VOLUNTEERS



STAFF OF ALMOST 200
FULL TIME &
APPROXIMATELY 300
SEASONAL

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Boomers

Born between 1946 and 1964



Gen X

Born between 1965 and 1980

A group of five young adults, three men and two women, are standing in a grassy field with trees in the background. They are all smiling and wearing outdoor gear. The person on the far left is a man with short blonde hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, holding a yellow water bottle. Next to him is a woman with dark curly hair, wearing a purple hoodie under a black jacket and dark pants. In the center is a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a grey jacket over an orange shirt and light grey pants, holding a blue can. To his right is another man with glasses, wearing a dark jacket and dark pants. On the far right is a woman with dark curly hair, wearing a blue jacket and dark pants, holding an orange water bottle. A semi-transparent teal banner with the word 'Millennials' in white serif font is overlaid across the middle of the group. At the bottom, a semi-transparent grey banner contains the text 'Born between 1981 and 1996' in a black sans-serif font.

Millennials

Born between 1981 and 1996

The background is a photograph of five young adults, three men and two women, posing on a rocky mountain trail. They are wearing blue aprons over their clothes. Two of the women are standing in the foreground, while three others are perched on wooden ladders or scaffolding structures. In the background, there is a rustic wooden cabin with a grey shingled roof and green trim. The surrounding landscape is a vast, rocky mountain range under a cloudy sky.

Gen Z

Born between 1997 and 2012



Generation	Typical Volunteer/Staff Role	Traits	Risk-Related Behavior Tendencies
Boomers	Legacy volunteers	Loyal, mission-driven	Trust in hierarchy, reluctant to challenge
Gen X	Seasoned staff/ volunteers	Independent, skeptical	Prefer autonomy, may disengage from group process
Millennials	Field staff, program leads	Collaborative, feedback-seeking	Value transparency, may challenge norms
Gen Z	New staff, interns	Tech-savvy, socially conscious	Expect inclusion, less tolerant of ambiguity or hierarchy

Check out the [Pew Research Center](#) for these and more generational data - plus some [interesting insight](#) into how we group and talk about generations.

A way that
generational
gaps have
shown up in
my work is...



Personal Reflection

The best
thing about
working
across
generations
is ...



The hardest
thing about
working
across
generations
is ...





Method One

Opposite Brainstorm

What does failure to bridge the gap look like? What are the risks?



Method Two

Utopic Thinking

What does a “perfect” multigenerational collaboration look like?





Opposite Brainstorm Response

Groups 1 & 2

Opposite Brainstorm

- conflict
 - mistrust
 - stereotypes
 - annoyance
 - disengagement
 - Work imbalance
 - hesitation to speak up
 - Not growing / stuck
 - failing to practice patience / urgency
 - groups get cliques / exclusive!
 - high risk of more accidents
 - lost opportunities
 - forgetting we have a shared outcome
 - diff ways of consuming information — emails — phone calls
 - changing organizational values based on all of these components
 - turn over / retention
 - miscommunication
 - failure to tap into experience / fresh perspective
 - failure to execute
 - different cultures / ways of experiencing the outdoors
 - fear of change / or high expectations
- leads to
burnout / inefficiencies
lack of self care
- EX: hiking w/
different gens.
→ phones
→ birding

failure to bridge gaps?

- Shut down
- volunteers / staff quitting
 - ↳ constant turnover
- bad culture
 - ↳ power dynamic
- siloing, embarrassment, shame
 - ↳ gatekeeping, hard to get people to join
- impatience
- dismissing or assuming
 - ↳ can create negligence
- ableism / ageism
 - ↳ could over or under assume
- everyone stuck in ways / not open
- hard to give effective feedback
- volunteers also donors — financial risk

Opposite Brainstorm Response

Group 3



- passive aggression
defensiveness
- Preconceived notions
 - inflexibility around tech in both ways
tech literacy vs dependency
 - fear of ~~following~~ speaking up
 - assumption you can't communicate
lack of understanding or taking things personally
 - program design not including all parties
 - weakness-based analysis
 - isolation/echo chamber
 - different risk tolerance/
prioritization of concerns
 - if it works why change it?
- VS.
- Innovation for its own sake
even if things work

