

# Promising Practices for Incorporating Positive Youth Development Into Young Adult Worker Voice Initiatives

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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 three worker voice 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, to support and encourage them to:

- **Collect feedback from every person on a team, including young adult workers, as a component of regular project work.**
- **Recognize young adults for their contributions and ideas.**
- **Make leadership and management available and accessible for feedback from young adults.**

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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 *worker voice* practices that can give young adults an opportunity to contribute and belong in the workplace.

## Integrating positive youth development into the workplace

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Young adults need opportunities to contribute to the places where they spend their time—their communities, families, and workplaces. Research finds that when young adults make meaningful contributions to their environments, they feel more connected and committed to those settings. Having meaningful opportunities to give input is a marker of job quality,<sup>2</sup> and is especially important for young adult workers, to help them build leadership skills and a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. However, implementation of these practices is not always easy. In addition to promising worker voice 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 meaningful contributions and feedback that these workers can contribute to projects, processes and workflows, and workplace culture. This gives them a specific expert lens from which to start employer conversations about worker voice, 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 solicit and act on young adult worker input. 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 encourage and incorporate young adult voice in ways that align with evidence-based positive youth development principles—including the need to respond to young worker feedback in a way that builds trust and further empowers young adults to speak up. And, 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 opportunities to contribute. This might include encouraging them to recognize the importance of their engagement or advising them on what input is appropriate (or not).

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<sup>2</sup> National Fund for Workforce Solutions. (n.d.). Job Design Framework. Retrieved August 6, 2024, from <https://nationalfund.org/job-design-framework/>

## 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 to Invite and Implement Young Adult Worker Voice

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Younger workers do not always have the power to voice—or are not sought out for—their opinions, so companies must have structured ways to encourage them to give input. Most companies we spoke with were facilitating ways for all workers to provide input, but few were seeking out young adults specifically. Of particular importance is the need for employers to be aware of whose voices are being invited and included—and whether workers of some backgrounds are more likely to be listened to than others. Below, we describe specific practices for workforce development practitioners can implement with employers in an effort to advance positive youth development principles when employers seek out and implement worker voice.

## ► Encourage employers to collect feedback from every person on a team, including young adult workers, as a component of regular project work.

Many companies talked about formalized ways of collecting input as part of their day-to-day project work.

- **Invite feedback at designated intervals during a project.** Technology companies, in particular, used formal project management approaches such as Agile or Scrum<sup>3</sup> that break down work into smaller pieces that have feedback loops built in. A project may start with all team members submitting ideas for how the project might fail, in a process called a pre-mortem. Following each piece of the project, the team meets to discuss what went well and what needs to change for the next piece. These kinds of processes make team member input an integral part of how a project works, which creates a structure that ensures that early career team members get meaningful opportunities to contribute to the team's success.
- **Collect feedback from everyone, including early career staff.** At each feedback opportunity, every member of the team—from the most junior developer to the team lead—must give input, which is then discussed as a group. One company received feedback during “retrospectives” after each piece of the project by having each person think of, write, and share at least one piece of feedback. These meetings were sometimes held at a location near the office to add a social team-building element.
- **Managers model giving and receiving input.** Managers at one company are instructed by leadership not to talk until at least three other people have talked. At another company, managers model how to share openly and be vulnerable by being the first to answer prompts such as, “What has pushed you forward in the past month, and what has held you back?” The project team then jointly decides which are the most helpful changes to make for the next piece of the project.

*“[The way we get feedback is] having regular, recurring space where everyone is expected to share, give everyone the opportunity to have equal voice and equal input, and then...facilitating that. The facilitator ought to be phenomenal at making sure that every voice is heard, they know the techniques they can do to make that happen.”*

- Employer interviewee

- **Key challenges:** Even companies that do not use specific project management approaches such as Agile can adapt these practices to build feedback loops into the course of a project and encourage young adults to have equal voice with more senior staff members. However, one potential challenge—especially in certain industries or in types of work—is that it may be difficult to build regular feedback opportunities within day-to-day or week-to-week processes.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see <https://asana.com/resources/agile-methodology> and <https://www.scrum.org/learning-series/what-is-scrum/what-is-scrum>

## ► Encourage employers to recognize young adults for their contributions and ideas.

All companies we spoke with described ways of acknowledging and rewarding employees for their contributions.

