

# Promising Practices for Incorporating Positive Youth Development Into Supervision of Young Adult Workers

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## Introduction

The demographics of the U.S. workforce are changing in ways that are hard to ignore. Large numbers of baby boomers are retiring and the young adults who are entering the labor force are more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other point in American history.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, there is a common challenge for employers who want to hire and retain young adult talent and for workforce development practitioners: how to set young workers up for success, particularly young workers of color who have been systematically excluded from opportunities to prepare for, access, and advance in the workforce.

One emerging strategy is to incorporate positive youth development approaches into the workplace to better support and engage young adult workers (i.e., those ages 18 to 29). Positive youth development has long been used in social service programs that serve adolescents and young adults. However, the workplace is a very different setting, with different constraints and expectations for young people; therefore, there is a need to better understand what it would mean for employers to implement positive youth development practices. Given that workforce development organizations understand both young jobseekers' and employers' needs, they play an important role in engaging employers in conversations about practices that support positive youth development and in helping them foster environments that encourage development for all employees, including young employees.

### Promising Practices

Through interviews with employers and workforce development practitioners, and focus groups with young adults, we identified four supervision practices being used by employers that are well-aligned with, and incorporate, positive youth development approaches. These are practices that workforce development practitioners can lift up in their engagement with employers, and support and encourage them to:

- **Communicate expectations about the job clearly, starting in the interview process.**
- **Help managers get to know young adults as individuals, including their interests, goals, strengths, and personalities.**
- **Invest in equipping managers with the knowledge and skills to be effective people managers.**
- **Facilitate young adults' relationships with multiple staff, managers, or mentors.**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds are people of color, compared with 39 percent of 25- to 64-year-olds (data on the working-age population by race/ethnicity from 2016-2020 come from PolicyLink/USC Equity Research Institute, National Equity Atlas, [nationalequityatlas.org](http://nationalequityatlas.org)). Future young workers are likely to be even more diverse, as Generation Z continues to enter the labor force: One estimate is that 50 percent of 7- to 22-year-olds in Gen Z are people of color, compared with 39 percent of millennials at the same ages and approximately 30 percent of Gen X at the same ages (data from Parker, K. & Igielnik, R. (2020). *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What we Know About Gen Z So Far*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>).

This case study is one in a series of three written to give workforce development practitioners an understanding of specific *supervision*, *professional development*, and *worker voice* practices that are currently being implemented by employers that align with positive youth development practices. This particular resource focuses on promising *supervision* practices that can foster positive and respectful relationships, help young adults of diverse backgrounds learn and grow, and empower all young adults to thrive at work.

## Integrating positive youth development into the workplace

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Consistent, supportive, positive relationships that provide young adults with guidance are a bedrock of positive youth development approaches. Because young people are earlier in their careers, supportive supervision helps them learn and develop, including via lessons about workforce behavioral norms and expectations. However, implementation of these practices is not always easy. In addition to promising supervision practices, this case study highlights some of the challenges and potential pitfalls employers may experience in the process of implementing such practices, which workforce development practitioners can help employers anticipate. The practices and challenges here were identified through interviews with employers and staff from workforce development organizations, and via focus groups with young adult workers in Chicago, IL and Birmingham, AL, where local partnerships are engaged in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work™ initiative (see more about Generation Work in the callout box).



From their case management and coaching relationships with young adults, workforce development practitioners have a unique understanding of the kind of encouragement and supervision structures that help young adults build on their strengths and grow, and areas where young adults need additional guidance to be successful. This gives them a specific expert lens from which to start employer conversations about supervision, while drawing on the promising practices described in this case study. For example, practitioners can ask thoughtful questions about these kinds of practices during conversations with new or established employer partners to help shift their thinking. Practitioners may be able to identify employers using these (or similar) practices as they seek potential partner companies that are likely to be thoughtful in how they supervise young adults. And workforce development practitioners who partner with employers to improve how companies engage with young people can use these practices as examples of how to supervise young adults in ways that align with evidence-based positive youth development principles. Additionally, workforce development practitioners who have a role in preparing young adults for work can provide them with structured and scaffolded support to identify and participate in positive, mutually reinforcing relationships with supervisors. This might include helping them understand what to look for in a good supervisory relationship, what questions to ask as a new employee, and how to identify and cultivate mentors at work.

