

A Baby Boomer and a Gen Zer Walk Into a Climate Action Meeting (SSIR)

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14-17 minutes



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A gap between the generations is a given—due to pop culture, technology, and the inherent need for every generation to explore and pursue its own vision for the future. But today there is a new tension between youth and adults. Currently, we’re facing a problem that is global in scale, that disproportionately will impact youth, and that adults mostly created: the climate crisis.

The [latest report](#) from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows that global greenhouse gas emissions will need to be reduced by 45 percent by 2030 in order to maintain a climate where future damages can at least be tolerated and managed. Instead, the world is on a trajectory to *increase* emissions by 2030. Adults, who wield all the decision-making power to solve this problem, after three decades of warnings, have so far failed to do so. In the simple words of Ugandan youth climate activist [Vanessa Nakate](#) at the 2021 Youth4Climate Summit in Milan, “It’s time.” The intergenerational tension today is qualitatively different from the past

because the consequences of adult failure will be felt long after the adults are gone. Youth are rightfully mad as hell, in part because they feel they have little say in their future.

Efforts at adult contrition often backfire—“I’m so sorry my generation messed this up. You’re the future! It’s up to you to fix this!” This framing may seem apologetic and deferential, but instead it makes youth even more resentful. At the same time, youth sometimes convey an analogous message—“You caused this. Just get out of our way.” Neither attitude is helpful.

We live in an increasingly polarized society. We’re divided by race, income level, education, geography, gender, occupation, culture, and of course, politics, to name a few. But rarely is our generational divide acknowledged and discussed beyond lighthearted derision (e.g., “[OK Boomer](#)”). It is an awkward division that is accepted in modern American society. But when it comes to climate change, we accept it at our peril.

Understanding how to bridge this intergenerational divide was the purpose of our 16-person Intergen Climate Group, composed of eight youth (15-26 years old) and eight elders (55-78 years old). We are two members of this group, one Boomer (age 65) and one Gen Z teenager (age 15). The group, formed by the Maine Climate Table, supported by a grant from the Dorr Foundation, has met for 90 minutes once a month for the past year. Our hypothesis was that we could work more effectively together rather than separately on the climate issue. But first we had to understand each other.

Here we share what we have learned together through a yearlong process of learning by listening. We hope these lessons will help anyone, youth or elder, who wants to bridge our generational divide and get something done that would not have been possible without the other generation. Most of our lessons are relevant to the many other divisions in our society today.

1. Understand our methods of communication differ.

At a simple operational level, part of the generational divide stems from the fact that our generations prefer different methods of communication. Boomers tend to prefer face-to-face, in-person interaction or lengthier written messages. Gen Zers often use texting, Facetiming, and an array of social media instruments to engage with each other quickly. Both methods are effective, but a preference for one or the other makes it easy for the generations to bypass one another. Or, as psychologist Elza Venter [explains](#), our different forms of communication can even create conflict between the generations. Learning how to use the communication methods of the other generation is a good, practical place to start for bridging the generational chasm. We need to open communication channels with each other. To do this we might have to ask for help from the other generation, such as providing transportation to an in-person meeting for youth who can’t drive yet or offering technical assistance to elders on how to use social media.

2. Combine passion with pragmatism.

Part of the work of the Intergen Climate Group was to understand *the other* generation. To that end, we inventoried our respective generational assets and liabilities. We found that the younger

generation has greater passion—they are generally more motivated. The older generation is more pragmatic, in part from a lifetime of having to solve one problem after another. No surprises here, but how do we combine the passion that comes from youth's understandable concern about their future with elders' pragmatism for problem-solving? Elders might know what works and what doesn't, but only in the world they've constructed. Youth are better at thinking outside the box because they haven't lived for decades in the *same* box.

A concrete example of combining these intergenerational assets is the intentional cross pollination of membership in different climate groups. By working together through representatives that bridge Maine Climate Action Now! and Maine Youth for Climate Justice, the former organization is able to advance the interests of the youth organization in spaces where the youth voice is not affirmed. And these bridging members of Youth for Climate Justice gain valuable knowledge from adult members of Maine Climate Action Now!

Combining these assets—passion and pragmatism—is one of our biggest challenges to working in solidarity across the generations on climate change. Because we don't typically mix socially or professionally, and maybe because we're not entirely comfortable with each other anyway—perhaps even intimidated by each other—it's easier to not interact at all. This is a mistake. Each generation needs to marshal the courage to seek out the other generation. Do not wait for the other generation to come to you. Go to them. And take humility with you, because you will need it.

3. Combine energy with knowledge.

Youth have energy. Elders have a lifetime of accumulated knowledge. These respective assets are normal—expected—a part of the natural order of things. Youth, when elders, will have much greater knowledge too. And elders once had the energy of youth. Combine energy with knowledge and a powerful force for action emerges. Energy without knowledge, or knowledge without energy, is less likely to be effective. These assets should be combined if we hope to address climate change in a timely manner. Each generation should be respected, embraced, and appreciated for the different assets each brings to the table.

4. We face different stressors, but the intensity is often the same.

We discovered that each generation has life commitments and stresses that limit their capacity to create the change they desire. Like elders once upon a time, youth are facing the challenges of establishing their place in the world. Concerns ranging from driver's ed to surviving and benefiting from the educational system often sap the seemingly limitless youthful energy for action. Layer on top of that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has constrained opportunities to build professional networks—something elders did not have to deal with decades ago. While we will get beyond COVID-19 at some point, it still comes at an unfortunate time for those young adults who are trying to establish themselves at a critical point in their careers. Mental health is also a massive issue as anxiety and depression [plague](#) a generation growing up in a seemingly broken world.