- **Publicly recognize good ideas or helpful feedback.** Several companies highlighted workers by featuring them in a company newsletter or a visible place in the office, or by acknowledging their contribution during company-wide meetings (either aloud or in the chat of a virtual meeting). Some companies make it a regular practice to give “shout outs” at every meeting to recognize ideas or input that have been particularly valuable. One organization developed a “Did You Know” segment of their all-staff meetings where staff can celebrate and show off their work. One leader described these segments as a way to “make employees feel that they’re being heard, and that what they say is useful.” Company-wide recognition efforts ensure that the distribution of rewards is not left to the discretion of team leaders or managers, which could increase the chances that some employees are recognized more than others.
- **Recognize employee contributions with small financial or other tangible rewards.** Many employers used small tangible rewards such as gift cards or company-branded gifts, or more substantial financial rewards such as spot bonuses. Other companies offer perks such as a prime parking spot.
- **Respond to feedback transparently; if employee suggestions can’t be implemented, provide reasons why.** The ultimate sign of how much a company values employee input is that management uses the information that they are given. Companies cited examples of how staff ideas had shaped systems and processes, small and large. For example, one worker at a manufacturing company suggested creating a safe walking path for employees coming from their cars into the factory through a congested loading dock area; another developed the idea for a job rotation program in which workers can try out different roles on the factory floor. At another company, young adults participated in an informal advisory council that a supervisor relied on for insight and recommendations on ways to be more efficient, implement new processes, or eliminate unnecessary tasks from staff roles. Even when companies can’t (or won’t) use ideas from staff, young adults in our focus groups talked about the importance of being given an explanation of how their input will or won’t be considered. In one office, this transparency was achieved by having employees write suggestions on a whiteboard in a common area of the office and having the manager respond—also on the whiteboard, where everyone in the office could see—with what the approach would be and the reasons for their decisions.

- **Key challenges:** Some companies shared structured ways of collecting employee input, including annual surveys and asking for feedback during company-wide meetings. However, some young adults we spoke to had mixed experiences with these types of feedback opportunities. Some acknowledged a fear of the repercussions of providing honest responses to a survey, even if the survey was anonymous. However, most young adults (and some employers) said that surveys were seen as a waste of time because the employer had not made changes in response to previous feedback, or even responded to input at all—for example, to explain why the company wouldn’t take action on feedback. These perceptions and experiences underscore that responding to feedback is just as critical as asking for it in the first place.

*“[In the all-staff meeting during live question and answer session with senior leaders] they’ll just give you a general answer and kind of not answer the question. You guys are bigwigs, we don’t get a opportunity to see you guys or talk to you guys, this is the one opportunity we can have, you still don’t answer the question. They give you the opportunity, but it’s not real.”*

**-Young adult worker**

## ► Leadership and management make themselves available and accessible for feedback.

One way that companies create the conditions for workers to speak up at work is to intentionally facilitate access to management for early career workers.

- **Managers hold meetings with the supervisees of *their* supervisees.** Some companies have “skip level meetings” at least once a month in which employees meet with their supervisor’s supervisor. One executive at a small technology company said he uses those meetings not to talk about the employee’s current work, but to facilitate coaching and mentoring that prepares people for their next role.
- **Managers have structured time during which they invite feedback.** At one manufacturing company, the president holds office hours on the factory floor. Immediately following these office hours, he sends a memo to the rest of the leadership team that summarizes what he discussed with workers and what the most pressing issues were. At the same company, the CEO and president regularly walk the factory floor to have casual conversations with workers to build trust so that workers feel they can approach them with ideas and input. They also have a monthly lunch with nonmanagerial staff explicitly for the purpose of seeking feedback. One workforce development practitioner noted that, “When company structure is very vertical and hasn’t changed as new generations have entered the workforce, you’re not asking the people making the widgets their opinions.”
- **Managers have structured ways of asking for feedback.** In one department of a large health care company, all supervisors ask two specific questions each month: what is giving you joy at work and is there a time recently when you haven’t felt seen or heard. The responses to these questions give the supervisor information about pain points and what is “filling someone’s cup” or helping them feel fulfilled at work.

- **Key challenges:** One challenge is that access to management alone is not enough. Leaders must be intentional about encouraging people to speak up and creating trusting environments in which workers feel safe doing so. As one workforce development practitioner put it, “when leaders are comfortable leading as themselves, the team feels empowered to do the same.”

*“At the individual level, [we focus on] the intentionality of bringing up [specific questions during supervision meetings] so that people don’t feel like it’s a burden to raise them because the supervisor is raising it.”*

**-Employer interviewee**



# 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>4</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>5,6,7</sup> Many of these support systems can be informed and strengthened by incorporating worker voice.



**Workforce development organizations play an important role in engaging employers in conversations about these practices and helping them design and implement worker voice initiatives.** A critical first step is to encourage employers looking to implement new practices and policies around worker voice 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 the kinds of issues that young adults value having input on—and how they want to be recognized for their contributions—companies can gain valuable information to develop a plan (perhaps in partnership with a workforce development organization) to solicit and incorporate worker voice.

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

<sup>4</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>5</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>6</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>7</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>

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.



# Acknowledgements

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Child Trends spoke to 41 people to inform this case study, and we thank them for their willingness to share their experiences and insights, so that we could better understand promising practices for incorporating positive youth development within the workplace. We would also like to thank Hannah Lantos and Jan DeCoursey of Child Trends for their expertise and support throughout this work. This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

**Suggested citation:** Sacks, V., & Bradley, M. (2024). Promising practices for incorporating positive youth development into young adult worker voice initiatives. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/1148g6050d