



The Climate Initiative

Youth on Boards 2023 Lessons Learned

Background:

In 2020, an intergenerational discussion group ranging in age from teens to 80s convened to explore ways to bridge generational divides. They focused on identifying ways to work together to address climate change in Maine. This Intergen Climate Project was initially hosted by the Maine Climate Table. When the Climate Table decided to sunset, having fulfilled its original mission, Intergen became a program of a new non-profit organization, Our Climate Common (OCC).

After a year of regular meetings, exploring generational differences in attitudes, values, and expectations in the context of climate issues, Intergen decided it was time for the next step, to take action. Some members of the group decided to pursue a new project together. That project, eventually called Youth on Boards, Action on Climate (“YOB”), aimed to increase the number of young people who are full-fledged members of Maine-based government, nonprofit and private sector boards where decisions impacting climate are made. The project was co-led by an older volunteer and a paid, part-time younger contractor, and guided by an intergenerational advisory Project Team.

In 2023, YOB made significant progress towards its goals, including placement of three youth on boards of nonprofits in Maine. However, after a year of working together, the Project Team observed communication issues and conflicts between the co-leads that caused a misalignment between the project’s stated values and our actions. This was a “wake-up call” to the team that we needed to return to our foundations and do some serious internal work. We worked with an organizational development consultant and began the process of having difficult conversations about our goals, shared values, and work styles. However, disagreements among the leaders resulted in OCC withdrawing its organizational support for YOB and the resignation of the elder co-lead.

Despite this change, enthusiasm for and commitment to the project remained strong among the remaining members of the Project Team and we decided to find a new home for YOB. It didn’t take long to discover the alignment between YOB and The Climate Initiative (TCI), a national nonprofit with roots in Maine.

The Climate Initiative's mission is to educate, empower, and activate young people to combat one of the greatest threats to our planet – climate change. As such, TCI provides young climate champions with education and engagement tools to steward our planet and catalyze the transition to climate-resilient communities. With such clear mission alignment between TCI and YOB, YOB officially became a project of TCI in December of 2023.

This essay is an attempt by an intergenerational group involved with the project to document the lessons we learned about the challenges and opportunities of working intergenerationally. YOB's stated goal is to place youth on boards, which means that young people are going to have to be prepared to navigate power dynamics and values differences within many of our established institutions. Likewise, older people on boards also have to be prepared to create space for youth and learn to accept new perspectives. As a Project Team, we faced the very same issues we expect youth and boards themselves will encounter when trying to work together. We aim to be transparent about these challenges and share our insights with the hope that other groups working to empower youth voices on climate action can learn from our experiences.

Lesson 1: Co-create and agree on shared values, mission and define terms and vocabulary upfront.

Co-creation by youth and older adults will create a stronger foundation for a project than merely co-leadership. The organizational structure of YOB was largely created by older adults, with a youth co-lead recruited partway through the process. This led to problems when we encountered differences in values and intentions amongst the generations. It is critical to ensure that the voices of younger people have equal input and authority from the beginning so that true agreement can be achieved in terms of the values, mission, structure and operation of any project. Co-creation provides the opportunity for all participants, regardless of age, perspective, or time commitment, to delve more deeply into their values and to jointly create a shared vision and mission for a project.

Conversations about values and life experiences can be challenging and time consuming, but the dialogue can be extremely rewarding and build trust. This trust and clarity can help to ward off bigger, more time-consuming differences later. Older individuals in our group needed to attempt to better comprehend the values and life

experiences that young people are bringing to climate work and their resulting focus on equity and justice. Likewise, younger members of the team, in addition to clearly defining terms they are using, can learn to try to articulate their values and views in ways that diminish the chance of defensiveness from older generations.

Lesson 2: Projects benefit from clear decision making processes, conflict resolution policies & crisis management plans.

Based on our experience, individuals from older generations, especially men, may interpret disagreement or differing opinions as disrespect based on the value system in which they were raised. Their expectation can be that others, especially young people, should show humility, deference and hold back on strong opinions. On the other hand, many youth feel threatened by disagreement and sometimes identify conflict as “harm” in a way that may not be understood or resonate with older generations.

Groups or projects that include multiple generations, races, and genders should take the time to explore these differences, and set ground rules for behavior. Clear policies to follow when conflict arises are critical. Groups should also practice navigating disagreement on small, low-stakes issues and learn to give each other feedback. It is essential to create an environment that fosters dialogue around disagreement, ensures all feel respected, and creates pathways to heal from harm.

