MEANING MAKING

8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations

Josh Packard, PhD, and Contributors

Foreword by Rabbi Elan Babchuck, MBA

Springtide
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

MEANING MAKING

8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations

Josh Packard, PhD
Ellen B. Koneck, MAR
Jerry Ruff, MA
Megan Bissell, MA
Jana N. Abdulkadir

Foreword by Rabbi Elan Babchuck, MBA

Springtide™
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

In my role at Glean Network, a think tank focused on developing and equipping innovators and entrepreneurs to imagine and develop the future of faith in America, I spend a lot of time looking at numbers. The think tank studies statistics, deciphers data, and ultimately tries to craft narratives that inspire hope and spark thoughtful action on the part of spiritual, business, and social impact leaders around the country. The American religious landscape is shifting so rapidly—the rate of disruption is only accelerating—and making sense of those shifts is the first step toward better serving the people behind those numbers.

One of the challenges of parsing these numbers, however, is that we must rely on the accepted labels and categories used by the researchers. For years I've listened to colleagues and friends refer to almost a third of the population in America as "nones." Others focus on the "unaffiliated," the "nonbelievers," the "nonreligious."

While these typologies might offer convenient and clean ways of understanding the world, they end up defining people by who and what they are *not*. What these labels gloss over is the humanity of each individual seeking to make meaning of an increasingly indecipherable world, to discover their purpose in life, and to feel known during a time of growing anonymity.

This book reminds us that we can do better. *Meaning Making* introduces us to people—*real people*—whose lived experiences and deepest yearnings paint vivid pictures that numbers and labels alone could never do. This approach allows humanity to tell the story about numbers—and not the other way around.

Meaning Making is an invitation for innovators in every sector—from tech to education to religion—to design around the deeply felt needs of our nation's youth. It invites entrepreneurs—from venture-backed to social to spiritual—to build on the solid foundation provided in these chapters.

Meaning Making doesn't just outline these emerging opportunities to meet the needs of young people; it hands us a blueprint to build a world worthy of them. And while much of the work of innovation and entrepreneurship might rely on counting people, this book reminds us to make sure that those people count.

Rabbi Elan Babchuck, MBA
Founding Director, Glean Network
Director of Innovation, Clal

INTRODUCTION

Young people care deeply about _____.

For many of us, how we fill in that blank, consciously or subconsciously, will determine our work and relationships with young people. If we get it wrong, our service to and with young people will suffer. At Springtide Research Institute, we are determined to get it right, and we undertook research and conversations with young people to do just that.

Meaning Making: 8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations is our investigation into the values that young people, ages 13 to 25, practice and uphold. What motivates them in their common quest to discover, create, and express significant meaning in their lives? What organizations and groups do they choose to engage with and be a part of? How do those organizations exhibit and express those values?

The values young people articulated comprise the chapters of this book. They emerged from surveys and interviews with young people, as well as other quantitative and qualitative research involving a range of resources, both scholarly and popular. As we collected our data early in 2020 through a nationally representative survey; looked at other data sources; and uncovered the practices, people, and organizations that were attracting intense commitment from young people; we made discoveries helpful to leaders trying to shape organizations, groups, institutions, and one-on-one relationships that better serve and care for young people today.

In many ways, the young people represented in the research in this book[1] are simply continuing social trends that have been ongoing for years. Our society has moved away from lives neatly

---

[1] At Springtide, we are committed to understanding the full breadth and depth of experiences of young people. The research in this book includes surveys and interviews with young people from ages 13 to 25. Internal analysis of survey results revealed no significant differences in terms of values based on age.

organized by traditional institutions. Instead, people have been turning toward new types of organizations and toward personal relationships that permit and encourage living out their entire value system in a variety of ways.

In other words, productive, meaningful work is no longer just the domain of the 9-to-5 job.

Religious belief and spiritual aspirations, explorations, and expressions no longer belong only to Sunday mornings or Friday evenings.

Being a good citizen is not confined to volunteer work done after hours.

The research, stories, advice, and solutions articulated in these chapters confirm that young people are thinking about their lives in holistic ways, where traditional institutional boundaries have been blurred or erased entirely.

These social trends have significant implications for leaders who work with young people, including employers, religious leaders, teachers, youth program workers, and social entrepreneurs. Whatever your role, you can't go wrong by attending to and adopting the eight values articulated by young people in this book.

Accountable. Inclusive. Authentic. Welcoming. Impactful. Relational. Growthful. Meaningful.

