

# Youth-Centered Onboarding

*This resource was developed by Pure Momentum Consulting for the 2025 Board Empowerment Program of the Community Foundation for Monterey County.*

## 1. Introduction to this Resource

This resource is designed to help nonprofit boards thoughtfully welcome and integrate **youth members (under age 25)** into their governance and leadership structures. It offers a set of **youth-centered onboarding questions** that encourage genuine dialogue, relationship-building and mutual learning between new youth board members and the boards they are joining. The companion set of questions for **board mentors** supports meaningful two-way connection and ongoing support during the youth member's first year of service. Use the prompts as **conversation starters** to foster curiosity, trust, and shared understanding between youth and mentors, key ingredients for successful intergenerational collaboration.

### Why Youth Inclusion Matters

Inviting young leaders into nonprofit board service is more than a gesture of inclusion. It's an investment in the organization's long-term relevance, creativity and sustainability. Youth bring fresh perspective, firsthand insight into emerging community issues and a lived understanding of social and cultural dynamics that seasoned boards may overlook. Their voices strengthen decision-making, expand community reach and model shared leadership for the next generation.

### What Youth Gain from the Experience

Youth who serve on boards gain exposure to nonprofit governance, strategic thinking and collective decision-making. They learn how community organizations operate, practice professional communication and develop confidence in contributing their voice to multi-generational teams. Through mentorship, they also build networks and leadership skills that can shape their future civic engagement and career pathways.

### What Boards Gain from the Experience

Boards that intentionally include and support youth members gain access to perspectives that keep their mission responsive and future-focused. Engaging youth challenges assumptions, refreshes board culture and builds bridges across generations. It also cultivates a pipeline of emerging leaders who understand the organization's values from within and can carry them forward.

## 2. Instructions for Use

This tool works best when used as part of a **board onboarding or orientation process** or introduced later to strengthen relationships between youth members and the board as a whole.

### When to Use This Tool

- **Before a youth member joins the board:** during interviews, onboarding planning or informal meet-and-greet sessions.
- **During the first 3–6 months** of a youth member's service to support integration and trust-building.
- **When assigning or checking in with a board mentor:** as a structure for early 1:1 conversations.

### How to Use the Conversation Questions

- These are **conversation prompts**. Allow room for tangents, pauses and storytelling. The goal is not speed or task-completion, but mutual connection.
- Choose **3–5 questions** from each section (youth-to-mentor, mentor-to-youth) to start with based on your relationship and what feels most timely.
- Use the questions in a 1:1 meeting, phone call or even asynchronously (e.g., shared reflections via email or Google Doc).

### Who Can Facilitate or Introduce This Tool

- This tool is designed to be flexible and adaptable to your organization's culture and capacity.
- Board Chairs, Executive Directors, or Governance Committee leads can introduce this tool as part of board culture.
- Board Mentors (see Section 4) can use the tool to structure their early conversations with youth members.
- Youth members can review the questions independently and select ones they'd like to explore.

## Notes & Caveats

- This tool assumes a **baseline of psychological safety** and a willingness to learn across differences. (See Section 3 for foundational board culture considerations.)
- Not all questions will resonate for everyone. Encourage choice, autonomy and co-creation.
- This resource is **not a substitute** for board training or a comprehensive youth engagement strategy.

## 3. Foundational Board Culture Considerations

Before inviting a youth member (under age 25) to join your board, it's essential to prepare the soil not just the seat. Youth inclusion is most effective and sustainable when the board has done the work to ensure a culture of **psychological safety, mutual respect and meaningful engagement** is already being cultivated.

The following conditions should be in place before onboarding a youth board member. If your board is still working on these areas, that's okay. Consider pausing recruitment and focusing first on internal culture-building.

### Recommended Conditions for Youth-Ready Board Culture

#### 1. Clear Onboarding Structure

- The board has a written onboarding plan that outlines roles, responsibilities, meeting cadence and learning pathways. Materials are accessible and not overloaded with jargon.

#### 2. Appointed Point of Contact or Board Mentor

- A trusted, relationally attuned board member is designated to walk alongside the youth during their first year of service (see Section 4).