Facilitated conversations with a third party experienced with racial, gender and power dynamics can also help to uncover these issues and set up equity-focused policies and procedures so the group can be more effective in both its internal and outward facing work. Our project could have benefited from training and attention to differences in leadership, facilitation and decision-making styles between genders and generations as well.

Lesson 3: Take the time to build trust and a culture that reinforces equity by explicitly acknowledging and naming power differentials and mapping identities and lived experiences.

Our different identities affect our individual values, and our level of access to power, respect, and financial security. Taking the time to name these differences can be uncomfortable, but helps to build trust and respectful relationships. With

trust-based relationships in place, team members can begin to have respectful dialogue about how their differences affect their work.

The YOB team had stark differences in lived experience due to race, gender, and financial situations that were unnamed and unacknowledged but affected behavior by team members.

For example, there were power differentials due to unequal access to and control over finances. Who needs money in order to participate, and who holds the purse strings, can have an impact on people's willingness and ability to speak up or disagree in certain situations. We could have acknowledged and explicitly named these differences at the beginning of the project. Doing so would have empowered us to discuss mitigation strategies, and to create decision making and governance structures that acknowledged situations where those with less financial power would struggle to speak up.

In another example, one YOB team member's lived experience as a person of color made issues of equity essential to their work, but for those without that personal experience, such issues were sometimes seen as extraneous. Those who have remained active in YOB agree that training and dialogue on race and racial justice issues is critical for groups working on climate change, especially intergenerational groups.

Asset mapping within a group is a tool that may help to diminish the erroneous assumption that older people have all the experience, skills, knowledge, and young people have all the passion and are unrealistic and impatient. Every individual brings unique perspectives and experiences to a group, and taking the time to inventory and document these can help a project grow and make important decisions.

Lesson 4: Be mindful of the pitfalls related to the sense of urgency to solve the climate crisis (or any crisis) and assumptions about which generation may feel a greater sense of urgency.

Multiple generations recognize that we are in a climate crisis, and that we need to take urgent action to address it. Important decisions are being made now on whether and how to allocate huge amounts of resources that can be used to help address climate change, or make it worse. However, shortcutting the time it takes to

build trust and relationships to more effectively work together will not get us to our goals.

Contrary to popular assumption, it was the older members of our project who felt the strongest sense of urgency to take action and accomplish the project goals as quickly as possible. However, this sense of urgency limited our ability to focus on critical steps listed above, such as building trust, defining shared values, and creating clear conflict resolution policies.

We learned that, because we have so many systems of oppression and injustice built into traditional ways of taking action and “doing business”, if we move too quickly and without intention, we run the risk of repeating the same mistakes and injustices we are aiming to address. We can and need to pay attention to the process while also moving forward on concrete goals. Slowing down can lead to breakthroughs and more sustainable solutions moving forward.

This is another area where values need to be voiced at the outset of a project, and where the skills of deep listening and seeking compromise may be needed. Finding a balance between process and goal accomplishment that feels comfortable for all team members can help sustain a project in the long term.

Conclusion

Any project that aims to create opportunities for youth and marginalized groups in places where they have been historically excluded, should acknowledge that youth and marginalized individuals may face hostility and mistreatment in spaces of power historically controlled by white men (like boards).

We learned that we should work harder upfront to identify and articulate shared and differing values, and agree on common language. We stress that, in order to avoid conflicts like the ones YOB experienced, intergenerational teams should engage in training on how current systems are dismissive and even hostile to youth and other marginalized groups, and work intentionally to create a team culture that challenges these systems.

Working towards more inclusivity and justice in the climate realm, or any realm for that matter, means that current systems of power will be disrupted as new voices

assert their perspectives and identities. That is particularly uncomfortable for those in power who can feel threatened by any movement that seeks to disrupt. But to ignore this reality that systems must change is to keep our heads in the sand, and this constrains us to a path that is not likely to bear creative, sustainable, long term solutions.

Again, more work up front on identifying and articulating values, beliefs and common language and training on how current systems are dismissive and even hostile to youth and other marginalized groups will go a long way in helping projects to avoid conflicts like the ones YOB experienced.

Though we may enter this work with the best intentions, we all must recognize that we are capable of unintentionally creating systems that perpetuate the injustices we aim to address. It takes a lot of vigilance not to fall into these traps. And it takes a lot of trust, patience, and time to navigate these challenges as they arise. We hope the story of YOB is instructive and helpful to those seeking to harness the power of intergenerational alliances to address climate change.

We welcome questions and dialogue about our perspectives and conclusions.

Signed,

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