



**CradletoCareer**  
Anchored at United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

# **Youth on the Rise: Supporting Youth Engagement**

## **A Reflection & Guide**

## **Cradle to Career Partnership**

Anchored at United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

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## Introduction

The work of the Cradle to Career Partnership's Youth on the Rise Change Network (YOTR) relies on the voices of young people in the community. Authentic, meaningful, and actionable youth engagement is critical to ensure that what YOTR partners do is beneficial for youth in Pima County. The following reflection and guide describes one method for youth engagement – a Fishbowl. This Fishbowl activity allowed YOTR and adult partners to better understand what steps need to be taken to include youth in this work as leaders and decision-makers, and it is a tool to support youth and community engagement.

While reading through this guide, think about the following:

*How am I engaging youth in my own work, both day-to-day and at a larger scale? How can I do this more authentically?*

*How can I ask for feedback from the young people I work with, and act on that feedback in a way that shows I listened?*

*How can I create more space for young people to engage in leadership roles in my organization or program? How do I make sure these spaces are safe for young people to contribute?*

# Why a Fishbowl?

The work of the Cradle to Career Partnership's Youth on the Rise Change Network (YOTR) relies on the voices of young people in the community. Authentic, meaningful, and actionable youth engagement is critical to ensure that what YOTR partners do is beneficial for youth in Pima County. This Fishbowl activity allowed YOTR and adult partners to better understand what steps need to be taken to include youth in this work as leaders and decision-makers, and it is a tool to support youth and community engagement.

## What is a Fishbowl?

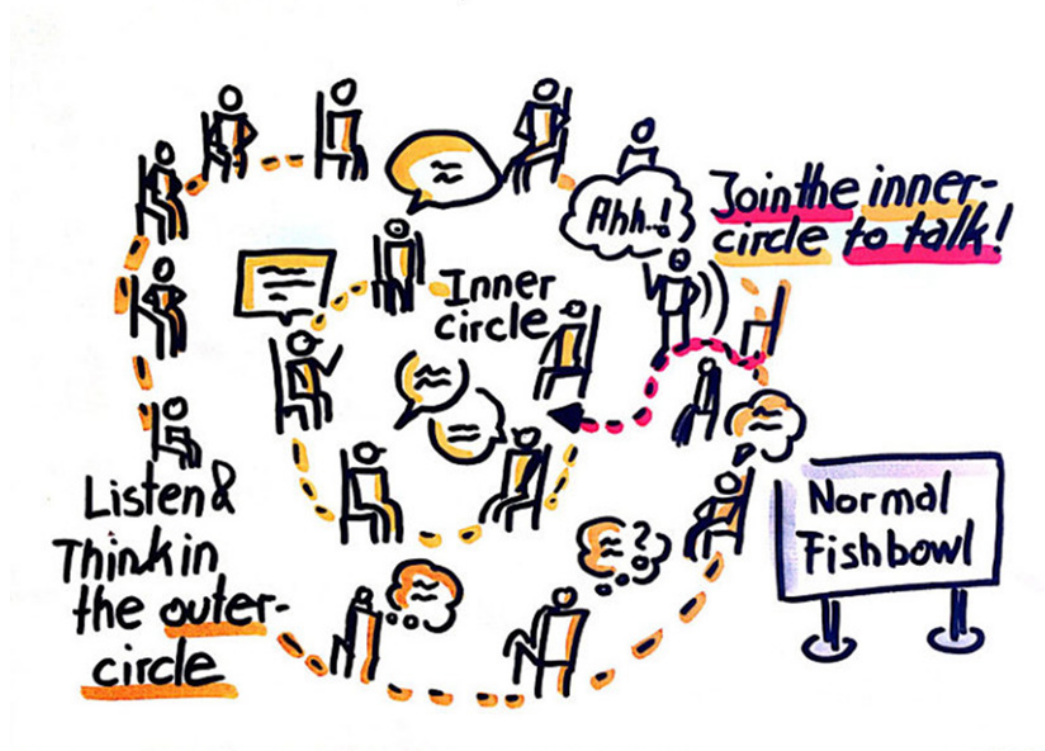
The Fishbowl tool enables the facilitation of large group dialogue by focusing on a small group discussion in an inner circle while the rest of the group listens and observes from the outer circle.

