

BUILDING TRUST AND INFLUENCE WITH GEN Z

How to reach their hearts before you speak to their heads by Pastor Manny Cruz

I. "WHY SHOULD THEY LISTEN TO YOU?"

1. Opening Story: Share a real or relatable story of a student leader who couldn't connect with teens because they jumped into preaching before building relationship.
2. Quick Engagement Question: "Think about the last time a teen truly opened up to you – what had to happen first?"
3. Main Point: With Gen Z, influence is relational before it's informational.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE GEN Z LANDSCAPE

Goal: Give leaders a snapshot of the world teens are growing up in so they understand what shapes them.

Cultural & Social Challenges:

1. Information Overload – Teens have unlimited access to information (and misinformation).
2. Identity Pressure – Social media creates comparison culture & performance anxiety.
3. Distrust of Institutions – They value authenticity over titles or authority positions.
4. Loneliness Epidemic – More connected online, but more isolated in real life.
5. Anxiety & Mental Health Awareness – High levels of stress; they value safe spaces.

Mini Exercise: Have leaders share in pairs what challenges they see most in their own students.

III. THE "TRUST BEFORE TRUTH" PRINCIPLE

Core Idea: If they don't trust you, your words don't matter.

Practical Ways to Build Trust:

1. Consistency Over Time – Show up to their games, concerts, and everyday life.
2. Listen First – Ask good questions and let them finish their answers without jumping in.
3. Vulnerability – Share appropriate struggles from your own life to show you're real.
4. Follow Through – If you say you'll pray for them, follow up later.
5. No "Fix-It" Mode Right Away – Sometimes they need empathy before advice.

Illustration: Compare trust to a "bank account" – every act of care is a deposit; every broken promise is a withdrawal. Truth is best received when the trust account is full.

IV. AVOIDING PITFALLS THAT PUSH THEM AWAY

Common Mistakes to Avoid:

1. Preaching at Without Knowing – Giving answers to questions they haven't asked.
2. Over-Spiritualizing Everything – Sometimes they need you to listen before quoting a verse.
3. Using Outdated Stereotypes – Avoid "back in my day" comparisons.
4. Inconsistency – Canceling plans or being too busy communicates they're not a priority.
5. Talking About Them, Not With Them – No one likes feeling like a project.

Leader Reflection Question: "Which of these pitfalls have I accidentally fallen into, and what will I do differently?"

V. APPLICATION & CHALLENGE

1. Takeaway Principle: Trust is the bridge; truth is the cargo. Without the bridge, the cargo falls.
2. Challenge to Leaders:
 - a. Identify 2 students you'll intentionally invest in relationally over the next month.
 - b. Choose one way you'll build trust this week without an agenda to "teach."
3. Closing Encouragement: When you earn the right to be heard, your words carry lasting weight in their lives.