## Generation Work™ and the Principles of Positive Youth Development

The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Generation Work in 2016 to connect more of America's young adults—especially young people of color from low-income families—with meaningful employment by changing the ways in which public and private systems prepare them for and support them in jobs. Now in its second phase, Generation Work partners across the country are engaging with employers to expand their understanding of their role in supporting young adults' employment stability and career advancement. Child Trends has served as a national partner since Generation Work began and focuses on helping local partnerships integrate positive youth development approaches into their programming and their employer engagement efforts.

Positive youth development is an intentional, prosocial approach that focuses on young people's strengths and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities for growth and learning, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. In the workplace, young adults need structured and supportive opportunities to develop and expand their skills within a trustworthy and safe environment where they are encouraged to give input and share their ideas, opinions, and perspectives.

## Promising Practices for Supervising Young Adults at Work

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Demonstrating value and appreciation for supervisor-young adult relationships is a win-win for employers and employees. Supervisors play a vital role in supporting and developing young workers; in turn, strong and supportive relationships facilitate improved employee satisfaction and job performance. Employers described supervision as one of the most complicated workplace challenges—and the one that was most worth solving. Young adults in our focus groups emphasized that supervisory relationships affect their entire experience at work, in both positive and negative ways—including (sometimes) being a reason to leave a company. Below, we describe specific practices that workforce development practitioners can implement with employers in an effort to advance positive youth development principles in supervision of young workers.

## ► Encourage employers to communicate expectations about the job clearly, starting in the interview process.

When young adults understand what they are expected to do, and how their job contributes to a company's larger goals, they may feel better prepared and ultimately more confident. Clear expectations that are iterated consistently promote positive relationships in which young adults feel supported and comfortable asking questions when instructions are not clear or when they need guidance. Structured onboarding processes that explain company norms and processes—and allow time for questions and conversations about them—can reduce young adults' feelings of overwhelm when starting a new job.<sup>2</sup>

- **Set clear expectations during hiring.** Expectation-setting realistically needs to start even before onboarding, during the hiring process. This means employers should both hire young adults into the correct roles and describe company expectations—even basic expectations such as showing up every day and on time—during interviews. Some companies also offered opportunities for prospective employees to tour their facilities prior to applying, as another way to give young adults an idea of what a job at their company might be like.
- **Set clear expectations through a formal onboarding process.** Onboarding is a time in which expectation-setting is more formalized. One company stated that they “have performance discussions with staff when they're hired, discussing the company's ... expectation of being a good teammate, which includes showing up on time and active listening.” For most companies, onboarding processes typically take up to a week, although one company has staff complete a four-week onboarding process designed by the adult learning experts on their internal learning and development team. Topics range from how to access benefits such as the retirement plan, to scheduling shifts, to business etiquette and company values. One financial services company employee described their onboarding content as designed around “what did I wish I knew [when I first started my job].”
- **Recognize when expectations are not being met and adjust training in response.** Several companies noted that it has been especially important to communicate expectations around following company policies to their youngest Gen Z workers.<sup>3</sup> One mid-size tech company noticed a trend in which more of their earliest career workers were showing up late or not following the company policy of being in the office on certain days. After discussions with their young adult workers to uncover the reasons behind this trend, the company is now developing a training about professional etiquette and developing healthy personal habits (e.g., why it's important to show up on time, how to plan one's morning to be able to show up on time, how to actively listen and participate during meetings) to incorporate into its onboarding process. The goal of this additional module in onboarding is to help their earliest career workers understand the company's expectations and teach basic life skills such as time management.

► **Key challenges:** These expectations, including during onboarding, are delivered through multiple modalities such as face-to-face conversations, self-guided online trainings, live trainings, and handbooks. Young adults and workforce development practitioners cautioned that online training and onboarding modules can become outdated or repetitive, and that—as digital natives who grew up with technology—young adults tend to skip through online trainings almost through force of habit. Expectation-setting approaches that

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<sup>2</sup> See other examples of onboarding practices here: Orellana, R. & Tomaskovic-Devey, D. (2022). *Onboarding young workers in a post-pandemic world*. University of Massachusetts Amherst Center for Employment Equity.

