

The Readiness Paradigm

Why Systems Must Change for the Youth Leading Them

“It’s time to redesign how we define youth leadership—through trust, co-creation, and systems that recognize lived experience.”

Author Name:

Matthew Agustin

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Introduction: The Readiness Paradox

“The future doesn’t wait, and neither should our systems.”

They lead climate protests, organize peer mental health networks, co-design AI ethics curriculums, and coordinate food distribution during crises. Around the world, young people are stepping up—not hypothetically, but systemically. They’re not just future leaders; they’re leaders now.

As Ashoka’s *Thrive Together* report reminds us:

“We believe that the ability to identify a problem, find a solution, and build a team to drive change is something every young person can learn—and that many already have.”

And yet, institutions still ask for resumes.

Resumes may have their place, but when treated as the sole lens of legitimacy, they erase more than they reveal.

This is the paradox. Youth are showing up with clarity and courage, while decision-makers continue to evaluate their readiness through outdated filters: years of formal experience, elite degrees, or narrowly defined credentials. These metrics often have little to do with the actual leadership work already underway, and everything to do with legacy systems built to measure conformity over creativity, and pedigree over proximity.

“The problem isn’t youth readiness—it’s how we define it.”

It’s time for a new paradigm. What if readiness wasn’t something young people had to prove, but something we could co-design with them? What if systems—funders, employers, policymakers, educators—recognized the intelligence born from lived experience and invested in leadership that is already in motion?

Of course, even seasoned professionals are struggling to find work in many sectors, and that scarcity is real. But this only sharpens the question: why are young people still being measured by checkboxes they didn’t design, in systems that weren’t built for them in the first place?

This isn’t a call to romanticize youth leadership or ignore the realities of disillusionment, burnout, and economic precarity. It’s a call to widen the frame so we see what traditional measures often overlook.

In this piece, we explore why existing models of leadership readiness are failing youth, especially those in the Global South and structurally excluded contexts. We call for a shift from credential-based evaluation to relational, participatory design, what we term *Readiness by Design*. Along the way, we’ll name the harms of mismeasurement, spotlight youth already leading systemic change, and propose institutional shifts that treat youth not as beneficiaries, but as co-builders of the future.

Because the future isn't waiting, and youth shouldn't have to wait to be trusted.

Section I: Systems That Can't See Us

“We’re trying to measure a seed by its shadow.”

This is the quiet failure beneath many youth leadership pipelines, funding calls, and fellowships: the belief that readiness can be reliably measured through checklists and credentials. But for today’s young changemakers—especially those in the Global South, rural areas, or refugee contexts—these proxies don’t just fall short. They actively obscure what readiness looks like.

Institutional gatekeeping tends to reward those who have already been given access. Credentialism privileges prestige over proximity, paperwork over lived expertise. “Experience,” as it’s often defined, favors those who’ve worked within the system—rarely those who’ve challenged or rebuilt it from the outside. As a result, youth who are leading bold, relational, and systems-aware work often go unrecognized, unfunded, and unseen.

Take the Green Africa Youth Organization in Ghana. Their members are designing zero-waste models and leading climate education campaigns rooted in local knowledge and circular economy principles. It’s systems-aware work grounded in real lives and real stakes—participatory, adaptive, and community-defined. But because it doesn’t conform to standard resumé formats or institutional metrics, it risks being labeled “informal”—a word too often used to sideline legitimacy.

Or consider youth-led digital rights groups working across South Asia and Latin America to shape safer, more inclusive online spaces. These young leaders regularly organize consultations, speak at forums, and co-create policy recommendations—often without any formal affiliation. Their leadership is visible in community trust, platform change, and movement design. But their lack of credentials can still keep them off eligibility lists.

This gap between leadership in action and institutional recognition is backed by data. According to the Capgemini–UNICEF report, more than half of young people believe they’re ready to rise to the challenge—but only 44% feel prepared. That disconnect doesn’t mean youth are confused. It means the systems assessing them are misaligned.

