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# Learning Together Across Generations Because Everyone Matters

## ABSTRACT

Marge Schiller (74) and Ashley Cooper (34) believe intergenerational conversations are a fundamental element of quality decisions and committed implementation. Integrating the perspectives and experiences of people of all ages contributes to effective long-term, sustainable action. This article sets out the case for who should be “at the table” and why maximum mix is magic.

Appreciative Inquiry lives and is grounded in inclusive spaces. Lifting all voices and learning together is foundational to the AI approach. This article is an invitation to expand our lens to see the power and potential that is ignited when people of all ages and stages are included in summits, gatherings, learning spaces and conversations. Maximum mix is magic and this includes intergenerational partnerships. What happens when we create places where we can all come together to learn, contribute, have fun and do good work?

Purposeful inclusion helps to cultivate environments that transcend positional advocacy and expand to include the multiple perspectives from which we all see. The very act of hearing how another thinks opens up new fields of possibilities. Reverent listening fosters respect for the different contributions we each have to make. In addition, meaningful relationships unfold when we hear each other’s stories. These relational connections create channels through which intellectual and emotional content can move into committed action.

So what are the contributions that people from varying ages and stages have to offer?

Elders possess a broader experience of successes and failures, financial resources, contact networks, an understanding of political landscapes and disposition for maintaining a long-term outlook. Younger generations possess the vigor, passion and zeal so vital for making things happen, an interest to learn and find purpose, the desire to change things (just about anything really!) and a refreshing ability to broach topics made taboo or ignored by elders.

As you read on, know that you are looking at the tip of an iceberg, peeking into the power and potential of intergenerational and multigenerational engagement and their ability to address difficult issues while leveraging individual strengths. Intergenerational input is foundational for sustainability.



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### Intergenerational, multigenerational

For clarity, here are our definitions of the terms intergenerational and multigenerational: INTER-generational means interaction amongst and between generations. Interaction is reciprocal action where individuals are engaging with and influencing one another. This can be in both face-to-face and virtual settings. MULTI-generational denotes many or several generations present. For example, imagine yourself at a gathering with people of all ages. When the youth are sitting at one table and the elders at another, it is a multigenerational gathering. There may or may not be intergenerational interaction. When tables are mixed with people of different ages talking to each other, it is both intergenerational AND multigenerational. So multigenerational attendance does not automatically produce intergenerational conversation. We recognize that there is great value in both approaches depending on the goals, context and setting.

This article focuses on intergenerational relationships.

What might shift if learning, public problem-solving, civic engagement, educational planning and other aspects of “business as usual” ensured that people of various ages were present and contributing? How many boards of directors have youth as members, helping to align actions for the future with the interests of multiple generations? How often do our younger generations miss the chance to hear the wisdom of experience and the perspectives of their elders? How often do well-intentioned community events fall short of their desired outcomes, because the very people the organizations wished to engage were never a part of the planning process? We could go on. The opportunities for inclusion are many.

### Age and perspective

In illustrating the opportunities inherent in intergenerational collaboration, it is important to clarify our choice of language. “Young” or “youth” does not specifically mean “child”; and “elder” or “older” does not specifically mean “grandparent.” These are relative descriptions that are dependent on the people and circumstances involved. In this article, 34 year-old Ashley is the younger author while 74 year-old Marge is the elder author. In partnership, we both contribute valuable insight in clarifying and expressing our thoughts. However, change the context to include an 18 year-old, and suddenly Ashley is also an “older.” The age is of less importance. It is the perspective brought to the table by individuals living at various points in the span of life and the ability to listen to and respect these different points of view that is of significance.



Marge and Ashley

How do we foster mutual respect? Conversely, when do we shut down opportunities for intergenerational collaboration? Being curious and listening reverently to one another with intention to hear and discover the insight individuals have to contribute opens the space for deep learning and mutual respect. Elders saying “I’ve been there, tried that” or giving a pretend smile and nodding in agreement while not really considering a younger’s perspective shuts down conversation. And it is also true that experience has value and youngsters can learn from elders’ life courses. When youngsters of any age are impatient with elders that shuts out and shuts down collaboration.