<https://www.umass.edu/employmentequity/onboarding-young-workers-post-pandemic-world>

<sup>3</sup> Dimock, M. (2019). *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

leverage personal relationships could be more effective. For example, employers talked about taking advantage of their review meetings (monthly during their first 90 days, and then semi-annually) as points to check in on and identify challenges that young adults might be experiencing, and to find ways to help employees meet expectations for their role. And young adults talked about valuing managers who are transparent and direct in their individual and team conversations.

## ► Encourage employers to help managers get to know young adults as individuals, including their interests, goals, strengths, and personalities.

Making the effort to get to know someone is a critical step in building positive relationships marked by respect and trust. This means understanding what is important to someone, their goals, their preferences, and what motivates them. This approach is common in workforce development programs and often happens through case management and coaching.

*“You have to understand what makes a person who they are.”*

-Employer interviewee

- **Supervisors treat young adults with respect.** Young adult workers in our focus groups valued supervisors who treated them as adults, listened to them, and treated them with respect. These supervisors also welcomed even minor questions, were transparent about decisions, and advocated for the young adult and their team.
- **Supervisors ask young adults about their goals.** Young adult workers built strong relationships with supervisors who helped them develop and advance their goals. Workforce practitioners recommended that, at minimum, supervisors must have regular one-on-one meetings with supervisees, combine modeling and coaching in their interactions at work, and have intentional conversations about career goals and long-term interests.
- **Supervisors give constructive feedback when issues arise, rather than react harshly.** Supervisors who have positive relationships with supervisees can deliver feedback constructively. This might come up in situations where life gets in the way of work; supervisors should be able to respond with perspective and empathy, rather than have it be a source of aggravation or frustration. One workforce development practitioner described this as getting supervisors to be “curious instead of furious.” For example, young people described supervisors whom they found treated them unfairly as those who had not been understanding about requests for schedule shifts related to school or family care obligations, or those who had been quick to judge rather than allow youth to explain their reasons for actions or have a conversation to prevent those actions from happening in the first place. One young adult described being written up for wearing casual clothing at work despite observing a manager in another department wearing something similar. When young adults feel they are treated unfairly at work, they may feel less committed to their workplace, thereby increasing unwanted employee turnover.
- **Companies bring supervisors and workers together around shared interests or team celebrations.** One way for companies to create opportunities for young adults and their co-workers to build personal connections is by encouraging young workers’ engagement in company-planned shared experiences outside of work, such as softball games with teams of people who have different professional roles or work in different parts of the company, team outings to celebrate accomplishments, or online gaming nights. Some companies also support local charities or social issues that employees indicate are important to them, either with financial donations or by organizing staff to volunteer.

► **Key challenge:** Ensuring that people managers build authentic relationships with their supervisees is difficult for companies to translate into intentional and documentable practices. Another important challenge supervisors face in getting to know each supervisee as an individual is that competing priorities make it difficult to spend significant time with each person they manage. One manufacturing company explained, “Supervisors are well-meaning but are under a great deal of pressure to get product out of the door.”

## ► Encourage employers to invest in equipping managers with the knowledge and skills to be effective people managers.

Managers need training about specific, developmentally appropriate strategies to support young adult workers, including on how to make workers of all backgrounds feel comfortable, supported, and safe. Workforce practitioners have insights about how to effectively engage and work with young people and are well positioned to support employers in this area. The companies we talked to are doing this in several ways:

- **Informal but intentional training on people management approaches:** One medium-size technology company holds monthly “Munching with Management” brown bags for people managers to have lunch with the CEO and discuss TED Talks or books that describe different management approaches; these discussions are open to all employees but required of managers.
- **Formal management training on a range of topics:** At one large financial services company, all new managers go through a six-month cohort-based training (with other managers who started or were promoted at a similar time) focused on topics such as racial equity and inclusion<sup>4</sup> and goal-setting. Another company gives supervisors access to required and optional online, self-guided trainings that include topics such as how to deliver feedback or clearly assign work.
- **Training for awareness and skills that help managers create trustworthy settings in which workers of all backgrounds feel safe:** One manufacturing company partners with local nonprofit and industry organizations to train all supervisors and team leads on trauma-informed practices, recognizing implicit bias, conflict management, and emotional intelligence. A workforce development practitioner also noted that companies can better access “untapped talent pools of young adults who might have barriers outside of the workplace” when they train supervisors to recognize those barriers and facilitate access to supports that can address them.
- **Consistent communication of people management values:** Other companies described informal ways in which leadership communicates people management values to managers. For example, two concrete values mentioned included encouraging managers to listen before taking action when a conflict arises and encouraging staff to experiment and take risks. One company refers to their “win or learn” approach: Employees might try something that goes well, which is a win; but if they try something and it doesn’t go well, they learn from that experience (contrasted with a “win or lose” approach). For young

