



**Jobs for
the Future**

Five Standards for High-Quality Youth Leadership Opportunities

A guide written by young adults on how to create meaningful experiences for young leaders at your organization or within your network.

AT A GLANCE

This guide outlines five key standards for organizations looking to develop or improve youth leadership opportunities. These standards are designed to foster leadership skills, career development, and self-determination for young adults.

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About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives the transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We routinely reevaluate our efforts as usage evolves. info.jff.org/language-matters

About the Young Adult Talent Development Network

JFF launched the Young Adult Talent Development Network in 2018 to bring together national and local entrepreneurial nonprofit organizations that work at the intersection of education, youth development, and workforce preparation. The network is comprised of senior leaders as well as young adult leaders who work together to address the most pressing needs and opportunities of supporting young adults 16-26 years old entering postsecondary training and navigating their early careers, with the ultimate goals of strengthening practices, improving outcomes, and growing a cohesive field of young adult talent development at a sufficient scale to support the aspirations of young adults and meet the talent needs of employers and industries.

About the Young Adult Leaders Council

Building on the foundation of the Young Adult Talent Development Network, JFF partnered with the Taco Bell Foundation to establish the Young Adult Leaders Council (YALC), a research and advisory body composed of young adults aged 18-26. The YALC works in tandem with the Young Adult Talent Development Network to ensure that young people are directly involved in informing solutions for the next generation of leaders. This collaborative approach ensures that resources and initiatives are shaped by the very individuals they aim to serve. Learn more about the YALC [here](#).

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Firsthand Insights From Young Adults

The members of the Young Adult Leaders Council (YALC) believe that initiatives that invest in young adults and give them opportunities to build leadership skills are pivotal. Young adults who take advantage of these opportunities—which can include work-based learning experiences, early-career employment, and more—emerge with new skills, networks of new connections, a community they can rely on for support, and a clearer idea of the direction their work and learning journeys will take. Through their own experiences, council members have learned that even well-meaning organizations need guidance on how to create the conditions that foster self-determination, a sense of belonging and meaning, and a sustained interest in leadership among young adults.

This brief introduces five standards that members of the YALC developed to serve as tenets that employers, youth-serving organizations, and talent development practitioners should uphold when designing leadership opportunities for young adults. The insights and guidelines presented here will be useful for organizations that believe in the potential of young adults, value youth voices and perspectives, and are willing to invest time and money to develop the skills and abilities of future generations of leaders.

This brief is a valuable resource for organizations that want to remove the guesswork from decisions about how to appeal to young adults' values and priorities; it also offers useful information and guidance for future leaders who want help determining where to invest their time and energy as they pursue their work and learning journeys. The YALC hopes that this resource will prove to be useful to current and emerging young leaders as they work to improve their current opportunities and advocate for their futures.

				
Standard 1	Standard 2	Standard 3	Standard 4	Standard 5
Invest in a Mentorship Culture	Facilitate Thoughtful Planning for What Comes Next	Fair Compensation and (Wide) Access to Support Services and Resources	Cultivate Reflective Leadership	Center Youth Voice, Experience, and Potential
Young leaders should have regular opportunities to connect with mentors and build relationships that support their growth.	Young leaders should receive guidance on how to determine what comes next for them, including career navigation support and exposure to a range of occupations and pathways.	A high-quality youth leadership opportunity should include fair compensation and access to resources that support young leaders' overall well-being.	High-quality leadership opportunities should encourage risk-taking, learning from mistakes, and building resilience.	For youth leadership opportunities to be high quality, they need to continually evolve. Integrate ongoing opportunities to hear from young leaders and create mechanisms to implement their guidance.

1. Invest in a Mentorship Culture

Young leaders should have regular opportunities to connect with mentors and build relationships that support their growth.

Mentorship is crucial to career development for workers of all ages, but young workers may be unsure about how to navigate these relationships. Young adults may not know how to engage with professionals who are older and more experienced than they are. And, for their part, veteran workers may need some guidance about how to be effective mentors. Organizations can benefit both groups by building a broad culture of mentorship that includes formal mentoring programs but also embeds casual mentoring into low-stakes everyday interactions.