Each of these values consistently emerged for young people both in terms of their personal practices and what they hope to see embodied and embraced in organizations, causes, or clubs they join. The converse is true as well. Absent these values, organizations, groups, and relationships run the real risk of alienating young people or not attracting them in the first place. But these values aren't just for or about young people. Rather, taking a cue from their principles, the work of creating a culture that is accountable, inclusive, authentic, welcoming, impactful,

relational, growthful, and meaningful will benefit and improve your organization and relationships in countless ways.

Throughout this book, we identify and explain these values, and we pull from a variety of sources to illustrate exactly how these values show up and matter in practice. You will find personal narratives, data, definitions, and case studies in each chapter. Additionally, at Springtide Research Institute, we aim to provide *actionable* insights. To that end, you'll also find prompts to help you incorporate and reflect on the ways to embed or strengthen these values in your own work and relationships with young people, as well as references for learning more about them.

Young people are seeking meaning, and they are looking in new places and looking to new people to find and create it. Through an exploration of these eight values they hold in high regard, we hope to equip you to meet and aid young people in that quest, and to add meaning to your organization, relationships, and life in the process.
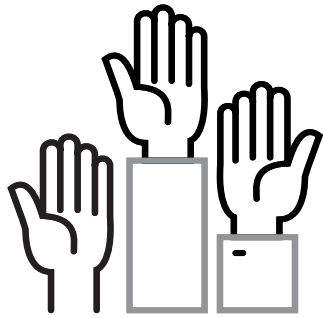
ACCOUNTABLE

Away at college, Ellie experienced an unnerving and confusing sense of displacement and disconnection in her life. Friends, family, and familiar activities and commitments—those bedrock connections that had grounded her and provided a sense of accountability to both herself and the trusted people and associations in her life—were now distant.

"I knew who I was and what I loved to do in high school, but then I got to college and other people's interests were different, their thoughts were different," Ellie says. Without the daily presence of these trusted adults, friends, and routines, and without a clear sense of purpose, role, and expectations to hold her accountable, she felt uncertain and unmoored.

Ellie tried various on-campus activities, but found these student-led communities lacked a level of accountability she found essential when choosing where to spend her time. "There was not always a consistent welcoming authority," she explained; a kind of warm presence and familiar face that notices, names, and knows those who show up for the activity. Students don't "always show up or follow through with responsibilities. Communities I thought I would enjoy—such as floor nights, student clubs, dances, floor dinners—did not maintain a level of commitment or consistency from the participants."

Ellie tried adult-led organizations and activities as well. As a musician, she became involved with conservatory and the band ensemble. As a person of faith, she tried worship communities and Scripture study group. As an athlete, she found a gym and workout buddies.

But missing still was the sense that these were people and organizations to whom she might entrust herself—people she could trust to hold her accountable—to encourage her to show up and to check in with her when she didn't. It wasn't until a caring, demanding, trustworthy coach stepped in that Ellie would find the confidence and motivation to thrive at college. Notably, it wasn't this individual's charisma that made the difference, but rather the value of accountability this leader and his organization represented, a value that a majority of young people have told us they seek out in the organizations and activities in which they participate.

We will return to Ellie's story later in the chapter, but first, let's take a look at what accountability means and why it's important to so many young people when choosing the types of organizations and groups to join.

Accountability
Insights from Springtide Research

The stereotype that young people just want permission, even affirmation, to do "what they want when they want" has persisted for a long time, perhaps especially in American culture. And like many stereotypes, it contains a hint of truth—as young people move from childhood to adulthood, more and more freedoms become available to them. Responsibility amid those freedoms often follows closely behind, though there can be a lag—hence the stereotype.

But, as in Ellie's story, young people have another persistent desire that doesn't get nearly the same spotlight, despite data suggesting its prevalence. Accountability, the all-important value Ellie was seeking in various groups and relationships when she arrived at college, is understood by social scientists as having three parts. A person or organization practicing the value of accountability provides each of these:

1. Clear roles and expectations

2. Well-defined goals and purpose

3. Opportunities for regular and meaningful feedback

Accountability emerges in Springtide survey data as one of the chief values young people seek out when forming relationships with people and places, whether that value is exemplified formally or informally. Often, accountability is rooted in the very culture of an organization, and the character of leadership plays a critical role. In particular, our data suggests that young people value many aspects of accountability—working toward defined goals, owning one's mistakes, making amends, following group norms, and being trustworthy.
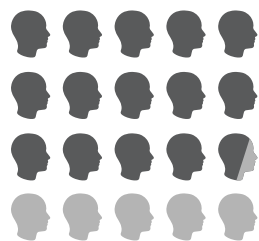
Nearly 75%
of respondents said **accountability** is an important quality for any organization they might join.