#### 3. Orientation to Power Dynamics

- The board is aware of generational, racial, and socioeconomic dynamics that may impact how youth engage. There is openness to rebalancing power, listening deeply and acknowledging blind spots.

#### 4. Flexible Participation Structures

- The board offers accessible meeting formats (e.g., hybrid/virtual options).
- Time of day, transportation, and compensation (if applicable) are considered when designing participation.

#### 5. Valuing Lived Experience as Leadership Capital

- The board understands that traditional credentials are not the only measure of readiness.
- Youth are welcomed for who they are instead of asked to prove their worth through perfection or over-preparation.

#### 6. Openness to Feedback and Adaptation

- The board regularly evaluates its own culture and welcomes suggestions for change.
- There's a shared commitment to evolving rather than expecting youth to assimilate into outdated norms.

### If These Are Not Yet in Place...

Consider using this tool internally to begin culture-shifting conversations before inviting youth onto the board. These questions can also support **intergenerational dialogue** among current board members to begin practicing a more inclusive, reflective culture.

## 4. The Role of the Board Mentor

Welcome a youth member onto your board by assigning a thoughtful, accessible and consistent **Board Mentor**. This can be the difference between a youth member feeling overwhelmed and disconnected, or feeling seen, supported and empowered to contribute meaningfully.

A Board Mentor is not a supervisor or gatekeeper. They are a **trusted guide and companion**, helping the youth board member orient to the unspoken norms, formal structures and relational dynamics of board service.

## Purpose of the Board Mentor Role

- To serve as a **relational bridge** between the youth member and the rest of the board
- To offer a **safe space for questions, reflection, and clarification** without judgment
- To model transparency, curiosity and vulnerability in leadership
- To ensure the youth member doesn't feel isolated, tokenized or out of place

## What a Board Mentor Does

- Schedules **regular 1:1 check-ins** with the youth member (monthly is recommended during the first 6 months)
- Helps translate meeting content, jargon or unclear expectations
- Checks in about workload, capacity and comfort levels
- Encourages the youth member's input, helping them identify when and how to bring forward ideas or concerns
- Shares personal experiences and insights from their own board journey
- Advocates for the youth member's presence and inclusion when needed

## What Makes a Good Mentor

- A relational, patient and grounded presence
- A willingness to listen more than they speak
- An understanding of generational, cultural or systemic barriers youth may be navigating
- A comfort with naming power dynamics and helping the board grow through discomfort
- Ideally, someone who remembers what it felt like to be new and someone who values shared leadership

## Duration of the Mentor Relationship

- Recommend a minimum of **6 months**. Check in after 6 months: Is this still working? Does anything need to shift? Extend to the first full year if possible.
- The frequency and format of check-ins can evolve based on mutual comfort and rhythm

## 5. Youth → Mentor Conversation Questions

*Questions to help youth board members build trust, learn the culture and feel supported*

These questions are designed to support conversation between you (as a youth board member) and your board mentor, Executive Director, or any trusted board leader. You do **not** need to ask all of these at once. Choose 3–5 that feel most relevant to you right now. Think of these as invitations to connect, not performance checks.

These conversations can happen during a 1:1 meeting, a casual coffee chat or a virtual check-in. Feel free to reword them in your own voice.

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### Getting to Know You

#### 1. What brought you to this board? Why do you care about this organization?

This helps me understand your journey and what keeps you connected.

#### 2. What helped you feel like you belonged on the board when you first joined?

I'm curious about what made you feel welcome or what you wish had happened differently.

#### 3. What do you enjoy most about being a board member?

I want to learn what's possible and fulfilling about this experience.

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## Learning the Landscape

### 4. If I have questions during a meeting, what's the best way to bring them up?

I want to participate well but I don't want to interrupt or feel lost.

### 5. Are there any "unwritten rules" I should know about how this board works?

Sometimes the hardest part is what's not in the handbook.

### 6. What's a typical role youth board members have played here in the past?

I'd love to know what's worked—or what didn't work—so I can find my rhythm.

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## Support + Communication

### 7. If I'm feeling unsure, stuck, or overwhelmed, what's the best way to bring it up with you?

I want to know how to ask for help in a way that works for both of us.