Here are some promising practices that can foster the development of a culture of mentorship:

Create Safe Spaces

Gen Z workers thrive on good vibes and welcome opportunities to create safe spaces where colleagues feel free to share thoughts and ideas with one another. The Young Adult Leaders Council encourages mentors to drop all the stuffy business talk. We're all people at the end of the day, and we'd all like to feel fulfilled in our jobs and career searches. Mentors should let their mentees know that their conversations are safe and relaxed spaces where it's OK to voice ideas and concerns and share their ambitions and dreams.

Keep the Door Open

With the demands of work, school, and personal life, young people may sometimes let things fall by the wayside. Mentors should understand their mentees aren't perfect and may sometimes fall short in maintaining relationships, however valuable they may be. It may be hard for young adults to reconnect after a period of being out of touch because they're worried about having to explain their absences and they may be uncertain of how a mentor will receive the delayed outreach. Mentors should set expectations that address how to reconnect after an absence and let mentees know that it's OK to get back in touch even if a long period of time has gone by.

Facilitate In-Person Connections

The YALC believes in the value of meeting in person. Face-to-face contact in real life helps individuals and groups connect authentically, breaks down walls, relieves discomfort, fosters participation in discussions, and enhances future virtual engagements.

2. Facilitate Thoughtful Planning for What Comes Next

Young leaders should receive guidance on how to determine what comes next for them, including career navigation support and exposure to a variety of occupations and pathways.

Young leaders won't be young forever. Organizations should adopt and invest in policies and practices that create opportunities for young workers to thoughtfully prepare for transitions from one experience into the next. Young leaders often need assistance in reflecting on their interests, experiences, and strengths and assessing what those could mean for their career journeys. It's important for employers, mentors, and others to find ways to support young leaders engaging in this process and to frame career planning as an integral part of a leadership opportunity.

Here are some promising practices that can help create an environment where young people reflect on and gain insight into the steps they could take next:

Set (Flexible) Goals Early On

Employers and other talent development practitioners should embed goal-setting and check-ins into young workers' leadership experiences. Goals should be driven and designed by the young adult, and they should include the expectation that the individuals will take increasing levels of responsibility for and ownership over their work. Goals should also reflect the reality that it's a good thing that young adults may change their minds as their interests and passions evolve. Therefore, while setting goals is an important practice that can help young leaders take steps that push them further and expand their horizons, these goals should be flexible and the process should embody what we want for all young adults: the opportunity and agency to take their passions and ideas seriously and pursue them with support.

Take an Asset-Based Approach and Value Lived Experiences

Managers and others who support young leaders should share their insights into what makes these individuals special and what makes them sing. It's empowering to hear others compliment you about what you do well, and for young people that kind of feedback can positively influence their sense of self and expand their perceptions of the opportunities that lie ahead. It can be especially helpful for managers and mentors to encourage young leaders to reflect on the skills they've gained through lived experiences and help them envision how they can apply those skills to jobs and careers of interest.

Connect Young Leaders to a Range of Experiences

Employers and other organizations should provide young people with opportunities to cross-train in multiple roles so they can explore and gain exposure to a variety of jobs and observe other people at work. These opportunities will not only help young leaders build their networks but also help them fine-tune their ideas about what they want to do.

3. Offer Fair Compensation and (Wide) Access to Support Services and Resources

High-quality youth leadership opportunities should include fair compensation and access to resources that support young leaders' overall well-being.

Leadership opportunities won't be truly accessible to young people—and they won't provide the career steppingstones they need—unless organizations pay their young leaders fairly and offer good benefits packages that address the broader needs they may be experiencing at what is a pivotal time of transition in their lives. Offerings could include access to mental health services, resources for individuals experiencing financial instability or food or housing insecurity, and assistance navigating health care options and paying for coverage.

Here are some promising practices that organizations can embrace to address the broader needs of the young people in their orbit:

Pay Young People Fairly

Young people in leadership positions should be paid a decent wage or stipend that enables them to comfortably support themselves. Organizations and leaders who say they value youth voices and perspectives should walk the talk and invest in the young talent that makes their work and their organizations stronger.

Pay for Education and Training

Employers and other organizations should offer financial assistance to help young leaders cover the costs of postsecondary education and professional certification programs. Ongoing education and training can be the key to career advancement. Employers should research the cost of credential programs and other professional development opportunities and offer meaningful support that can make it financially feasible for young leaders to pursue their educational goals.