When asked about accountability, young people overwhelmingly indicated that it is highly important to them that the people and organizations in their lives help to hold them and others responsible to the commitments they've made. In fact, nearly 75% of

our survey respondents say accountability is a top value in their lives. This high regard for accountability was somewhat surprising to us, as it's not typically a value many people associate with younger generations. But the numbers tell a different story.

Our research also reveals a strong connection between accountability and organizational trust: 45% of young people say that if the leader is not accountable, then they cannot trust the organization; 65% say important qualities of a strong, accountable leader are owning mistakes and making things right.

Furthermore, the value young people place on being accountable extends to their personal lives: 66% of those surveyed believe in taking responsibility for their mistakes and making things right when they've harmed someone.

How can this necessary sense of accountability be conveyed or built? Leaders can begin by establishing clear roles and expectations, providing well-defined goals and purpose, and incorporating opportunities for regular and meaningful feedback. In the next three sections, we look at each of these three aspects of accountability in contexts specific to young people.

Clear Roles and Expectations

Organizational and group settings benefit from clearly defined roles and expectations for participants and leaders alike. Some settings are more emotionally charged than others, heightening the need for this sort of clarity. The Dinner Party—a movement that gathers young people who have lost loved ones—is a case in point.

Hard losses can be difficult to discuss, even among the best of friends or with the most trusted adults. Often in larger groups, this is even more challenging, as sharing vulnerably about a deep, perhaps even still raw, wound is risky. **That's why ground rules—the first facet of accountability—are so important.**

When people gather with the express goal of talking about deep grief and loss, it is helpful, maybe even necessary, to have clear guidance, some rules of conversation for sharing such confidences. This Dinner Party provides a fine example.

Lennon Flowers lost her mom to lung cancer during her senior year of college. Three years later, Lennon had moved 3,000 miles from home—but not away from the need to continue to talk about her mom and explore how her life, death, and absence continued to affect Lennon. Then Carla Fernandez, a friend who had also lost a parent at a young age, invited her over for dinner. From that seed was born The Dinner Party, a now worldwide community of 20- and 30-somethings who have each experienced the loss of someone deeply significant in their lives. The hosted dinners give participants an empathetic, listening, and compassionate space in which "to transform life after loss from an isolating experience into one marked by community support, candid conversation, and forward movement using the age-old practice of breaking bread," according to The Dinner Party.

Today, with more than 3,000 currently active participants at more than 275 tables in over 100 cities and towns worldwide, The Dinner Party has developed simple but significant expectations to guide Dinner Partiers, which are posted on its website:

- **Stick with "I" statements and avoid advice-giving.** Remember that no two stories are ever the same.

- **Share the air.** We listen to silence as well as speech, and you are under no obligation to speak: In the words of our friends at The Center for Courage & Renewal, this is not a "share or die" group.

- **Keep it confidential.** What's said at the table stays at the table.

- **No grief wars.** Parent loss or partner loss. Sudden loss or years of caregiving. No one's grief is "better" or "worse" than another's. We're here to hold space for all of our stories, not just our own.

- **Joy and sadness are not mutually exclusive.** We welcome laughter here as much as we welcome tears.

For young people in their 20s and 30s, significant grief is uncommon. Those attending a Dinner Party might already feel like outsiders among their peers. This is why, when navigating the murky and messy experience of grief, practicing accountability is of the utmost importance for participants to feel safe and encouraged. Indeed, in *any* group or organization where difficult or self-revealing conversations are valued and encouraged—a faith-sharing group at a church, a candid performance review conversation at work—shared accountability to the inviolable dignity of fellow participants is an absolute must.

The framework developed by The Dinner Party is impressive for many reasons. For example, it establishes the heart and values of the gathering. It also expresses some ground rules of effective communication and establishes norms around discussing a topic where clear social norms don't always exist or conversation is particularly challenging.

> **"** In *any* group or organization where difficult and often self-revealing conversations are valued and encouraged, shared accountability to the inviolable dignity of fellow participants is an absolute must. **"**

Such a clear framework in this discussion on accountability provides a model for how we might operate in our own lives and as leaders of groups or organizations where young people

are involved. The Dinner Party establishes clear roles and expectations for all parties. The Dinner Party works because participants know exactly what they can expect from one another and themselves, and they have this mutually accepted guide to refocus the gathering, gently correct themselves or others in the group, and even discern how to approach the night together in the first place.

> **ACT** ON THE DATA: A public display of roles and expectations, such as on a website, whiteboard, and so on, can serve as a reminder and hold leaders as well as members mutually accountable to one another and to the goal or purpose for which the organization exists.

