

# Generation Z: What is the Future of Stakeholder Engagement?

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**You have the power; we have the energy. Use your power to give us the framework we need, and we'll use our passion to steer the world on course!**

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*Given the context that Generation Z is growing up in, what are the implications for stakeholder engagement? Do traditional models hold? Will different methods need to be used?*

**If there is a generational theme to describe Generation Z, it is instantly connected and interconnected, with access to everything.** Generation Z, known also as the Net Generation or digital natives, were born approximately between 1990-2000, ages 11-21. Native to a world extensively connected locally and across continents, most of Gen Z has no recall of a world without the internet, smartphones, text messages, instant messaging, Skype, online social communities like Facebook and Twitter or self-publishing tools like YouTube and WordPress. Gen Z is wired and plugged-in, ready to access and multitask with a sense of alacrity and tenacity. In a February 2010 article written by Ethan Lyon that examines Generation Z, Penelope Trunk, founder of a Gen Y social networking site, says Gen Z will open doors that other generations barely knock on today because of their ability to process information and the amount of information that they have been able to process from an early age.

**Gen Z is emerging into a multigenerational workforce and civic community, one that is not always on and always connected.** According to a report released by the UN Joint Pension Fund, the workforce currently consists of four generations: the Traditionalist (1925-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-64), Generation X (1965-1980), and Generation Y (1981-1990). With Gen Z emerging into the workforce, five generations will be working, volunteering, and engaging in civic affairs together. The motto of Gen Z is work to live, not live to work. Gen Z will be more comfortable than most participating in an interconnected world, in using various technology and global-minded skills to problem-solve. This 'always on' and 'always connected' mind-set generates some of the friction existing between the generations. Researchers, sociologists, educators and employers will benefit from determining how the five generations can work together.

## **Given these contextual characteristics used to describe Gen Z, what are the implications for stakeholder engagement with Gen Z as a stakeholder? In order to define the implications, we should examine what is meant by the word, stakeholder, and by stakeholder engagement. What is a stakeholder?**

In *The Dictionary of Conflict Resolution*, Douglas Yarn defines stakeholders as those individuals, groups, or organizations that are directly or indirectly affected by a situation, problem, or project; who have the ability to influence the outcome; or who will be influenced by the outcome.

Because of the complex nature of public and community issues, constituent groups are often identified during a convening process, particularly for Agreement-Seeking processes. Characteristically, someone is selected and agrees to represent a constituency based on the interests identified (e.g., tourism industry, economic development, water quality groups, and future generations). According to Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, representation in this sense means speaking in the style of or selecting someone who has the expertise of or a good feel for the particular area of interest and the situation. James Creighton contends that membership in a stakeholder class is self-defined; that for those individuals whom no obvious mechanism is available to represent their interests, they may decide to self-select into a given process.

## **What is stakeholder engagement?**

Effective engagement is the first stepping-stone in problem solving, particularly in a complex world. Multifaceted issues can have different dimensions or levels of complexity requiring different solutions. In his book, *Solving tough problems: An open way of talking, listening, and creating new realities*, Adam Kahane has identified three levels of complexity in working with what he calls tough problems:

- a dynamic complexity of cause and effect that is distant in space and time, requiring a systemic approach to the problem and the solution;
- a social complexity when there are a number of different and perhaps conflicting points of view, and the problem is not owned by a single entity, requiring a participative approach; and
- a generative complexity meaning old solutions aren't working when the problem continues to change and is unpredictable, requiring a creative approach.

Not all problems are dynamically, socially, and generatively complex, but many social, environmental, and community issues are. Gen Z can expect to emerge into a global community faced with dynamically, socially, and generatively complex issues, a global community that is becoming more divided about how to resolve these complex issues.

A number of processes are designed to bring people together to discuss or resolve public or community issues and manage multifaceted and complex issues. Nonprofits like civic associations, environmental groups, private sector organizations such as business and industry, or public and other governmental agencies can initiate these processes. One way to think about this is the degree to which stakeholders can be involved from the least to the most comprehensive level of involvement, and the different outcomes that can be produced as a result of that level of involvement.

Figure 1 is a continuum of involvement, or a range of ways to involve stakeholders or the public at large in exploratory, planning, deliberative, and decision-making processes. In this model, adapted from the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center at EPA, the focus is on the potential goal or the outcome resulting from the level

of engagement rather than a type of process or discussion. Collaboration or the principles of working together towards a shared purpose can take place at any of these levels.