Ashoka’s *Embracing Complexity* echoes this tension:

“Systems change leaders are often underfunded and overlooked because they don’t fit into conventional categories of success.”

Until our definitions expand, many young people doing real work will continue to be overlooked—not for lack of readiness, but for lack of recognition.

It’s time we stop measuring seeds by their shadows—and start seeing what’s already in bloom.

Section II: Readiness by Design – A New Leadership Paradigm

What if readiness wasn't something young people had to perform to gain access, but something we could design into our systems from the start?

Readiness by Design is a framework that reimagines leadership development not as a gatekeeping process, but as a co-created relationship. It challenges systems to shift from assessing credentials to recognizing conditions—because leadership doesn't begin with institutional permission. It begins with agency, context, and trust.

Across movements, communities, and crises, youth are already leading. But too often, their legitimacy is judged through a lens they didn't author. Instead of forcing youth to prove themselves through institutional hoops, **Readiness by Design** asks institutions to do the work of reconfiguring access, recognition, and power. It rests on three key principles:

1. Trust as Default

If a young person is organizing mutual aid in their neighborhood or coordinating climate strikes in their city, that's leadership. Period.

Yet most systems still demand resumes, references, or affiliations before offering real support. This burden of proof creates unnecessary friction—and often filters out the very leadership we need most.

“These young people aren’t waiting to grow up to lead—they already are.”
— *Unlonely Planet, Ashoka*

Models like the **Youth Climate Justice Fund (YCJF)** show what trust can look like in practice. Instead of asking for extensive proposals or vetting through elite networks, YCJF removes gatekeeping entirely. They invest early, provide flexible funding, and treat youth insight not as a risk—but as a resource.

2. Legitimacy Across Contexts

Leadership isn't confined to boardrooms or conference halls. In fact, some of the most innovative, high-impact work is happening in non-institutional spaces: peer mental health collectives, digital safety campaigns, climate action WhatsApp groups.

But too often, this work is dismissed as informal or insufficient. When readiness is only validated through formalized, Western-centric frameworks, it erases how leadership actually shows up for many youth—especially in the Global South, in refugee communities, and in decentralized networks.

3. Co-Authorship, Not Consultation

In many youth initiatives, young people are invited in late—as advisors, survey respondents, or token representatives. That's not readiness. That's reaction.

True systems change means **designing with youth from the beginning**. It means making space for their questions, not just their quotes. It means moving beyond consultation to **co-authorship**—shared ownership over ideas, strategies, and solutions.

Ashoka's *Young Changemakers* model exemplifies this shift. Rather than selecting based on grades or affiliations, it centers lived commitment, changemaking experience, and peer recognition. It's not about how well youth fit the mold—it's about how powerfully they've already remade it.

When systems are designed to trust, recognize, and co-create with youth, something powerful happens: the question isn't “Are they ready?”—it becomes “What conditions can we build to help them thrive?”

“More than half of young people believe they’re ready to rise to the challenge—but only 44% feel prepared.”
— Capgemini–UNICEF Report

This readiness gap isn't about youth capacity. It's about system design. Readiness by Design is a call to close that gap—not by fixing youth, but by fixing the systems around them.

Section III: Lived Leadership, Invisible Metrics

She didn't wait for approval to begin.

At 19, she co-designed an AI ethics curriculum now taught in three countries. Her classroom was a virtual collective. Her credential? A lived sense that her voice mattered—and that the tools shaping tomorrow should be accountable to the people most impacted by them today.

Elsewhere, a young leader created a peer support network for displaced students navigating life between homes, languages, and borders. She didn't have a nonprofit title or government backing—just a WhatsApp group, a deep well of empathy, and the kind of organizational clarity that comes from surviving disorientation.

These are stories of readiness. But not the kind most systems know how to see.

Resilience, empathy, collaboration—these are the skills we build every day, but they don't show up on a résumé. Youth are already managing collective care, cross-cultural dialogue, digital coordination, and moral complexity. Yet they're met with: 'That's great—but do you have a degree?' Leadership is being lived, not legitimized.

