

# DEVELOPING NETWORKING SKILLS

This practice brief is part of a series highlighting pedagogical strategies that supported youth social and emotional well-being during the summer of 2020. These approaches acknowledged both their present realities as youth coped with the pandemic, and their future lives as they prepared to pursue professional opportunities.

It draws on a larger study and report, **Youth Empowerment Summer: Crisis Response and Lessons for the Future of Collective Action and Work-based Learning**, which analyzed and documented the efforts of a New York City-based coalition of advocates, educators, community leaders, and youth activists. The YES coalition organized in 2020 following the onset of Covid-19 to create conditions that provided the city's most vulnerable youth with robust work-based learning experiences during a period of uncertainty, precarity, and unprecedented need.

Find the full report on the YES coalition and other practice briefs at [www.yes2020.nyc](http://www.yes2020.nyc)

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## DEVELOPING NETWORKING SKILLS WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

The practice of networking—reaching out to more expert others through cold contacts or mingling at professional events—is a common way for newcomers to a field to connect with professionals. These connections can lead to invaluable mentoring experiences and acts of brokering that advance youth's careers (Ching et al., 2018).

Yet when this type of networking feels more instrumental than organic, and is directed towards professional goals rather than personal goals, it can leave people feeling “dirty” (Casciaro et al., 2014). Additionally, youth may feel insecure and too intimidated to reach out to professionals.

Although the common approach of assigning one-on-one formal mentors can sidestep youth's insecurities, research has found that this approach does not necessarily empower youth or lead to lasting connections. A promising alternative approach directly trains youth to develop skills that help them to identify mentors they relate to and proactively pursue multiple connections (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to develop networking skills are featured here:

- + **create peer-networking groups**
- + **provide step-by-step advice**
- + **invite professionals to see youth at their best**

### PROGRAM GUEST SPEAKER

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“ Traditionally, when you hear about networking, it's about meeting people who are a level above you and trying to impress them and get them to help you, but that in my career has not been how it's been helpful. It's been about getting to know peers and building real relationships with them, and building a community around what I'm interested in and figuring out how we can help each other.

### PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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“ When we think about [a] professional network, we don't think about it just transactionally, and I really want to make sure that we're fostering that community within the students. So that students, their first foray into building a professional network is each other.

### QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Practice networking with their peers?
  - + Demystify networking at each step of the process?
  - + Invite professionals to see them at their best?

## DEVELOPING NETWORKING SKILLS CREATE PEER- NETWORKING GROUPS

### What did we see?

One program in our study, Collective Storytelling, had twenty youth form two video documentary production teams, taking on specific roles such as animator, producer, and actor.

The program structured collaboration in two main ways: Each team consistently worked together to produce a video documentary of their own design, and youth also met with their equivalent roles across groups so they could learn from each other.

As youth worked in production teams, they learned about each others' strengths and talents across their respective roles. They bonded, quickly sharing Instagram handles, agreeing to meet up in-person after the pandemic ends, and shared that they were keeping each other in mind as potential collaborators on future projects.

Additionally, as youth met with individuals who played a corresponding role on the other team, they were able to learn from each other, sharing their best strategies and approaches to performing their role.

Creating opportunities for this kind of “lateral” networking—done with peers—supported youth to make personable, yet professional connections with one another. It also provided an opportunity for youth to practice their networking skills and become more confident in reaching out to professionals in the future.

### YOUTH

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“ I only really have connection with people I've worked with, let's say 'Jeff' is an actor ... and he's really talented, and 'Marissa' is a theatre kid, that's things I want to keep, remember, because me, myself, I want to be a director, screen-writer so I definitely need to remember those names when I get big.”

*So that really helped, and just the experience itself, it's like now I know what to look for, how it's done, so maybe in the future, if I get to do this again, I can even make more connections with people that I've seen [who] do a lot of film and documentary production.*

## DEVELOPING NETWORKING SKILLS PROVIDE STEP-BY-STEP NETWORKING ADVICE

### What did we see?

In the program Bold Futures, a panel of guest speakers provided specific advice for how to reach out to professionals, how to cope with rejection, and how to stay in touch with professionals who are responsive.

Advice for reaching out included “Spend many hours looking at people’s profiles on LinkedIn, what their career pathways have looked like,” and “Use warm messaging such as ‘I’m a junior or senior at college; I’m looking for some career advice.’ Not explicitly saying ‘I’m looking for a job.’ That way you can build a network.”

Speakers also shared advice for coping with rejection: “Don’t be afraid of someone rejecting you by ghosting your well-crafted email. That’s okay.” They noted that, if, out of “ten cold emails, only one responds, you have one person you didn’t before.”

Speakers shared advice for next steps as well: “Try to make it not a one-time transaction ... six months later, ‘just wanted to update you, this is where I’m at,’ or ‘If you see that person got a promotion... ‘hey, I noticed this, where are you now?’” One noted, “people love to talk about themselves,” and observed that even if “people are busy, they appreciate the attempt to cultivate the relationship.”

A program director affirmed, “Once people have that little bit of investment in you, they love to hear that you graduated college or you landed an internship. Update them about something that went well.” A panelist pointed out that eventually this long-term relationship building can naturally lead up to a specific ask.

## YOUTH

“ I remember one of the speakers explicitly said that you can reach out to anyone in the field and just be like, “Hey, I’m a college student. I like what you do and I wanna learn more.” And people are apparently very nice to that and are willing to help, which is not something I thought of and not something I’ve been told before, and it’s not something I’ve done, so I think it was a nice reminder to

*just, sometimes you need to just go for it, because if you don’t try, you’ll never know what happens.*

*My networking skills, I will say, have improved. [It was] a combination of the assignments we had to do and networking with other students in the program, plus some advice that some of the speakers gave. It’s just motivating me to network, even though it might be a little scary or awkward.*

## **DEVELOPING NETWORKING SKILLS INVITE PROFESSIONALS TO SEE YOUTH AT THEIR BEST**

### **What did we see?**

Empathy Unbound hosted a final project presentation, inviting the various guest speakers, mentors, and adults that the youth had interacted with up to that point. The event was an intimate space in which the program directors introduced the youth by bragging about their work and growth over the summer, which was then evidenced in youths' presentations. The youth were able to develop their relationships with professionals

further through an extended question and answer session where they were invited to talk about what motivated the project, what they liked about the process of working on it, and what their future dreams and ambitions are.

In a larger program, youth coordinated and led a virtual "Day of Action," where they showcased their work to an audience of over 1,200 attendees. One cohort of youth acted as a logistical team and were responsible for "creating the Zoom, editing the video submissions, and hosting the whole virtual event, including emceeing, [and] live transitions." Another cohort of youth served as the outreach team: "They contacted all of our [Workplace Challenge] partners and guest speakers to invite them, reached out to each cohort to inform them of the event, and created flyers and social media content to spread the word."

### **YOUTH**

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“ When we made the video, I actually sent it to my [video journalism] teacher, and she was very proud. That was pretty cool.

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

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“ If you invite people to come see you at your best, they will show up!

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

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“ We turned to our young people to host this event. Two cohorts worked collaboratively to put the event together, at which it was only youth voices that were elevated, while adults took a back seat to listen, learn, and celebrate their efforts.