- "too sensitive" "in my day..."
can't relate → invalidation
"as a rite of passage"
- the rules changed; folks feel irrelevant
folks step back when they don't feel heard
- stress injury from lack of communication
- financial component - balancing relationships,
communicating across generations
tradition & evolution
cost, fundraising
- "when run by only 1 generation, what is lost?"
how to empathize
across
generational
differences?
- complacency
stalling out
loss of knowledge

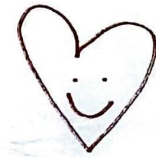
Utopic Thinking Response

Groups 1 & 2

WELCOME
TO

M G U

MULTI-
GENERATIONAL
UTOPIA

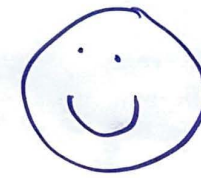


- Emotionally Regulated, Needs are met
- Productive Conversations about CHANGE
- Everybody has an interest in the outcome
 - but: No sacred cows
 - and in engaging + learning intentions
- Things aren't taken personally
- dedication to storytelling + knowledge transfer
- Lots of CURIOSITY
- Accountability for impact, Acknowledgement & Bias
- EVERYONE participates
- inclusive application of technology
- Leveraging strengths to maximize growth
- Appreciation & Gratitude, Service & Compassion
- Embrace imperfection — Rupture & Repair
 - ↳ AKA the WIP that is perfection
- Intentional & Facilitated