### It really was different then

It is also significant that for a whole slew of socio-cultural reasons, it truly was a different time when those elders “went there” and “did that.” Experience must

## How do we foster mutual respect?

be viewed in the context of present conditions. A mindset that comes from growing up immersed in social media and global connections is different from one influenced by earlier eras. “Then” is not necessarily the same as “now”. Similar lost opportunities prevail when younger generations say “Ah, they [the elders] wouldn’t understand it anyway.” Including perspectives that span the generations strengthens understanding of what desirable outcome(s) look, sound and feel like for everyone.

We believe intergenerational conversations are a fundamental and crucial part of quality interactions that can lead to transformative action for a shared future. As norms for effective decision-making evolve, greater attention is being given to diversity and “who should be at the table.” Race, gender and religious participation are beginning to be acknowledged as a necessary part of public dialogue. Let’s keep those conversations alive and continue to make them even more effective and inclusive. We propose adding another foundational dimension – intergenerational participation.



Younger and older learning together at Gaming the Future event.

### We are all members of multiple communities

We have affirmed the value of meeting in our specific communities of race, gender, religion, age, geographies and other interests. Now, we are coming to understand that it is also the interrelationship of these multiple communities that allows everyone’s voice to be represented. Creating the path to our future together lets us move beyond the illusions and consensual reality of unilateral generational thought into the larger human experience.

Marge has lived through the civil rights, women’s, gay rights and other movements that advocate inclusion. She remembers when it was necessary to aggressively make the case in order to get these important issues on the table. Now both of us are advocating for another movement: “Intergenerational Inclusion.” What follows is some food for thought and stimulus to action to illustrate how including the intergenerational aspect as a conscious component leads to effective, sustained transformation.

### What happens when we live intergenerationally?

Respect governs our conversations and behavior.

Disagreement and debate are a fundamental ingredient of high quality decision-making and, as Jonah Lehrer points out in his article “Groupthink”, who is in the group makes a profound difference.

“...when the composition of the group is right – enough people with different perspectives running into one another in unpredictable ways – the group dynamic will take care of itself. All these errant discussions add up. In fact they may be the most essential part of the creative process... The most creative spaces are those which hurl us together. It is human friction that makes the sparks.”

People of different ages often don’t understand one another. For example, growing up in the age of information, technology and sustainability is a different experience than growing up during the time of radio, early television or World War II. The rate of change is accelerating faster than our parents ever imagined. Living in a globally connected world gives one a different perspective than living one’s life just knowing neighbors. When people of different ages come together,

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there are ripe opportunities for differences and disagreement. The sparks may fly, and yet the sparks ignite when respect governs conversations and behavior.

In our own work, a pattern that the two of us have frequently experienced in our own intergenerational exchanges is one in which the younger person is dismissed by elders. Youth perspectives can be devalued as naive or lacking experience, or not even invited to begin with. Youth or young adults are seen as having less to contribute, resulting in a patronizing nod or "you just don't understand." Ironically, this same assumed lack of understanding in our observation is often directed upstream from 30-somethings to those over 50.

What we can learn about each others' preferred forms of intergenerational exchanges: participants in a 'Catch the Connection Community Playdate' decorate hands to show that we each have something unique to contribute.



Additionally, methods of communication can contribute to the gap. While some might value only conversations between two people in the same room, others might find an email, Skype, text or Facebook message as more comfortable ground for initiating dialogue. What can we learn about each others' forms of communicating?

Values also play an important role in understanding others and developing mutual respect. People of different generations and at different stages of development often have different values. The research on Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millennials points out patterns to help people make meaning, highlighting generalizations about generational perspectives and values. These can be useful. Optimizing this research, however, requires discernment and discipline in recognizing that all people of a similar age group are not the same. Valuing individual differences is essential. We believe in the power of identifying patterns and we are clear that accepting stereotypes is disrespectful and non-productive.

