

Don't complain, train young adult slackers who work in your office

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Emerging adults aged 18 to 25 are often criticized for their poor interpersonal skills, sense of entitlement, and casual work ethic. But a new University of Illinois study suggests that fault-finding adult co-workers could make a big difference in young workers' leadership development by developing relationships with them, modeling the behaviors they wish to see, and providing leadership growth opportunities.

"Young adults in our study had learned a lot from mentors who modeled initiative, drive, and persistence; demonstrated how to communicate with confidence and engage in active listening; and displayed reliability, tolerance, respect, and a positive attitude," said Jill Bowers, a researcher in the U of I's Department of Human and Community Development.

According to Bowers, most of the literature on leadership development is written from an adult point of view. In this small qualitative study, however, [young adults](#) describe their leadership growth as students and on the job as they moved from adolescence into [young adulthood](#).

The study shows that role models were profoundly influential during the transition to adulthood, and the article describes a role model-driven framework for leadership development, she said.

"Adults who are complaining about the new generation of 'slackers' should build relationships with students and young colleagues and actively model a professional work ethic for them," Bowers said.

In the study, when a mentoring relationship was established and role models demonstrated the behaviors they wished to see in young participants, mentees described a process in which they listened to the knowledge their mentors shared, engaged in opportunities to grow as leaders, and believed in their own potential, she said.

Later in the [leadership development](#) process, some emerging adults became inspired by positional leaders—say Gandhi, Hillary Clinton, or Bill and Melinda Gates. These cultural leaders, who were unknown personally to study participants, inspired the young adults' vision of future activism, but that didn't happen until a teacher, family member, coach, or co-worker had laid a foundation for thinking about character and leadership, she said.

"For that reason, we'd like to encourage businesses and organizations to offer leadership training, explicitly teaching employees and youth leaders to be good [role models](#) and teaching youth and young adults how to develop and maintain relationships with mentors," she said.

"It's natural for some people to engage in positive communication and active listening or demonstrate initiative and perseverance. For others, those qualities aren't as instinctual, and establishing relationships and mentoring young adults is something they could learn if businesses made teaching those traits a priority," she said.

When adults prepare to take on a mentoring role, it's important that they evaluate their own work ethic and professional skills. They should modify their behavior and personal qualities that they wouldn't want to see replicated in the adolescents or young adults they are working with, she said.

"You have to demonstrate the skills you're trying to teach, not just preach about their importance. If you tell a student or a young co-worker

to use good email etiquette, and then don't follow your own advice in communicating with them, you lose credibility," she said.

More information: "Examining the Relationship Between Role Models and Leadership Growth During the Transition to Adulthood" is available pre-publication online in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*, DOI: [10.1177/0743558415576570](https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558415576570)

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