Shared Goal or Purpose

The value of accountability deals with expectations, responsibilities, and communication. A shared goal or purpose is essential for practicing this value, whether within an organization or a relationship. For a group or organization to thrive, goals for leaders and members alike must align at some level.

What happens when one side of that equation—leadership or membership—moves away from an original goal or purpose for participation? Quite understandably, accountability may suffer, and with it the reason for participation. Without clarity or agreement about *why* to gather, the inclination to keep doing so understandably decreases.

Leaders who work with young people over an extended period often witness participation falling off as the young people grow up. These leaders might ask themselves what's behind the decline: Are participants "aging out" of an organization or activity for unavoidable and even good reasons that accompany human development? Or has a discrepancy, even a clash, about the

expectations and goals of the activity occurred among members and leaders? Participation in youth sports illustrates the challenge for leaders who work with young people. Studies in recent years have documented a steady drop-off in involvement in both school and nonschool programs from the late preteens through high school.

What seems to be contributing to this decline, studies conducted by the Aspen Institute, George Washington University ("The Fun Integration Theory"), and others suggest, is that the *original shared goal* or purpose of having fun, maintaining a reasonable balance of sports with other life activities, and ensuring ease of access regardless of individual ability (inclusion), had morphed. Increasingly, young people were being turned off by the pressure on winning, the demanding practice schedules that left little time for other interests, and the favoritism shown toward the most gifted athletes.

While you may not be involved with youth sports, clear lessons are here for leaders of all kinds of organizations. One of the more notorious examples of a decline of young people from organizational participation is in religion. Leaders who work with young people in this arena might ask themselves whether there is simply an overall difference between the goals and purpose of most organized religion and those of the young people they might wish to serve. If the answer is yes, how might this be addressed? Further, if the decline in participation follows along a continuum of age, as statistics seem to suggest, when and how and why does this trend manifest itself over time?

Any group or organization that seeks to serve young people ought to regularly investigate whether the goals and purposes of members and the organization align. Be clear to yourself, as well as the young people you care for, regarding your agendas. As for understanding the agendas of the young people themselves: ask them. This brings us to the third aspect that defines the value of accountability.

ACT **ON THE DATA:** Regularly review the goals and purposes of your group or organization, with leadership and membership as well. Be both humble and flexible, willing to change when change is called for, to adjust methods and procedures as circumstances merit, and even to dissolve if a goal has been accomplished or an original purpose no longer exists.

Regular, Meaningful Feedback

Young people need to have opportunities for regular and honest feedback to feel that they are being afforded the two-way accountability they desire and deserve. Almost two-thirds of young people surveyed by Springtide expect leaders of organizations to make amends for wrongdoings and to take ownership of mistakes. Nearly the same percentage of young people (66%) indicate that they apply those same high standards of accountability to themselves personally. Clearly, accountability is understood as a value to be shouldered and practiced *together*.

65%
say important qualities of a strong, **accountable leader are owning mistakes and making things right** within an organization.

45%
say that if **the leader is not accountable**, they **cannot trust the organization.**

In Australia, an effort is underway to open a two-way street for communication around accountability, ensuring young people have the opportunity to speak and to be heard. Creating and sustaining a culture of accountability is one of the goals of

Helen Connolly, the first-ever Commissioner for Children and Young People in South Australia. Convinced that accountability requires effective feedback mechanisms and that young people are critical stakeholders of governments, businesses, and communities, Connolly set out to talk to young people ages 13 to 18 about their views and experiences. She writes about the experience in a 2018 article in the online journal *Medium*.

Trust was a recurring theme in these conversations, Connolly reports. She heard from young people that they are more likely to trust governments, businesses, and schools if those institutions ask for and respond to feedback. One 16-year-old girl she talked with explained that "feedback must be there for everyone. . . . Responses to feedback must be fast, efficient, reliable and must cater to the needs of whoever needs assistance." The mechanism for feedback can't be in vain—young people can see right through empty gestures. Instead, as the young woman indicates, there must be opportunities for *meaningful* feedback, which means it is taken seriously and responded to thoughtfully.

> " The mechanism for feedback can't be in vain— young people can see right through empty gestures. Instead . . . there must be opportunities for *meaningful* feedback, which means it is taken seriously and responded to thoughtfully. "

Young people expect leaders and organizations to hold themselves and others accountable for working toward defined goals. Young people are willing to hold themselves to this high standard—to take responsibility for mistakes and make amends if they've done wrong. It's no surprise they also expect this from leaders and organizations—indeed, 45% of our survey respondents report that if a leader *doesn't practice* the value of accountability, the organization cannot be trusted.