*“Supervisors, because of the trainings that they’ve gone through, are more open to having conversations with their employees and spending extra time talking about life, and not just business.”*

**-Employer interviewee**

<sup>4</sup> We use the term Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) here, but employers also used terms such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB).

workers who are learning and developing new skills on the job, this approach is particularly important. These values are repeated to managers in their own supervisory meetings and leadership aims to model them as well.

- ▶ **Key challenges:** As one CEO pointed out: Training is never enough. Supervisors have to model and effectively implement the practices they learn about in training, which includes getting regular feedback on that implementation. Ongoing use of skills described in training is especially critical as supervisors work with young workers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and practice applying learning from trainings around racial equity and inclusion. Workforce practitioners and young adult workers

*“Supervisors have to, in some way or fashion, live that out for folks to feel safe to exist here.”*

**-Workforce development practitioner interviewee**

both emphasized that companies can train managers on topics related to creating inclusive environments, but if young workers of color don't see the training affecting supervisor actions and attitudes in their day-to-day life, training doesn't translate into feelings of safety and belonging. Several companies are in the process of identifying ways to systematically assess the degree to which supervisors are successfully managing people, in order to provide follow-up coaching and supports to ensure that all employees receive high-quality supervision. For example, companies described disaggregating responses to annual staff surveys by manager or team to identify where there are issues and bright spots. Most companies we talked to are just starting to think about how to do this, and these tracking and feedback systems could be a future promising practice.

## ▶ Encourage companies to facilitate young adults' relationships with multiple staff, managers, or mentors.

Supported interactions with multiple managers provide young adults opportunities to develop positive relationships, practice professional skills such as networking, and develop soft skills such as communication, all within a structured environment. Young adults in focus groups spoke about valuing access to multiple management-level staff, and that having relationships with supervisors from other areas in their companies helped them when their direct supervisor wasn't available or wasn't being supportive. And the benefits go both ways: One workforce development practitioner observed that companies that give their managers more experience with and exposure to young adults are more successful at bridging generational divides.

- **Set up a supervision structure that formalizes young adults' relationships with multiple managers.** Several companies set up their supervision structure to separate out the functions of managers who oversee project work versus those who evaluate performance or resolve employee issues. For example, early career staff might work under the direction of a team lead who oversees day-to-day work and product completion and whose role is to provide mentorship, teach skills, and give feedback on work quality. Separately, the young adult establishes a relationship with a separate, designated manager who can help solve any interpersonal or personal problems that arise. Team leads are often other young adults with longer tenure at the company, and moving into these roles can be an important opportunity for advancement and professional growth for young adults.
- **Make senior leadership visible and accessible to young adults.** At one manufacturing company, both the president and CEO walk the floor regularly, stopping to speak with employees at all levels about non-work-related topics—a practice recommended to the company by a community organization as a way to increase employees' equitable access to and relationships with management. At that company's

town hall meetings, there is often a line of employees waiting to talk to senior management after the end of the formal meeting. One way the company ensures that all workers can access this opportunity to connect is by providing interpreters for staff whose first language is not English.

- **Facilitate conversation between young adults and senior leaders.** Many companies establish a supportive, less intimidating environment in which young adults can build rapport with senior organizational staff members. Examples include brown bags, special events, and book clubs with C-Suite or upper-level management as structured ways to put early career staff in a room with leadership with a clear way to start a conversation.

## Putting Positive Youth Development in Action

As employers look for ways to attract and retain young adult talent, workforce development practitioners can offer positive youth development approaches as a promising way forward.<sup>5</sup> While our case study explored promising practices and more research is needed on outcomes, it is reasonable to assume that young adult workers will be more likely to feel supported when companies focus on their strengths, create trustworthy and safe settings, and provide them with opportunities to learn.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Many of these support systems can be formalized through supervision practices and processes.