Based on this continuum of involvement, the degree of stakeholder involvement is least likely when the goal of a project is Outreach. The level of stakeholder involvement increases when the goal of the project is Information Exchange; it increases further still when the purpose of the project is to provide Recommendations, and again when the outcome is an Agreement. The purpose of the project determines the level or degree of stakeholder involvement in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

## **Process Design**

Each level of involvement can also be thought of in terms of process, not simply what needs to happen to support the outcome but how does it need to happen. Each level of involvement can be described as process design or a method of sequenced activities that will lead to the purpose of the project. For example, process design may be a series of multiphase meetings or simply a one-day workshop that are often pre-structured while allowing for emergent activities as needed.

## **Process Management**

In *Process Design, Making it Work*, Dorothy Strachan and Paul Tomlinson discuss another aspect of process design called process management, or the role of the facilitator as the manager or guide of the group process as stakeholders participate in activities. Process management can include for instance, agenda development, determining how decisions will be made, how the group will work together, and what ground rules will help support the group in doing their best work together.

## **Traditional Methods of Stakeholder Engagement**

Examples of traditional methods of stakeholder engagement are listed in Figure 1. One particular method, Study Circles, has been around since the 1970s, and is used in different countries to encourage face-to-face dialogue around a number of topical issues such as racial equality or planning for growth. Age-old competencies like asking good questions, listening to one another, and using a guide to manage the discussion when the risks are high, are critical skills that many of the traditional methods like Study Circles encourage.

In the second chapter of *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, Button and Ryfe say that part of the intrinsic value of democracy is that it allows citizens to see things from different points of view, enabling them to see themselves as equal, capable, and responsible members in a shared political life. These customary methods of informing, of exchanging information, of seeking recommendations and agreements, and permitting deliberation, support a more inclusive society. These methods are a way for citizens to have opportunities to help shape the very communities and countries they live in, and provide a reasonable amount of confidence that implementation of a project is somewhat assured. It is the author's opinion that many of these traditional methods like Agreement Seeking will hold for the future given the need to frame and encourage dialogue and collaborative work around public or community issues, especially across a multigenerational and cultural societal context.

## **Methods of Involvement: What Does the Future Hold?**

Many of these traditional processes will be augmented with traditional and emerging technologies. Traditional technologies in stakeholder engagement can include facilitation walls, easels, and Post-it® notes, along with electronic technologies like presentation software, black and white boards, SMART boards, videos, online decision-criteria analysis tools, interactive websites to gather stakeholder data, or the use of smartphones to register and weigh in on polling activities.

**Figure 1: Continuum of Involvement Practices**

Outcome of Level Involvement	OUTREACH	INFORMATION EXCHANGE	RECOMMENDATION SEEKING	AGREEMENT SEEKING	STAKEHOLDER DELIBERATIVE ACTS
Purpose of Involvement	Provide Information	Provide and exchange data, opinions and options	Provide non-binding but influential advice or comments	Reach a workable agreement	Stakeholders or citizens take actions
Level of Convening	Self-Select	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Select</li> <li>• Stakeholder Selection</li> </ul>	Stakeholder Selection	Stakeholder Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Select</li> <li>• Stakeholder Selection</li> </ul>
Methods of Involvement: examples of approaches in process design	One Way Exchange Methods <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website</li> <li>• Fact Sheets</li> <li>• Listserv</li> <li>• Flyer</li> <li>• Press Release</li> </ul>	Two Way Exchange of Information Methods <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Meeting</li> <li>• Open House</li> <li>• Listening Session</li> <li>• Online Dialogues/ Blogs</li> </ul>	Consultative Methods <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory Committee</li> <li>• Citizen Jury</li> <li>• Community Forums</li> <li>• Policy Dialogue</li> <li>• Task Force</li> <li>• National Issues Forums</li> <li>• Charrettes</li> </ul>	Agreement Seeking Methods <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus Agreement</li> <li>• Settlement Agreement</li> <li>• Negotiations</li> </ul>	Stakeholder Led Methods <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voluntary Program</li> <li>• Community Action</li> <li>• Town Hall Meeting</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• Study Circles</li> </ul>
Leaders of Process Management	Moderator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moderator</li> <li>• Facilitator</li> <li>• Facilitative Leader</li> <li>• Technical Expert Teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator</li> <li>• Co-Facilitator</li> <li>• Facilitative Leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator</li> <li>• Co-Facilitator</li> <li>• Third-party Neutral</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator</li> <li>• Co-Facilitator</li> <li>• Third-party Neutral</li> </ul>

