

Your Youth Is Your Strength

It's not easy being young and trying to raise money – many times, those with the resources don't take young people seriously as change makers, fundraisers, and leaders. What can we do to turn around this situation? How can we get past these obstacles, so that our projects and ideas get the support that they deserve? *How can we turn our youth into a source of strength, rather than a disadvantage?*

Make your youth visible when you approach funders. A biology teacher in the rural United States has never had a grant proposal turned down – as a result, his classroom has a wind tunnel, its own computer lab, huge fish tanks, and other pricey equipment. The secret is this: He partners with young people in writing all of his grants. Their names go on the cover, their writing fills the pages, their bios are in the appendices. *Youth is an asset – treat it like one.* Go into meetings with potential funders with an older ally – so that you have the credibility of youth, along with the experience of a seasoned fundraiser.

Build alliances with youth-friendly adult organizations. It's hard for any person – especially one under 25 – to convince a foundation, a corporation, or even an individual to fund them to work for social change. One obstacle in many countries is the tax law – donations to individuals aren't tax deductible. So finding an organization to act as your fiscal agent can be key – they receive the check, you get the cash (sometimes organizations ask for a small cut in exchange for the service – it depends).

These alliances are important for more than just tax reasons. Having well-known, long-standing organizations on your side will help convince funders that you're a good investment – that your idea isn't going to go away the moment your mood changes. And organizations can provide the facilities, staffing, advice, and technology resources you need to get your work done.

So how do you build these alliances? Shop around – choose allies that have a track record for trusting young people, have a good reputation in the community, and that have access to the resources you need. Find a youth-friendly person in the organization, and approach them with a well-thought-out plan. Ask them for advice before asking for partnership – it's essential to build a relationship before asking for any sort of formal arrangement. Demonstrate what's in it for the organization – what they will get out of the partnership. And when you get to the point of formal partnership, get things in writing – in a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) that lays out who is responsible for what.

Choose funders that let you stay true to your beliefs. There are many foundations, corporations, and individuals out there that you simply won't want associated with their cause – because they've proven they could not care less about young people, your community, and your issues. *Don't let your vision and hard work become a media stunt for a company that needs to clean up its act.*

How do you do this? Get your giving [code of ethics](#) down on paper – so that everyone involved in your organization has a chance to have input on what money you will and won't accept, and what sort of relationships you will and won't have with funders. When you're doing research on

potential funders, learn about their commitment to [social responsibility](#). And when it comes down to it, take a stand – don't accept money from a source that you're not proud to be associated with.

Don't let funders take control of your project. Some funders will only give you money if you change your idea so much that it's no longer theirs. Some – especially corporations – will insist that their logo goes on everything that you do. In either case, your autonomy and independence is in danger. Most of the time, though, things aren't this black and white. Donors often have good advice to offer – and just as often believe that they have your best interest at heart. Forming a partnership with a funder, while keeping your vision strong and true, can be challenging.

As you build a relationship, make sure that you're getting involved in a way that lets you stay independent. Most funders will tell you not to change your idea to meet their guidelines. On the other hand, we all change our language depending on who we're talking to – and different funders will react more or less positively to different ways of describing the same project. So, keep the work consistent – but don't be afraid to change the way you talk about it.

Don't fall into the trap of being a “little adult.” There are a bunch of “professional young people” out there – the same student leaders who are invited to all the conferences, who can dress well, who say the things that adults want to hear. Sometimes it's tempting to act like a smaller adult in order to get in those doors – to write proposals that sound like an adult wrote them, to go into meetings and talk like an adult, to fall back on the same fundraising strategies that adults always use. Sure, sometimes it's necessary to put on a suit to get respect. But your youth is your strength. So raise money in ways that only youth can – speak honestly and openly with donors. Get out on the street to spread the word. Do things that adults would be too embarrassed to do. Be yourself.

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