UTOPIA

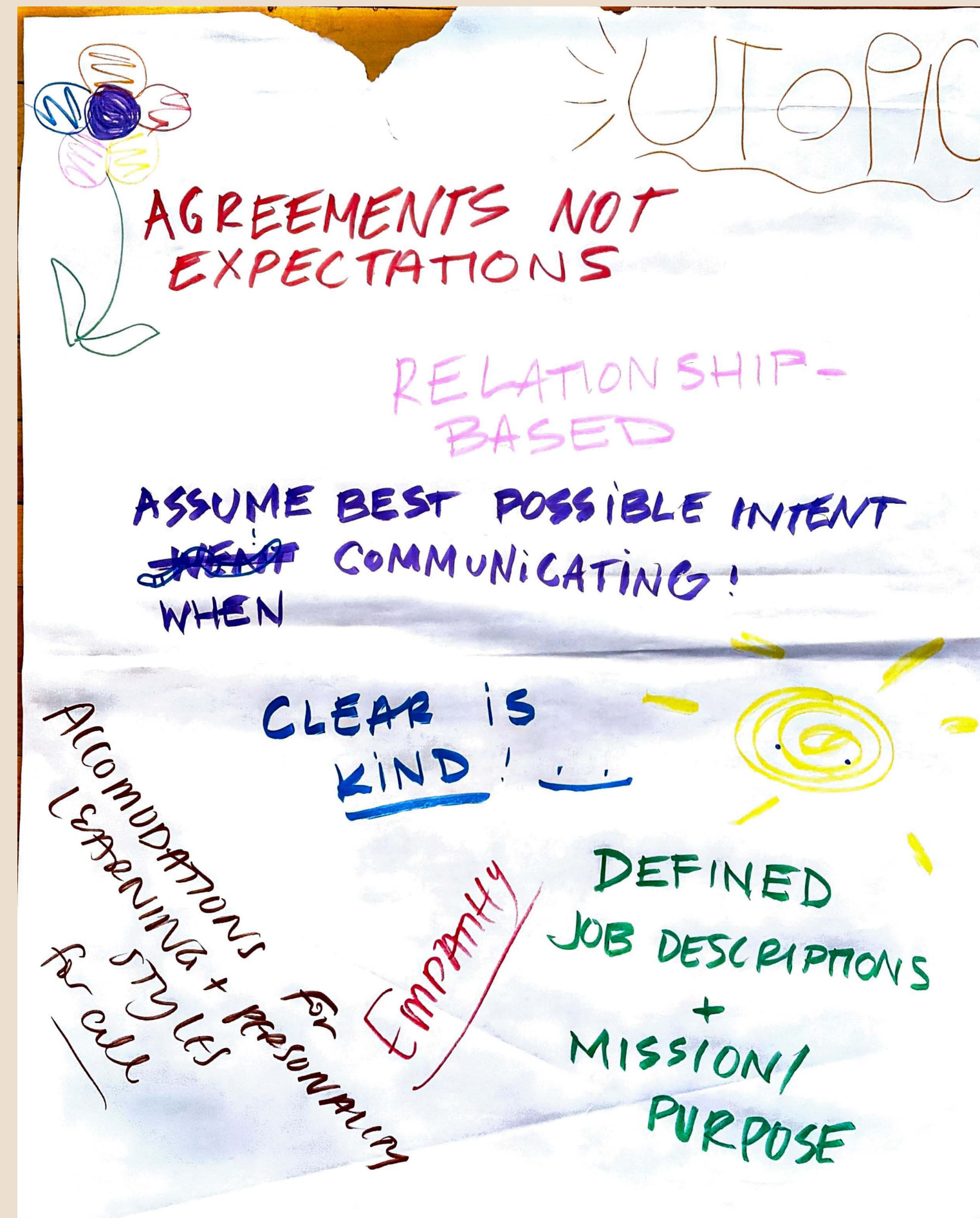


- TRUST
- UNITY
- HOLISTIC
- SPACE FOR STRENGTHS TO SHINE
- AWARENESS OF CHARACTERISTICS + TRAITS OF EA. GEN - ADAPTABILITY
- SELF-AWARENESS
- INTERGENERATIONAL HEALING
- OPENNESS TO LEARNING - TWO-WAY
- GROWTH MINDSET
- UNDERSTANDING INTENT (VS. IMPACT)
- MEANINGFUL
- TIME
 - Shared
 - Reflection
 - Structured
- VISION - shared, clarity, co-creation
- INTENTIONAL BALANCE + APPROACH
- HEALTHY CONFLICT, DISAGREEMENT - SPACE FOR THIS





Utopic Thinking Response Group 3





What we agree will be present when we have successful cross-generation work: things to work towards and cultivate

- Culture of growth & Feedback
- Open Communication
- Sense of Community belonging

- Needs are met
- Curiosity
- Accountability
- Collaboration & inclusion
- Empathy & trust
- Patience & Assumption of ^{Good} intent
- Fostering Understanding
- Clarity of goals & expectations
- Distribution of Power



LEAVE BEHIND

What are we doing now that isn't working?



BEGIN

What do we need to build into staff or volunteer practices?



BRING ALONG

What's already working that we should reinforce?



Leave Behind

overriding needs
too busy
too full
no space

trauma
dumping

-Becoming
avoidant
when there
is tension

Forcing engagement
across groups that
do not want to
engage

Framework
of a youth
serving program
only.

mean
girlz
vibes

CONCENTRATION
OF
POWER OR
DECISION MAKING
IN ONE
GENERATION

Making
decisions in
silos without
input from other
staff/generations

Lack of
transparency
between decision
makers &
field staff

- Mistrust of
values and
intentions...
- Judgement of
different needs...

DISTRUST

Mistrust
ego
Sad
Vibes
(24/7)
sometimes is ok

MAKING
SNAP
JUDGEMENTS

being
close-minded

Judgement &
Assumptions

Discounting
opinions
or experience
based on age

No space for
generations to
come together
+ share ideas,
experiences, thoughts

imagining a
full staff slideshow
is "community
building"

NOT ENOUGH
~~THAT~~ CROSS-
GENERATIONAL
EXPOSURE

assumptions

assumptions that
multi-decade instructors
have strong mentorship
skills and want to
be mentored frequently

The mentality
that the younger
employees ~~are~~ are
lacking useful
knowledge &
ideas

Assuming
we all are
working/seeing
things in
similar way

Negative
Ideation/stereotypes
in both
generational
directions

pigeon holering
or
stereotyping
making
assumptions

Pre conceived
Notions

MAKING ASSUMPTIONS
BASED ON
GENERATIONAL
STEREOTYPES

Leaving
Differences
Unspoken

Gossip w/in
generations
instead of
communication
across them

expecting
value-alignment
w/o clarity

Assuming our
methods of
communication
work for all
audiences

Not acknowledging
issues
*Ignoring tensions!