### 8. Is it okay if I give feedback about how things are going for me on the board?

I care about making this work well for everyone, and I value open dialogue.

### 9. Are there any areas where you think I could stretch or grow during my time here?

I'm open to learning and developing, even if I don't have it all figured out yet.

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These questions are just a starting point. You don't need to have perfect language just curiosity, honesty, and a willingness to build a relationship. Your voice matters here.

## 6. Mentor → Youth Conversation Questions

*Questions to help mentors build connection, confidence, and clarity with youth board members*

As a board mentor, your role is to support, not shape, the youth member's experience. These questions are designed to spark conversation, build trust and gently uncover where support, encouragement or clarity may be helpful.

Choose 3–5 questions that feel natural to your voice and the relationship. Allow time for the conversation to unfold without rushing or over-directing.

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### Relationship + Curiosity

#### 1. What inspired you to consider board service at this stage of your life?

This helps me understand what brought you here and what matters to you.

#### 2. What makes you feel most welcomed or at ease in a group setting?

I want to be mindful of how you best connect and contribute.

#### 3. What does leadership mean to you right now?

There's no right answer—I just want to learn how you see your own voice and impact.

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### Learning + Growth

#### 4. What areas of the organization are you most curious to learn more about?

This can help us find meaningful places for your voice and involvement.

#### 5. How do you like to learn something new: by observing, asking questions, doing it yourself?

This helps me support your learning style, not assume it.

#### 6. Are there areas of board work that feel confusing or overwhelming right now?

I want you to know it's okay not to know everything. We all start somewhere.

## Support + Communication

### 7. What's the best way for us to stay connected? Text, email, quick check-ins?

I want to respect your time and make communication easy.

### 8. Is there anything I can do to help you feel more confident or included in board meetings?

Your experience matters, and I want to be a steady resource as you find your rhythm.

### 9. If something doesn't feel good or clear, how would you like me to respond?

This helps us co-create a respectful, caring dynamic from the beginning.

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These questions aren't about performance or pressure. They're about presence. A good mentor listens deeply, adapts support to the youth's needs and creates space for honest, evolving dialogue.

## 7. Tips for Including Youth in Strategic Discussions

*Supporting meaningful participation beyond symbolic inclusion*

Youth board members are not just future leaders. They are **current partners in vision and strategy**. Including them in real decision-making helps shift board culture from performative inclusion to shared leadership. These tips support thoughtful integration into strategic conversations:

### Before the Meeting

- **Provide context in advance:** Share key documents or summaries early, with plain language explanations of what will be discussed and why it matters.
- **Assign a conversation partner:** Pair the youth member with a more seasoned board member for a pre-meeting chat to review the topic and answer questions.
- **Invite pre-reflections:** Ask youth to share any thoughts or questions in writing before the meeting to give them space to process without pressure.

## During the Meeting

- **Name their presence as valued:** Acknowledge youth perspectives early in the meeting and invite contributions with care. Not spotlighting, but signaling belonging.
- **Create room for pauses:** Don't rush through agenda items. Slower pacing gives everyone, especially newer members, space to digest and reflect.
- **Use breakout groups or small circles:** This can make it easier for youth to engage than speaking in a large room or Zoom grid.

## After the Meeting

- **Follow up 1:1:** Ask the youth member how the discussion felt for them. What was clear? What was confusing? What would help next time?
- **Offer re-engagement opportunities:** If they didn't speak during the meeting, invite them to reflect later or contribute to a subcommittee.
- **Let participation be iterative:** Not every meeting will be a breakthrough—and that's okay. Consistency builds confidence.

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## Closing Reflections

Bringing youth onto your board is not just a gesture of equity. It is a **strategy of vitality**. When supported with intention and care, young board members contribute fresh vision, grounded lived experience, and a rare kind of honesty that can shift entire cultures. And when mentors and leaders walk alongside them with curiosity and trust, transformation becomes mutual.

Use this tool as a doorway, not a destination. Let it spark real conversations, challenge assumptions, and help your board become a place where all generations lead, learn, and grow together.