At the same time, many elders find themselves caring for *even more elderly* parents, and are stretched to the emotional breaking point. Climate change is important, but today a 60-something elder may have to find suitable housing for their 90-year old parent, *and* figure out how to pay for it. In our group, we learned that we all have our stressors, irrespective of generation. We can only give so much today and make it until tomorrow when we hope to give more. Despite our misconceptions going into the first Intergen Climate Group meeting, now we know we are alike in this regard. Our respect for one another has grown. Our compassion for one another has grown. Trust, respect, and compassion for each other are the building blocks of solidarity.

5. Be aware of self-created obstacles.

Over several meetings, one member observed that the elders tended to dominate our discussions. This may derive from the confidence that comes with age, or a tendency for well-intentioned adults to be overly exuberant or even overbearing. It could derive from a learned generational hierarchy. Every child is taught that their parents know best, and to sit back and listen when mentors, teachers, and other adult figures speak. This leads to young activists being uncertain of their position in intergenerational spaces and worried that their lack of experience means their contributions won't be recognized as valid. It was too easy for experienced and accomplished elders to unwittingly dominate the airtime of our meetings.

We had not anticipated this issue. Once we knew it was a problem, elders became careful to not fill so much “space” during our meetings. We used one of our scheduled monthly meetings to meet separately by generation so that each age group could reflect on how they used their voice, and how much airtime they occupied in a meeting. Given our society's hierarchical mores, if elders want to be a positive force for intergenerational work, they need to be deliberate about creating space for youth to lead with their voice and their actions. At the same time, youth need to be willing to occupy the space as adults learn how to yield their power and leadership. Each group needs to be more self-aware.

6. Relationships come first.

The most important lesson we learned from our year together came in the last two months. Perhaps as a preemptive solution to the anticipated awkwardness of spending time together, we likely “overengineered” our meetings in the first half of the year. Members of the group were asked to lead discussions about specific climate issues that interested them. We thought this approach would be a way to learn how the different generations viewed different climate issues. One topic example was, “what role should corporations play in solving the climate crisis?” While we did reveal interesting and instructive differences between the generations on various issues, this approach failed to build mutual trust and respect, which was what we really needed to work on. Having discovered this late, but not too late, our last two meetings were devoted to getting to know each other personally—what mattered in our lives, what were our hopes for the future. Agenda items and overly structured discussion questions were what got in the way of real connection in our first meetings. Once we swept the bullet-points away, free-flowing conversation and interpersonal learning followed.

Likely the most profound observation of the year came from a youth member at our last meeting—“This group is the first time I’ve worked with adults where they didn’t have some kind of power over me—as a parent or a teacher or an employer.” It took us most of a whole year to learn what we should have known at the beginning—that relationships of trust and mutual respect were all that we needed to work together, a lesson that could be applied to many of our societal divides today.

From Conversation to Action

These observations from our Intergen Climate Group may seem obvious. Still, they are rarely articulated so directly or analyzed objectively for the purpose of achieving intergenerational action. The important question is, what are we going to do with these observations? How can we apply what we have learned from each other, taking concepts from discussion-based Zoom meetings to tangible action? It’s good to know our differences, and our assets and liabilities, but now what?

One simple action all elders can take is to press organizations they are involved with to create decision-making leadership positions for youth. Give up your privileged board seat with the provision that you will be replaced by a young person. If you are an elder in a position of power, collaborate with and help fund youth movements. There is an element of truth to getting out of the way so new ideas can come forward. Hopefully, youth will ask for elders’ wisdom because they know it will make them more effective agents of change.

Elders, beware of tokenism—of inviting only *one* youth member to a board, or a steering committee, or whatever the governance body might be. Populate these decision-making bodies with a substantial balance of youth so that their generation can fully contribute. Sure, young people may make misjudgments because of inexperience, but they bring fresh thinking to the problems of our time—a good tradeoff.

A more specific example of combining generational assets comes from [recent legislation](#) in Maine to divest the state’s pension fund from fossil fuel companies. Without the joint efforts of the Maine Youth for Climate Justice Coalition and the largely adult-led Sierra Club of Maine, this bold climate policy would not have succeeded. Youth activists organized the advocacy effort, working with Margaret O’Neil, a state legislator, who sponsored the bill and is a young person herself. Adult activists and allies worked on the technical side, providing critical analysis of the performance of the Maine Public Employees Retirement System, skills that youth do not yet have. Each generation complemented the skills of the other and valued what each brought to the effort.

We do not interact intergenerationally for all kinds of reasons, from our methods of communication to unintentional intimidation of the other, to power differentials that naturally come with age, to simple laziness and lack of courage. This is a mistake. We encourage everyone, regardless of age, to reach out to someone of a different generation and start a dialogue. Start by listening, not speaking. No more reason is needed than a genuine interest in understanding the perspectives and aspirations of the other—a desire to bridge the divide so your

own values might be better realized. The relationship will likely flourish, and you will accomplish things you could not have accomplished otherwise.

At the final meeting of the Intergen Climate Group in December 2021, every member voted to continue for another year, but focus on *doing* rather than talking.

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