Other continuums or spectrums include James Creighton's The public participation handbook: Making better decisions through citizen involvement, International Association of Public Participation ([www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)), and the Policy Consensus Initiative's Practical Guide to Collaborative Governance.

Source: Adapted from the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center, EPA.

**For Gen Z, the future is very bright and holds promise not only for traditional methods of engagement but for new technologies beyond our imagination.** Many of these tools can help assist in convening an intergenerational community and workforce to work purposefully and collaboratively together, amidst small or large groups of people. According to Kelley O'Brien from the NC Civic Education Consortium, national trends suggest that Gen Z is less involved in civic engagement than previous generations, but given their inclination for being connected, social media and other technologies could improve their level of involvement in civic affairs and discourse. Two immediate examples come to mind.

### **Example 1**

E-bay has exemplified new methods for Online Dispute Resolution (ODR), for managing and transforming conflict. In the online presentation, *Smart Tools for Smart Power: Simulations and Serious Games for Peacebuilding*, the story is narrated of how E-Bay has built an online civil justice system in resolving disputes and become a leader in the development of a variety of ODR tools. ODR is a vibrant and growing section of the profession that is developing innovative technology for how stakeholders can engage online.

### **Example 2**

Through a program, *We Are Wiser Together*, the World Café, is specifically exploring multi-generational collaboration. Working groups of different generations and demographics are brought together to use their collective experience and expertise, and develop multi-generational recommendations and solutions toward critical challenges. The Cafés can be tailored to the context, the issue, and any size group of people.

**Technology is and will be more of an integral tool in our overall learning and stakeholder engagement processes.** Interactive devices, like handhelds, will provide a wide range of applications that promote engagement and collaborative learning including interactive resource materials and virtual collaborative space to problem-solve. Yet, the intergenerational community and workforce that Gen Z will emerge into is not always on and always connected. As Gen Z engages with a multigenerational workforce and civic community, they will need to take the time to understand different work style preferences and generational values about technology in the use of group work. As the generations come to share perceptions and learn from one another, and as the older generations learn more about technology, they will be able to “tailor a process to fit their fuss.”

**Gen Z can successfully navigate a nanosecond terabyte world in a transparent, abbreviated, and non-punctuated fashion.** Unfortunately, their abridged communication style is not always understood (nor appreciated) by other generations. Growing up in an accelerated world validates the need for speed and instant gratification, especially when one can live virtually from experience to experience. Gen Z wants to know what they need to know without all the “details.” Given the speed at which Gen Z can communicate and the propensity for an abbreviated language, listening and interpersonal skill development may not come easily to Gen Z.

Sociologists are troubled that long-term engagement in online technology inhibits the building of relationships, socialization skills, and general development. Thus, Gen Z may find it harder to deal with difficult people and situations or to know who and how to trust. Divisiveness and polarization can breed on the internet, principally among people who tend to remain anonymous. Communication led with statements about who is for or against what, often results in confrontations and arguments. While the speed of mass communication encourages thousands of people to talk about the same thing at the same time and can drive social change, the jettison of

information is worrisome when it is inaccurate, false, or simply incomplete and yet thousands will believe and act on it.

One aspect for Gen Z to keep in mind then, is the “art of thinking together” as coined by William Isaacs in *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*; the “art of thinking together” is not always evident in social networking. Dialogue, according to Isaacs, is shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together, it is something you do with, not to another person. As Gen Z learns to articulate what they believe and as they develop their own core values and critical skills, it will prove helpful to them to consider the art of thinking together, of asking good questions to help inter-generations engage more effectively in an online environment and with one another. Relationship building takes time. It is built through trust, mutual respect, and understanding. While Gen Z understands the abbreviated language better than other generations, other generations are beginning to catch on as a way of communicating.

