

LEARNING TO ASK

A New Harmony Approach to Intergenerational Dynamics

Working with community choruses by definition means working with people from a wide range of backgrounds. This includes working with people of different ages. As we explored in *New Harmony Vol. 1*, an individual singer's worldview and needs are influenced profoundly by their identity and background — their race, their gender identity, their socioeconomic level, and their physical ability. These characteristics impact how a singer or volunteer relates with others in our chorus organizations and what they need from us in order to feel welcome.

Age strongly influences both a singer's worldview and their socioemotional needs. Differences related to age might include differences because of time in life. Sociological research suggests that as we get older, the quality and quantity of our relationships change and the things that we value may shift from when we were younger. Research into LGBTQIA+ choruses suggests, for example, that younger and older people may have different motivations for joining a chorus related to their time in life.

There are also other age-related differences due to the popular media we consume, the prevailing social and political issues, and the shared community traumas experienced during formative periods of our life. These shared experiences — popular TV shows, music, and movies; contemporary social problems; and collective emergencies like the AIDS epidemic or 9/11 — shape us into what are called “generational cohorts.” People who grew up in the 1970s are going to have very different shared experiences from people who grew up in the 2020s, for example. In a sense, growing up in a different time is similar to growing up in a different culture.

Unfortunately, in recent years, popular media has determinedly reinforced the idea that individuals in a generational cohort have oversimplified stereotypes that predefine them. Boomers are rich. Gen-X is stoned. Millennials are lazy. Gen-Z is anxious. None of these stereotypes are true! Yet, because these false stereotypes are so pervasive, age differences may be an easy explanation for disagreements. “Younger and

older singers can't get along because they just don't have anything in common.”

The reality is *the age of the person doesn't matter at all!* Regardless of a person's age, there are three attributes any person must have to engage in our work towards New Harmony: (1) a curiosity about people different from ourselves, (2) an ability to be honest and vulnerable, and (3) a willingness to be uncomfortable through the process.

1. Be **curious**

2. Be **vulnerable**

3. Be OK with *discomfort*

First, **be curious**. In order to work effectively with people from different backgrounds, we must first be authentically curious about them. This curiosity must be “real,” a genuine interest in learning about the other person's experiences and why they see the world in the way that they do. To do this, we must ask questions! Too often, disagreements occur because we assume that other people do or should share our views. By asking instead of assuming, we give ourselves the opportunity to better understand the other person not from our own biases but from themselves.

Popular stereotypes suggest that older people become less curious over time, and younger people are overly curious. Another stereotype is that older people have lots of experience, whereas younger people have no experience. Again, these are just stereotypes. Every person has their own story. There are plenty of older people in our choruses who are very excited to get to know people with unfamiliar identities. Conversely, there are many younger people who express a complete unwillingness to go outside their social comfort zone. We must ask others about their experiences rather than assuming things about them based simply on their age.

Second, **be vulnerable**. In an ask culture, people should respond honestly to the questions being asked. Be forthright with opinions and beliefs. Say what you mean. This doesn't mean to be rude, of course. It's perfectly

easy to be both honest and kind to the people around us. When hearing someone's response to a question, believe them! If someone says something doesn't feel good to them, or something makes them upset, believe that they are being honest with you even if you don't understand why. Then, ask them for clarification from their perspective to better understand where they are coming from. You don't always have to agree with them, but you do have to try to understand the situation from their perspective.

In an ask culture, vulnerability sometimes means being willing to say no. "No, I don't like this piece of music." "No, I don't like being touched." "No, I don't feel like I am being represented on the stage." Hearing a singer say "no" isn't a threat, it's an opportunity. Understanding a person's honest viewpoint, even when they don't feel good, is an important step toward creating spaces where people are truly having their needs met.

Third, be willing to be uncomfortable. It is common for people to feel uneasy when confronted with unfamiliar ideas, identities, and points of view. This is not an "instinct," per se, but a learned behavior based on previous life experiences. To work together, we have to move past these programmed reactions and recognize that our anxiety about unfamiliar people is our problem, not theirs. If someone says or does something that feels uncomfortable, first ask yourself, "Why am I uncomfortable?" If possible, have a conversation with the person and ask them to tell you more about themselves. People who are familiar to us allow us to be vulnerable more easily, but familiarity can only develop when we take the time to get to know someone. Just as straight people are often more supportive of LGBTQIA+ issues when they know someone who is queer, we too can and will be more supportive of our fellow choristers when we know them on a more personal level.

Ask culture demands more work on the part of each individual when interacting with others. We can't simply assume that those we work alongside share our values or experiences. It is our responsibility to ask, but we also benefit from getting to know them on a deeper and more intimate level by being honest and vulnerable. GALA Choruses have always had a responsibility to provide safe social space. For example, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020s, as well as through the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, choruses became a place of refuge for many people, a uniquely important

place for singers to interact and socialize. Think of this like transformative community engagement put to action as an individual practice — a "transformative interpersonal engagement."

Ask culture also means allowing the other person to say "no." Some people are happy to be open about themselves, but others prefer to be more private with their personal considerations. Asking a question is an expression of power — you are demanding something personal from that person. Be gracious and understanding if the person would prefer not to share something with you.

One good strategy to foster an ask culture is to model good ask behavior. When someone makes a statement about their point of view, rather than assume their intentions, ask! "What experiences have you had that influenced you to feel that way?" Many people enjoy talking about themselves. Ask them to share a story about something they experienced. Allow this to be an opportunity to learn about the person and let them share with the whole group if they are comfortable. There is no better way to learn about someone than hearing about their life from their point of view.

Asking is especially important with regard to physical touch. It has become increasingly clear that while some people are very comfortable with physical touch, people who prefer not to be touched are increasingly comfortable expressing this openly. In the 1980s, physical touch among casual acquaintances was an incredibly important form of emotional support and perceived as safe in spaces like our choruses. Flash forward to the 2020s — many people now expect to choose when they are touched and to be asked for consent first. The simple solution is to simply ask.

As our chorus members continue to age, intergenerational dynamics will continue to be an important consideration as we work toward New Harmony. But, we cannot allow ourselves to be brainwashed into stereotypical generational cohort thinking as framed by the media. People of any age can be curious, vulnerable, and willing to be uncomfortable. By fostering an "ask culture" instead of an "assume culture" we can cultivate a chorus community that actively celebrates the identities of and supports the needs of each individual no matter their age or background, without resorting to stereotypes. 🌸