**Workforce development organizations play an important role in engaging employers in conversations about these practices and helping them create supervision systems that work.** A critical first step is to encourage employers looking to implement new practices and policies around supervision to start by seeking to understand the perspectives of young adult workers at their companies. Although the promising approaches described in this case study are aligned with positive youth development principles, every company has a unique context and a unique talent pool. When employers ask about relationships with managers and get feedback on which current or potential future supervisory practices make young adults feel supported and respected, companies can gain valuable information for developing a plan (perhaps in partnership with a workforce development organization) for supervisor training, mentorship, and expectation setting.

<sup>5</sup> See this blog post for other examples of positive youth development in the workplace, and the business case for positive youth development: Strong, T. & Sacks, V. (2024). *How positive youth development approaches can inform your business choices*. The National Fund for Workforce Solutions. <https://nationalfund.org/how-positive-youth-development-approaches-can-inform-your-business-choices/>

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (2019). Illuminating the process of youth development: The mediating effect of thriving on youth development outcomes. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 7(3), 24-51. <https://doi.org/10.54718/GHUP2927>

<sup>7</sup> Burkhard, B. M., Robinson, K. M., Murray, E. D., & Lerner, R. M. (2020). Positive youth development: Theory and perspective. In *The encyclopedia of child and adolescent development* (pp. 1-12). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171492.wecad310>

<sup>8</sup> Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 98-124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260102>



In Chicago, the Generation Work partnership—the [Corporate Coalition](#), [Cara Plus](#), and [Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance](#)—leads cohorts of employers through the development and implementation of pilots to test practices intended to improve work experiences and trajectories for young adult workers, particularly young adults of color. For nine months, the Chicago partners provide companies in each cohort with training on racial equity and inclusion and positive youth development, coaching on implementation, and peer learning opportunities. The Birmingham local partnership, led by [Central Six Alabama Works!](#) and [TechBirmingham](#), manages the Birmingham Tech Council, made up of representatives from local tech companies and young adults who work at tech companies in the city. The Council meets monthly to discuss challenges and opportunities related to recruiting and retaining diverse talent, and finding sustainable employment opportunities, in Birmingham’s growing tech industry. Bringing employers into direct conversation with young adult workers, as peers, enables dialogue that might not otherwise happen within a company. It also offers young adult participants a forum to voice their experiences and ideas. The Council recently fielded a young tech talent survey to explore and highlight opportunities for improvement in local employer practices. These are just two examples of how Generation Work partnerships are engaging employers to make work better for all young adults by utilizing strategies like positive youth development.

## Methods Note

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In Birmingham, Child Trends interviewed 10 personnel across four companies, including one small and one mid-size technology company, a large financial services company, and a delivery services company; an in-person group interview with three staff members from the local Generation Work partnership; and an in-person focus group with three young adult workers.

In Chicago, Child Trends interviewed five personnel at two companies: a mid-size manufacturing company and a health care company; an in-person group interview with two staff members from the local partnership; two in-person interviews with three workforce development staff (one individual and one group interview); and an in-person focus group with seven young adult workers.

Child Trends cross-walked the practices described in the interviews and focus groups with positive youth development principles to identify promising strategies that workforce development practitioners could encourage employers to apply in their companies.

We do not know for certain whether these practices are *effective* in improving hiring and retention of young talent or young adults’ career trajectories. We did not speak to young adult employees at the same companies we interviewed, and we don’t know how the practices identified by employers were received and experienced by their own employees. However, we spoke with young adults working at other companies about the practices they have found to be either supportive or discouraging, and we compared those experiences with the practices described by companies. Throughout the case study, we have noted where the experiences of young adults offer caution or additional insight into how these practices can be applied.

Future research should explore linkages between positive youth development practices in the workplace and both employer and young adult worker outcomes. For example, exploring whether retention increases—and costs associated with turnover decrease—could be important information for employers. Additionally, a better understanding of whether these practices help young adult workers grow and reach their own individual career goals would be useful for both the field and young adult workers themselves. While studies of this sort would require collecting more detailed quantitative data and following workers from the same companies over time, they could advance our understanding of these practices in important and influential ways.

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