appeasing board
and donors
without looking
enough at
generations
we're serving

Resisting positive/inclusive
culture shift(s) in service
of member/volunteer
retention

Assumption of
jobs/experience

Assumptions
+
Bias

making assumptions

Assumptions



younger fulltime
staff managing older
seasonal staff and
not communicating
effectively

-too ~~much~~ many
long form
text documents

NOT
acknowledging
generational
differences

IGNORING
DIFFERENCE
BTW
GENERATIONS

Begin



proactive
communication

Better
Communication

Very clear
direction /
based on agreements

- Establishing
communication
norms
- Avoiding
complacency

Time to
connect the team,
build understanding,
empathy + relationships

learn
from
each other

Mutual
Respect
+
Understanding

Community
Reflection

a talk
about
generational
awareness -
how can we
be one team?

asking different
generations
what respect,
success and failure
look like to
them

Inter-generation
communication
tools &
feedback
opportunities

two way
Communication
Lines

Updating
how we communicate
options /
promote
offerings

More co-creation
- seeking of
input across
levels

Desire to
learn other
perspectives

CULTURE
OF
COLLABORATION!

Celebrate
diversity
of
Age

Expressing what others
value in a positive
way

EDUCATE OUR
YOUNGER STAFF
OF THE IMPORTANCE
OF MENTORSHIP
(INTERGENERATIONAL)

more mentorship

Mentoring in all directions -
a set of questions that
allow instructor teams to
recognize the skills they
can bring and have a
clear expectation of all
instructor mentoring and
being mentored

Sense
of
belonging

mutualism

Sense of
Community

SHARE SONGS
WITH OTHERS
FROM DIFFERENT
GENERATIONS



~~Emphasizing~~
Emphasizing +
building a culture
of service and
volunteerism

More regular feedback/
input from program
Participants

Volunteer
feedback

Explicit naming
of personal
working styles /
feedback
preferences



systems for
folks to share
their learning
preferences

REIMAGINING
VOL ROLES
RESPONSIBILITIES

*Planning
People have a lot of
great ideas and want
to implement without
really considering
what it really takes
to successfully complete.

MORE TIME
for survey/
feedback/ ideas
to be gathered,
heard + considered
(focus groups during
staff training)

Train Vol. leaders
on how to anticipate
conflict → introduce
new community norms

training
on
generational
differences

provide ~~space~~
space/time/venue/context
for learning about
each others generational
differences & strengths

More group
engagement
w/ staff as a
team

clearly (and repeatedly)
state the goals of
both seasonal and
fulltime staff for
better understanding
and alignment

Consider Alternate
work practices
that are more
inclusive to all
generations. i.e. remote
workshops

Establishing
Agreements for
work norms

build community
capacity for
joy + engagement
while respecting
work life balance

awareness of
these assumptions
/ challenges

~~Collaborative~~
Collaborative
training across
all program
staff

Bring this
training to
our staff to
Build Awareness

HAVING
CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT GEN.
GAPS + DESIGNING
TRAINING to fill
HOLDS

Standardize Operating
Procedures on common
Challenges =
• Communication response
• Form for feedback
of all staff
• Incorporating team building
meetings quarterly

More clarity of volunteer
role. Better communication
with volunteers before
program.
😊

Intentional
Partnerships

Collaborative
Assessment
&
systems that
stick

Regular (monthly)
opportunities
for PD
Human skills, tech
skills, etc.

~~Develop~~
develop specific training
components to
address generational
gaps & awareness

Fold these
discussions into
our Equity +
Belonging work

Explicit teaching
of how to and how
NOT to perform duties
of our program.
More thorough
modelling

Balancing
Professionalism
with being
your genuine
self.