Offer Both Group and Individual Opportunities for Reflection

Young adults benefit from opportunities to reflect on what they need to be successful—both in group settings and on their own. In group settings, peer support and encouragement create a space where it's safe to share ideas, tips, and tricks. And meeting one on one with an advisor or mentor offers young people a chance to build relationships of trust and openness in which they can be honest about potential barriers they face and get both advice about overcoming challenges and access to the resources they need to do that.

4. Cultivate Reflective Leadership

High-quality leadership opportunities encourage risk-taking, learning from mistakes, and building resilience.

The YALC believes in the growth that comes from taking risks and learning from mistakes. Great leaders aren't just people who succeed—they're the ones who can bounce back from setbacks, learn from failure, and grow through challenges. This standard promotes a leadership style that values reflection, humility, and empathy.

Here are some promising practices that employers can adopt to help young adults develop a reflective leadership style:

Be and Create a New Kind of Leader

The YALC's idea of a true leader is someone who leads with empathy, integrity, and respect. Gen Z workers are interested in learning how others have failed, how they've developed resilience, and what they're grateful for. Mentors and managers who bring these stories and perspectives to their relationships with young leaders will find more opportunities for connection, mutual respect, and sharing.

Acknowledge the Risks They've Taken

Taking on leadership responsibilities can be intimidating. Employers and other talent development professionals should recognize the courage it takes for young people to pursue these opportunities, especially when they're overcoming obstacles or entering new spaces.

Create Accepting Spaces

It's important to build environments where making mistakes and even failing won't dismantle one's credibility as a leader. Embodying leadership that centers integrity, empathy, and humility will foster those characteristics in the leaders of tomorrow.

5. Center Youth Voice, Experience, and Potential

For youth leadership opportunities to be high quality, they need to continually evolve. Organizations that design and implement youth leadership experiences can ensure that they're able to modify and adapt these programs to best meet the needs of young workers by seeking out and acting on feedback from the young leaders themselves.

Organizations that actively listen to their employees and program participants, welcome feedback, and are invested in creating an environment that supports young people's needs will be able to create relevant and meaningful opportunities for young leaders.

Here are some promising practices organizations can embrace to center the voices, experiences, and potential of young people in leadership positions:

Value Individual Experiences

Young leaders bring unique stories and intersectional identities to the table. These leaders may be people of color, individuals who identify as LGBTQ, or parents or caregivers. They may come from immigrant families, rural communities, or low-income backgrounds, and they may not have attended college. No matter what their identity is, they all deserve access to leadership experiences that honor their personal journeys, offer a space in which they can reflect on and share their stories, and enable them to join a community of peers and build a diverse network of professional connections.

Create Feedback Loops

Organizations should give young leaders regular opportunities to share their thoughts about their experiences and suggest improvements. It's important to let young people know that their opinions matter by implementing changes in response to their ideas while also by providing them with feedback and recommendations about new approaches they can take to succeed.

Champion a Mindset Shift

Employers and talent development specialists can take action to ensure that employees at every level of an organization, leaders in every industry, and young people in their communities all believe that young adults are leaders and should be listened to accordingly. The YALC knows that it will take a mindset shift for this belief to take hold, but the promising practices we elevate in this report make it clear that, in addition to formal leadership development programs, there are ample informal and situational opportunities for organizations to build the next generation of leaders by offering young workers experiences in which they can play leadership roles and take on added responsibilities.

Learn More, and Take Action

If your organization values youth leadership and wants to create meaningful professional development and career advancement opportunities for young adults, these standards offer a road map of steps you can take create a welcoming and supportive environment that helps young workers feel a sense of belonging and provides them with opportunities for reflection and growth. The members of the Young Adult Leaders Council have seen the difference between programs that tokenize young people and those that genuinely empower them. By embracing these standards, you can ensure that your organization's leadership programs truly represent the needs and values of the emerging generation of leaders.

Share this guide with your colleagues at other organizations to continue to amplify the recommendations and values of these young leaders.

And to those of you who are among our fellow young adults and aspiring leaders, the council hopes you can use this guidance during your own journeys to support your own growth and that of the people in your networks.

To learn more about the Young Adult Talent Development Network and to stay engaged in our work click [here](#).