This mismatch is not benign. It signals a deeper systemic failure: one where our metrics are too narrow, our proxies too rigid, and our imaginations too slow to keep pace with the leadership already in motion. The impact is felt most acutely by youth on the margins—those whose experience lies outside elite institutions but inside the real, complex work of social change.

As the Capgemini–UNICEF report reminds us:

“Systems that are designed to prepare youth for the future must be co-designed with youth.”

And when they're not? Disengagement follows—not out of apathy, but alienation.

Disengagement isn't disinterest—it's a reflection of systems that have failed to make space.

To center youth leadership, we must move beyond institutional visibility as the only valid form of readiness. We must learn to recognize lived expertise—not as a last resort, but as a legitimate, necessary foundation for building just futures.

Because what we fail to measure, we often fail to fund. And what we fail to name, we often fail to trust.

Section IV: Rewriting the Readiness Rubric

If our systems are mismeasuring youth leadership, then the solution isn't to demand more proof—it's to change what we're measuring. Readiness shouldn't hinge on performance in a system built without youth in mind. It should reflect co-created conditions that recognize, nurture, and evolve leadership already in motion.

“Empowering youth changemakers means building the conditions around them—not expecting them to succeed in spite of the system.”

— *Thrive Together, Ashoka*

Let's reimagine what readiness could look like across three institutional levels:

1. Funders: Invest in Potential, Not Just Proof

Traditional funding mechanisms reward track records over transformation. But if we continue favoring proven outcomes over bold potential, we'll keep missing the future.

That's why models like the **Youth Climate Justice Fund** are so vital. They flip the script—trusting youth wisdom, removing unnecessary gatekeeping, and funding early rather than waiting for perfection. These funds prioritize relationships over resumes, and vision over institutional pedigree.

Design Direction:

- Shift from competitive grants to co-created funding processes.
- Offer flexible, long-term funding rooted in trust and local context.
- Include youth in funding decisions—not just as applicants, but as reviewers and advisors.

2. Employers & Policymakers: Redefine Value

Youth are organizing communities, shaping policy debates, and designing ethical tech frameworks. Yet when job listings still demand five years of experience and a specific degree, they overlook leadership already in motion.

Instead of seeing youth as underprepared, what if institutions recognized the value of **lived experience**—especially from those who've navigated systemic barriers firsthand?

“We trust young people to tell their own stories. What if we trusted them to shape our institutions?”

Design Direction:

- Co-create onboarding programs with youth to bridge systems and lived practice.
- Expand the definition of “relevant experience” to include movement work, caregiving, peer mentorship, and digital leadership.
- Embed participatory policy design, ensuring youth help shape the rules that shape them.

3. Educational Systems: Cultivate, Don’t Just Credential

Education should be a launchpad—not a sorting mechanism. Yet too often, it filters for privilege instead of expanding access to possibility.

Imagine a curriculum that prepares young people for complexity, not just compliance. One that sees leadership not as a title, but as a practiced, relational act.

Programs like **Ashoka’s Young Changemakers** embody this shift. They prioritize lived commitment over credentials and support youth in becoming co-authors of their learning journey.

Design Direction:

- Center participatory, project-based learning that aligns with real-world challenges.
- Launch youth-led fellowships that build leadership across contexts—not just careers.
- Reframe “preparedness” around skills like collaboration, critical consciousness, and systems thinking.

Visual Callout: Old Rubric vs. Readiness by Design

Old Rubric	Readiness by Design
Years of experience	Lived commitment & context-driven leadership
Degrees and credentials	Justice-informed, relational learning
Individual achievement	Collaborative impact and community accountability
Performance under pressure	Resilience, mutuality, and ethical judgment

Redesigning the readiness rubric is more than an institutional upgrade—it’s a commitment to the next generation of systems thinkers, movement builders, and relational leaders. The future doesn’t wait. Why should our metrics?

What This Could Look Like in Practice

A regional climate foundation redesigns its youth grant program. Instead of requiring résumés and past awards, it invites youth to submit voice notes and project sketches co-developed with

their communities. Youth lead the review panel, and selected applicants receive mentorship, flexible funds, and a co-created leadership pathway—not just funding, but trust and infrastructure to grow it.