The roles of the Fishbowl components are as follows:

- Inner circle: sharing lived experience, responding to questions in a conversational style
- Outer circle: listening to the inner circle reflectively, assessing when they can contribute to the inner circle
- Facilitator: monitoring the conversation, moving from question to question, inviting people to “tap in”

Benefits of the Fishbowl tool when discussing complex topics are:

- Decreases risk of tokenism for participants
- In this situation, allows for youth-adult partnership in a way that's organic
- Allows for the conversation to move organically through different topics
- Encourages openness and authentic sharing



## What Went Into the Fishbowl Preparation?

To prepare for the Fishbowl activity, we took steps to ensure that we would be able to do the activity successfully. Recruiting youth, making sure they were appropriately compensated, and giving them time to read the questions and brainstorm responses before the Fishbowl activity was a crucial part in the activity's success. Eleven youth participated from Youth on their Own, Goodwill METRO/REC, ASU Public Allies, Teen Court, and UA Fostering Success and each got a \$10 Walmart gift cards to compensate them for their time.

The group of youth met before the Fishbowl activity, where the facilitator led introductions and a conversation around the Fishbowl questions. Youth were each given a printed piece of paper with the questions on them, and we brainstormed responses together. Goodwill METRO was also able to provide transportation for the youth to get to the meeting place.

Before the Fishbowl activity started during the meeting with partners, the facilitator started a conversation about norms/rules for the activity. Some of these included keeping information confidential (sharing information without names, organizational affiliations, etc.), giving space and taking space, and the WAIT (Why Am I Talking) rule. Setting norms before the Fishbowl started allowed youth to feel safe and comfortable in the space and gave them the opportunity to share in an authentic and vulnerable way.

## What Were the Questions in the Fishbowl?

1. What is youth engagement? What does it mean to you? (What does it look like when youth are engaged with adults who are trying to support them?)
2. Has there been an opportunity for you to engage in a group (council, etc.) and you decided not to? Why?
3. What has drawn you towards participating on a council or in a leadership role as a youth? What has made it exciting?
4. When you have been asked to participate and give a youth perspective, how do you think that perspective has been used? Why do you think that?
5. What makes you feel comfortable and safe to share your opinion in a group? What supports do you need to share your opinion in a group?



# What Did We Do During the Fishbowl?

\* While the Fishbowl was designed around youth engagement topics, important insights about accessing and using community resources were also shared by the youth participants.

## ***What is youth engagement?***

Youth expressed some important aspects of youth engagement – trusted adults, allowing youth to show vulnerability, and having adequate compensation were a few of the themes that emerged. Youth mentioned that councils are one way for youth to engage in their community, but that there are also other ways. Giving youth the opportunity to improve their own community, and speaking up for other youth, is considered a crucial part of youth engagement.

## ***What are some barriers to authentic youth engagement?***

Youth mentioned that being unable to engage rarely has to do with desire, but with numerous other factors. Some of these factors are listed below:

- Lack of parental/caregiver support
- Feeling overwhelmed with other commitments and life responsibilities
- Limited energy
- Emotional labor involved with completing applications (especially when a small group youth are always invited to the same opportunities)
- Not feeling welcomed/no sense of belonging
- Lack of knowledge
- Limited compensation can cause engagement to feel like unpaid labor – one young person stated “I need more than snacks.”
- Shyness
- Lack of experience with leadership leads to lack of self confidence

Another important factor that youth mentioned is the need to approach each youth in the right way to find out what their needs are. For example, the question “What do you need?” can be an intimidating and confusing question for some.

Youth also shared the importance of adults being aware of the difference between engaging with youth who are in crisis and with youth who have their basic needs met. Youth mentioned that this distinction is often not taken into account by adults and can be seen as not utilizing support when actually it is not the type of support needed at the time. One young person stated that, “If I’m hungry, how am I supposed to focus on GED Applications?”

Several youth also mentioned that they had a feeling of being undeserving of support and resources, or felt guilty accepting them. Youth stated that it can be “hard to accept free help” because it “can’t be that easy.” Youth don’t want to feel pitied, and adults need to keep this in mind when doing outreach in the community.

## ***What has drawn you towards participating on a youth council or other group? What has made it exciting?***

Youth mentioned the following factors:

- Being around peers with similar lived experiences
- Having a safe place to be that isn't home
- Feeling part of something bigger (helping the community, etc.)
- Having a safe and inclusive space for all cultures and communities to feel welcome

## ***When you have been asked to give a youth perspective, how do you feel this perspective has been used?***

Youth expressed frustration around this topic, saying that it feels like adults only ask for a youth perspective to appear as if they care, but rarely make actual changes based on the information. One youth stated that it “feels like a waste of breath” to share their opinion, reflecting this issue. Youth from the Fishbowl stated that they often feel over-surveyed or over-extracted for information that seems to go nowhere.

## ***What makes you feel safe to share? What supports do you need?***

Youth mentioned the following factors:

- Shared experiences
- Authenticity
- Vulnerability
- Trust (!!)
- Understanding
- Good listening skills from adults
- Non-judgement

To learn more about Youth on the Rise, contact Caroline Lewis at [clewis@unitedwaytucson.org](mailto:clewis@unitedwaytucson.org).