**Don't do anything about me without me**

We follow the maxim "don't do anything about me without me". How often do well-intentioned individuals, who want to support and help a particular group



Members of the youth lead production crew at TEDxNextGenerationAsheville

of people, move forward without including those most directly affected by the program or policy? Prime examples are youth or education programs that are designed by adults. Young people are the experts for their own lives, particularly when it comes to real questions of:

- What helps youth learn?
- What do they want to learn?
- What creates an environment where they are inspired to dive in and function at their best?
- What supports them living successfully with their life conditions?

The very same questions can be asked of any age cohort.

Is it such a novel idea to include the true experts when planning programming that deeply and directly impacts their lives?

Ashley was the Executive Director for TEDxNextGenerationAsheville, an event that spotlighted the ideas and talents of 11-19 year-olds. Youth and adults collaboratively designed the entire event. Two young high school students on the production team shared their experience:

TEDxNextGenerationAsheville is an experience that is not so common in today's busy world. We become so involved and focused with our own thoughts that it can be difficult to hear the voices of those who are below us – kids. Minors do not necessarily have a chance to always express their views in the world, but at the same time, they are not bound by the confines of the larger world. They are able to think “outside the box” and communicate the importance of many issues. TEDxNGA is an opportunity for that communication to take place, and is a forum for adults to hear youthful voices. It is truly an incredible experience – one that I feel honored to have been a part of. Wyatt Nyman, high school student

“I want people to know that sometimes kids have really good ideas. Ideas that everyone can learn from, ideas MEANT for adults to listen to. And I want for the adults to listen. To be proactive, and help our generation (the next generation, that is) feel like we can make a difference in the world. I feel like that was the whole reason behind TEDxNGA in the first place, and I feel like it's slowly becoming more and more noticed, respected and listened to throughout the country.” Xandy Chelmis, high school student

The future will happen,  
so why not play and work  
together to create the world  
we want, or at least try?

### **We experience the magic in a maximum mix**

Marge was the founder of the Positive Change Core, a virtual organization serving schools and youth with strengths-focused multi-generational approaches:

In Canton, Ohio, Alex P, a high school junior, was part of a Positive Change Core-supported conversation determining what to do about overlapping services to youth. One opinion was that the programs should be combined. Alex asked “Are they both doing a good job and serving kids?” Answer, yes. His suggestion was then to keep them both. Alex reframed the conversation into a win for all. His focus was on what is of the greatest value rather than the conflict between the existing programs.



Marge and Ashley at an intergenerational dialogue with AI friend, Cheri Torres

### Many questions still to explore

There are many more questions to investigate and stories to tell. We look forward to forums where we can continue to explore, share stories and work together. Let's talk more about...

- How we create environments where diverse groups of people from different ages and stages of life, and different constellations of life experience, feel safe and empowered to make valuable contributions in their neighborhoods and the broader world community.
- What is necessary in our internal construction and social design to enable people to genuinely feel included, empowered and able to participate at their fullest capacity.
- How we can nurture relationships that are built on trust, mutual respect and shared purpose.
- How we ensure that space is safe and generative for all of us – not just those of us who have convened the conversation.

Intergenerational engagement is a natural partnership for leveraging the strengths of each generation.

It is going to take all of us rising to the challenges of engagement to create the futures we want. The future will happen, so why not play and work together to create the world we want, or at least try? What can happen when we use our combined energy to “plerk”<sup>1</sup>?

We submit that “Intergenerational Inclusion” is an essential component for effective, sustained transformation.

As our colleague and friend Juanita Brown has said:

“Whatever our age or stage of life we are all one generation, alive together at a critical time for our common futures. Our challenged world needs each of our unique contributions, which makes dialogue, learning and partnering across generations more critical today than ever before.”

Our own beliefs and experiences bear out the wisdom of Juanita's statement.

### References

Lehrer, Jonah. (January 30, 2012) “Groupthink: The Brainstorming Myth,” The New Yorker.