This vivid yet brief scenario reinforces how “Readiness by Design” can manifest systemically—and inclusively—in real-world institutions.

Section V: Trust Is the Threshold

The future doesn't wait—and neither should our systems.

Youth aren't asking to be rescued by the future. They're asking to be entrusted with it.

Across every section of this piece, we've seen that young people are not lacking readiness—they're demonstrating it, daily. What they lack is recognition. And what institutions lack is trust.

It's not about preparing youth for a system that distrusts them—it's about preparing systems to trust youth.

That's the shift Readiness by Design calls for. Not a one-time intervention, but a long-term ethic. One that sees trust not as a risk, but as a responsibility. One that treats lived experience as leadership—not as an exception needing justification.

So the question isn't whether youth are ready for the future.
It's whether the future is ready for youth.

Because readiness, like leadership, is something we build together.

How might your institution become a builder of readiness?

Tensions Worth Naming: Where We Hold Complexity

This piece advocates for a shift in how we define and support youth leadership—but that doesn’t mean the path is simple. Below, we name seven tensions we hold with care. These are not contradictions to be resolved, but complexities to be navigated with honesty and nuance.

1. Youth Readiness vs. Job Market Realities

We recognize that today’s job market is saturated and increasingly competitive—even for seasoned professionals. Degrees, certifications, and institutional affiliations often serve as gatekeepers in systems built around risk management. But this only sharpens the question: if current pathways aren’t working for many adults, why are we still measuring youth by outdated proxies? The case for Readiness by Design is not about bypassing rigor—it’s about redesigning relevance.

2. Performance vs. Process

Not all leadership is easily quantified. Systems that reward only visible outcomes risk overlooking the slow, community-rooted, trust-building work that sustains change over time. Readiness by Design challenges us to value iterative leadership and collective impact—not just polished results or project completion. Process is where many youth build the relational, emotional, and ethical skills that rarely show up in metrics.

3. Scarcity vs. System Redesign

Resources are limited, especially in institutions under pressure. It’s fair to ask: how can systems afford to redesign readiness when they’re already stretched thin? But scarcity cannot be an excuse for stagnation. In fact, tight conditions call for more adaptive, inclusive systems—not fewer. Investing in co-designed pathways can surface innovations that legacy structures have long overlooked.

4. Youth Agency vs. Adult Stewardship

Shifting power doesn’t mean adults become passive. Youth don’t need institutions to disappear—they need them to transform. Adults still have roles to play as collaborators, mentors, funders, and stewards of safe, enabling environments. The shift is from gatekeeping to guardianship: not speaking for youth, but creating the conditions where youth voices shape the center.

5. Trust vs. Tokenism

Too often, “youth engagement” stops at consultation. Young people are invited to give feedback, but not to co-create strategy. Trust is not just about listening—it’s about shifting who holds the

pen. Tokenism gives the illusion of progress without redistributing power. Co-authorship means that youth aren't just present—they're pivotal.

6. Burnout vs. Empowerment

Many young changemakers are navigating burnout, especially when asked to fix problems they didn't create. Readiness by Design isn't a call to place more weight on youth—it's a call to redesign the load. Systems should provide support scaffolds: mentorship, peer networks, mental health access, and flexible funding that honors wellbeing alongside impact.

7. Imagination vs. Implementation

It's one thing to imagine new readiness models. It's another to embed them into policy, funding, and education systems at scale. Change takes time, pilots, and iteration. But the alternative—maintaining broken rubrics—is not neutral. It perpetuates exclusion. Implementation doesn't have to be perfect to begin—it just has to be principled, participatory, and open to learning.

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Author Bio

Matthew Agustin is a Research Consultant at the Responsible Innovation Lab at Arizona State University and a graduate in Innovation in Society. His work focuses on responsible AI, educational transformation, and systems design for intergenerational equity. He writes at the intersection of youth leadership, digital ethics, and futures thinking—championing pathways where young people are recognized not as future potential, but as present leaders.

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