

# Building a Thriving Learning Network for Intergenerational Practice

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Building a thriving learning community, community of practice, or peer learning network focused on intergenerational programming requires careful attention to purpose, structure, engagement, and sustainability. Because members are applying what they learn within their own organizations, the network should function as a practice accelerator, helping participants move from exploration to implementation and improvement.

## Define a Clear Purpose and Scope

A strong learning network begins with shared clarity about *why it exists* and *what members will gain*.

- **Articulate goals:** Decide whether the network focuses on skill development, knowledge sharing, innovation, or improving intergenerational practice across organizations.
- **Clarify scope:** Specify who participates (roles, sectors, experience levels), what kinds of intergenerational work are included, and intended outcomes.
- **Create a value proposition:** Members should clearly understand benefits such as practical tools, peer insight, collaboration opportunities, and program improvement support.
- **Develop shared language:** Co-create a working definition and guiding principles for intergenerational practice to align expectations.

**Tip:** Learning communities with vague purposes struggle to maintain engagement; networks without shared definitions struggle to produce actionable learning.

## Foster a Sense of Belonging and Shared Purpose

Professional learning networks depend on strong relationships.

- **Establish norms and culture:** Encourage openness, curiosity, respect, and collaborative learning.
- **Identify champions or core members:** Early participants model participation and help onboard others.
- **Create a safe space:** Members must feel comfortable sharing challenges and failures.
- **Celebrate contributions:** Highlight program successes, experiments, and lessons learned.

**Tip:** Belonging drives participation; participation drives learning.

## Design for Interaction and Practice-Based Knowledge Sharing

Learning networks succeed when interaction centers on real work.

- **Use structured activities:** Practice showcases, peer support, implementation workshops, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Encourage storytelling:** Real program experiences help translate ideas into practice.
- **Focus on application:** Every session should help members change or test something in their organization.
- **Leverage multiple channels:** Virtual meetings, discussion platforms, shared documents, and occasional in-person convenings.

**Tip:** Avoid one-way presentations. Interaction and applied learning sustain engagement.

## Support Peer Learning as the Primary Engine

In a learning network, expertise is distributed across members.

- **Mentoring and coaching:** Pair participants/organizations at different stages of implementation.
- **Peer review and feedback loops:** Members present challenges and receive structured input.
- **Group problem-solving:** Use facilitated sessions to tackle common barriers in intergenerational programming.
- **Stage-based learning groups:** Allow members to self-select into exploring, piloting, scaling, or refining phases.

**Tip:** Peer learning thrives when knowledge flows in both directions rather than from experts alone.

## Provide Resources, Tools, and Practice Infrastructure

Networks must make learning visible and reusable.

- **Knowledge repositories:** Program examples, activity guides, partnership models, and evaluation tools.
- **Collaboration platforms:** Slack, Teams, shared drives, or lightweight community platforms.
- **Practice library:** Capture lessons learned after each session.
- **Analytics and reflection:** Track participation and resource use to refine offerings.

**Tip:** Accessibility and simplicity matter — too many tools reduce participation.

## Encourage Continuous Growth and Experimentation

Learning networks are most effective when members actively test ideas.

- **Solicit member input:** Use surveys and reflection sessions to guide evolution.
- **Support experimentation cycles:** Learn → test locally → share results → adapt collectively.
- **Host applied learning events:** Design sprints, collaborative labs, or joint pilot initiatives.
- **Document outcomes:** Case studies and learning briefs help spread innovation.

**Tip:** Networks assist with change when conversation leads to experimentation.

## Sustain Engagement Over Time

Consistency and visible progress keep networks alive.

- **Establish a regular cadence:** Monthly gatherings, working groups, and periodic convenings.
- **Provide active facilitation:** Network leaders connect people, synthesize insights, and maintain momentum.
- **Promote distributed leadership:** Invite members to host sessions or lead initiatives.
- **Celebrate progress:** Share stories of new programs, partnerships, and improvements.

**Tip:** Engagement declines when networks feel inactive or overly centralized.

## Encourage Cross-Organizational Collaboration

The unique value of a learning network lies in connections across organizations.

- Facilitate partnerships between organizations
- Encourage joint pilot programs or shared funding opportunities
- Organize site visits or exchange sessions
- Support collaborative resource development

## Measure Impact Through Practice Change

Traditional participation metrics are insufficient. Track outcomes such as:

- New intergenerational programs launched
- Existing programs improved
- Partnerships formed
- Tools adopted or adapted
- Increased practitioner confidence
- Evidence of organizational change

## Design Principles for Online and Hybrid Learning Networks

- **Accessibility:** Ensure inclusive participation across technology comfort levels and organizational capacity.
- **Micro-learning opportunities:** Short, practical resources encourage ongoing engagement.
- **Flexible participation:** Combine synchronous and asynchronous options.
- **Trust and safety:** Clear facilitation and norms encourage honest exchange.
- **Knowledge portability:** Create materials that members can immediately use.

## Conclusion

A well-designed learning network focused on intergenerational practice becomes a living ecosystem where:

- Knowledge flows across organizations,
- Experimentation is supported,
- Practitioners learn from real experience, and
- Intergenerational programs improve faster than any organization could achieve alone.

## About Generations United

For more than three decades, Generations United's mission has been to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. As the leading advocate for intergenerational initiatives, Generations United sparks cooperation across ages, harnessing the vibrancy and productivity that emerge when people of all ages come together. Learn more at [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