**For the future to hold, allow Gen Z to help define the human condition and what can be done about it.** A recent example that comes to mind is how members of Gen Z in North Carolina have been engaged in addressing their concerns about growing up. In 2010, the NC Association of County Commissioners sponsored Youth Voice 2010, an inaugural summit for youth in partnership with the NC Cooperative Extension. During facilitated discussions led by Extension’s 4-H Youth Development leaders, youth from 76 counties in North Carolina identified the top 10 issues facing youth today:

- 1) teen pregnancy (prevention and education)
- 2) substance abuse (prevention and education)
- 3) dropouts (prevention)
- 4) violence (bullying, gangs, crime, abuse, and knowing what are unsafe actions)
- 5) recreation (generating safe community play places)
- 6) socio-economics (reduction in unemployment, hunger, and poverty; education in budgeting)
- 7) education (school funding issues, decision-making about college and how to pay)
- 8) participation in community decisions (lacking a voice in community/political decision-making)
- 9) health (knowledge about healthy lifestyles)
- 10) structured activities (more safe and effective activities)

Although individual counties identified other issues as more critical such as recycling, protection of natural resources, and parental neglect, the compilation of these issues gave the young people a way to communicate and prioritize their concerns. In 2011, Youth Voice will hold another summit to discuss and determine potential solutions to the top 10 issues identified, and how to implement them in partnership with their political and adult leaders.

According to Professor John Lee from North Carolina State University, Gen Z is growing up in an interconnected world, and thus has access to multiple highways of information and cultures, and readily engages with others about their ideas, opinions, and signature fashions. Part of the under 30 generation, these digital and social natives live their lives from both a constructed and an online environment. Their extensive participation in social media and networks has given Gen Z a virtual and global identity that they define, as well as a personal identity offline. Hence, Gen Z is not simply plugged-in. They are conversing with others from a different culture, miles away, in a cross-cultural learning experience and they are conversing locally, as they learn to articulate their own beliefs and values and define who they are.

It is because of the propensity for Gen Z to be connected to the global community, to friends, family, and colleagues, that they are contributing to a more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse world. With support from other generations, they can take a long-term view of civic responsibility and the development of working relationships,

particularly how cultivation of these relationships can serve them during challenging times. Though the topic today may be about the latest fashion, tomorrow it will be about the human condition and what Gen Z is prepared to do about it. For some members of Gen Z, that day has come.

Consider the movement, Occupy Wall Street. Born out of anger and frustration, Occupy Wall Street began September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District, spreading throughout the U.S. and other countries. A 21st century internet grassroots movement, propelled by online technology and social networking, it has become a global movement. Although the purpose and goals are said to be ill defined, currently they are demanding a seat at the table; they are not apathetic, they are resigned. Gen Z is there among them, voicing support for intergenerational equity, accountability for corruption, for decreasing the wealth disparity, and providing protection for labor and the environment. They are involved because their future matters and they believe it is at stake.

## **"I am only 12, but I will make a difference!"**

*A Gen Z Occupant of Wall Street*

**What can we do to facilitate their involvement in their future? In an increasingly polarized world, Gen Z will need to prepare for the complex dimensions resulting from global interconnectedness.** A myriad of challenges and opportunities face Gen Z. Some of the challenges will be similar to the encounters each subsequent generation has faced like ongoing poverty, hunger, and substance abuse. Other challenges, like changing economies and services, prohibitive healthcare costs, increasing costs for nutritious foods, and ongoing environmental and agricultural concerns, may be problems handed down to Gen Z. Other challenges, such as 'always on, and always connected' will yield unknown and unintended consequences.

Human beings, however, are aptly able to learn and relearn, through their creativity, resilience, and persistence. Over the years, each generation has made remarkable advances using their ingenuity and innovations to surmount a number of challenges. Individuals have accomplished some of these innovations; teams of individuals have solved others through dialogue. Gen Z should not be expected to be any different in responding to the challenges and opportunities that they face. In fact, given the workforce and civic community Gen Z is growing up into, Gen Z may well serve as the energy that propels needed change across the intergenerational and cultural landscape.

Kelley O'Brien says an important predictor of an individual's participation in civic life is - are they being asked to contribute. Therefore, let's ask Gen Z how they want to engage in their future and do what we can to support them in achieving that future. In the meantime, let's not forget to encourage them about the "art of thinking together", face-to-face.

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