COLLECTION
OF
STORIES

TRYING
THINGS
- build on what
WORKS
- figure out what
doesn't
- momentum
- not

EXPAND
SITUATIONAL
LEADERSHIP

[Begin Continued)

~~EXPAND~~ BUILD
GENERATIONAL
DIVERSITY
IN BOARD &
LEADERSHIP

targeting/better welcoming
older staff?

response time
≠ urgency 2/3
but listening
+ care

Capacity

Support
+ acknowledge
of challenges

remembering
also talking
about the
strength of
gen Z esp.
shifting power a
bit more

utilizing experience as
a measure of job
competence rather
than just certification

When hiring, rather
than asking how prospective
staff will work with
youth, asking how
they feel working
with corporate clients
or older adults as
participants

Bring Along



Diverse
leadership team

opportunities
for cross-
generational
engagement in
programming

yellow
Intentionally
creating
cross-gen
groups

Keep
collaborating
across generations!
Ultimately there is
so much knowledge
to share by all

Soliciting
ideas and feedback

Inviting
feedback that
is actionable
& timely

Feedback
- lots of
structures &
opportunities
(but still could
be more!)

HONORING AFFINITY
SPACES WHILE
ENCOURAGING
LEARNING MORE
ABOUT DIFFERENT
IDENTITIES

HAVING DIFF
GENERATIONS
WORK CLOSELY
TOGETHER IN
INSTRUCTOR
PAIRS

Keep up the diversity
in staff/instructor-
ages!

Having
a diverse, multi-
generational
work force
w/ experience &
innovation

RESPECTING &
VALUING
GENERATIONAL
DIFFERENCES (STORIES)

Listening to
input from all
staff to make
decisions

Debrief
Sharing

Speaking up
when conflicts
arise

All staff of all
ages rotate
to work together
- Mentor programs

Intergenerational
staffing teams

Partner collaborations
w/groups made up
of different generations

There seems
to be
empathy for
gen Z

feedback
in a variety of
ways
(verbal, written,
and online)

Thorough debriefs
that make space for
all feedback.

Following
enthusiasm
of leaders
& students

Honoring
cultural
traditions +
attitudes
(with respectful debriefs)

Sourcing high
caliber instructors
who are relatable,
engaged & content
in students

Positive
intent



Fun
Joy
Pet pics

LOVE FOR
THE
PROGRAMMING

the fun stuff

Outside
time



Begin the season
with intro meeting
to establish group
agreements. Guide
the conversation.



Culture of inclusion, Community

Collaboration respect

*Collaboration
It's always good to work together for the benefit of the whole. Being open to various ideas and perspectives.

collaboration and Inclusion of Ideas

Grace + Empathy

Mandatory Quarterly Leadership Trainings / group check ins

'Teaching to Gen Z' staff trainings

Encouraging board members, administrative leadership, + field staff to connect socially

Relationships matter

op cultivating relationship, on the job training, modeling at speed of trust

Inclusive, supporting Culture

celebrating shared success for organizational outcomes

connection / rapport / trust between gen's in different roles i.e. staff to leader to sr. leader

-time in meetings + retreats
JUST for relationship building

positive relationships
connection
value

Inclusion

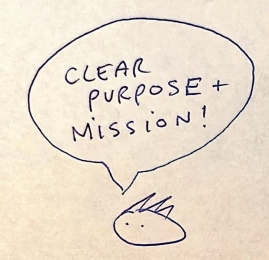
teambuilding exercises

SEMINARS, BOOKS AND TRAININGS ON GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY + ONENESS

inclusivity training + DEI, scenarios

emphasis on each individual having experience to draw on despite age and encouraging all to learn from each other

~~Mentorship~~
Mentorship between different generations (for task learning)



- Mission alignment
- Professional learning environment

(Bring Along Continued)

Sourcing high Caliber Instructors who are relatable, engaged + content i. students

Positive intent
||
☺

Fun Joy pet pics

mentorship, openness

Regular small-group check-ins with younger / new staff + mentorship from senior staff

Shared Mission + purpose

Clarity

LOVE FOR THE PROGRAMMING

the fun stuff

Outside time
☀



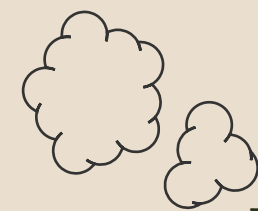
Who are
three
stakeholders
you'll check
in with?



Personal Reflection



What are **two**
ways to share
this with the
people you work
with?



Personal Reflection

What's **one**
action you'll
take within a
year from
today?



Personal Reflection



Thank You!

Feel Free to
Reach Out:
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