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How Two Teen Founders Cracked The Partnership Code

By Kate Vitasek, Senior Contributor. Kate Vitasek covers how to crack the...

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Published Aug 27, 2026, 06:58pm EDT

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Summary

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achieved remarkable international growth by prioritizing cross-sector partnerships. Despite Gen Z generally having fewer strong business relationships, these young leaders built multi-state and multi-national operations for BelieveNBooks, addressing childhood illiteracy, and Cycles for Change, combating period poverty. Their success stems from a strategic playbook: leading with a shared mission to attract passionate partners, scaling through simple, standardized toolkits and data tracking, and treating volunteers as valuable collaborators rather than mere headcount. This approach demonstrates that effective collaboration hinges on aligned interests and early partnership-building habits, rather than just capital or extensive networks.

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Two teen founders share how strategic partnerships helped their nonprofits scale.
GETTY IMAGES

When people picture nonprofit success, they often see a viral fundraising campaign or a splashy grant announcement. For two teenage nonprofit founders scaling international operations, the real growth engine has been something far less visible: cross-sector partnerships.

According to research released by Freeman, conducted with The Harris Poll, 91% of Gen Z respondents said in-person connection is one of the best ways to build the interpersonal skills partnerships require. The irony is that most also said technology has left them feeling more isolated from colleagues, rather than less.

The result? Gen Z professionals report having far fewer strong business relationships than older generations do, an average of 16 compared with 21 for millennials and 40 for Gen Xers.

Natasha Agarwal and Dhiyasri "Dhiya" Thirumurugan did not wait for that gap to close. Without significant funding or an established network, both built youth-led nonprofits into multi-state, multi-national operations largely by learning to identify and cultivate the right partners early.

Agarwal founded BelieveNBooks as an eighth-grader in 2021 to address childhood illiteracy. The organization has since donated more than 250,000 books to more than 50,000 underserved children across 10 locations in the United States and six African nations.

Thirumurugan co-founded Cycles for Change in San Antonio to combat period poverty and menstrual stigma. After just one year, Thirumurugan's early success was featured by local news outlet KSAT, highlighting the organization's impact on more than 400 students.

By 2026, just two years later, Cycles for Change had achieved nearly 10x growth, directly impacting 4,000+ individuals, raising more than $10,000 to support its work and people, and reaching more than 600,000 people digitally through its educational content.

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I recently had the chance to catch up with both of these teen founders to learn more about their approach to using partnerships to scale. Though the two causes could not be more different, the founders converged on nearly the same playbook. Three of their practices work for any leader trying to build or teach partnership skills.

Start With A Shared Mission, Not A Contact List

Both teens contribute their growth to tapping volunteers and partners who were eager to get on board with the mission. Agarwal's love of books led her to organize a book drive at her school which led to a connection with Guadalupe Center in Southwest Florida. That first partnership opened the door to a broader network of nonprofit collaborators around the world.

Today, BelieveNBooks has also worked with nonprofits in Ghana, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Kenya and Uganda to distribute 10,000 copies of Agarwal's book, "Tales of African Women Trailblazers," to children across the continent.

Thirumurugan also led with her passion: seeking to embed Cycles for Change inside organizations already serving the population she wanted to reach. For example, her advocacy caught the attention for a Days for Girls partnership where she led menstrual health education through co-hosted workshops.

She also sought out partnerships with organizations such as the Digital4Good accelerator which connected Cycles for Change to a national network of youth changemakers who continue to exchange ideas and collaboration opportunities.

Scale Through Simplicity, Not Complexity

Scaling a fledgling nonprofit organization, especially when you are a full-time student, can be a challenge. One approach both founders took was to standardize what volunteers actually needed: toolkits with outreach templates, branding materials and checklists that could easily tap into individual ambassadors to run their own book drives or health workshops without reinventing the process each time.

They also leaned into simple tools such as spreadsheets for tracking key data and trends. For example, Thirumurugan set out to treat data as a feedback loop and created some simple ways to track which social posts, pitches and events converted into new partners or donors. She then looked for patterns to sharpen future outreach, rather than repeating what already flopped.

Treat Volunteers As Partners, Not Headcount

Both founders lean on teen and college-aged volunteers who want short, structured commitments, as opposed to long-term ambassadorships. For example, Cycles for Change collaborates with school clubs, such as DECA and National Honor Society chapters, which provide a target-rich group of energetic young leaders who want to expand their leadership abilities and gain new technical skills.

Thirumurugan has found one of the most successful tactics for getting youth to help support Cycles for Change is asking what skills and roles individuals want, rather than slotting them into whatever job needs filling.

She explains, “It’s important to realize I am tapping into volunteers who are often busy students trying to balance many things. One thing that has really helped Cycles for Change is making sure our volunteers are not just doing much-needed work, but that they are also applying a skill or participating in areas they think adds the most value for them.”

In 2021, BelieveNBooks began coordinating with Florida Gulf Coast University students to run operations for the nonprofit. She adds how important this decision has been: “As a founder, it’s easy to feel like you have to manage everything. But tapping into FGCU has been a game-changer, especially because I wanted to continue our Florida headquarter operations while attending the University of Pennsylvania.”

The Business Lesson In A Teenager’s Playbook

If two teenagers can build multi-national partnership networks from a school book drive and a single co-hosted workshop, clearly, the barrier to cross-sector collaboration is not just about capital or credentials. Rather, the lesson is whether leaders are willing to lead with their mission before asking what a partner could do for them.

As Gen Z enters the workforce with fewer strong professional relationships than the generations before them, as Freeman’s previously cited research suggests, the organizations that will out-partner their competitors won’t be the ones with the biggest business development budgets.

Instead, they’ll be the ones that seek out partners that have aligned interests and lead with a partnership-building habit their people practice early and often, the way Agarwal and Thirumurugan did before they were even old enough to vote.

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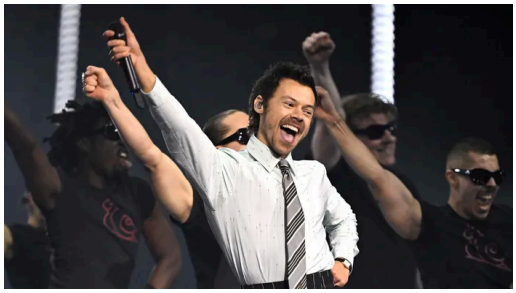

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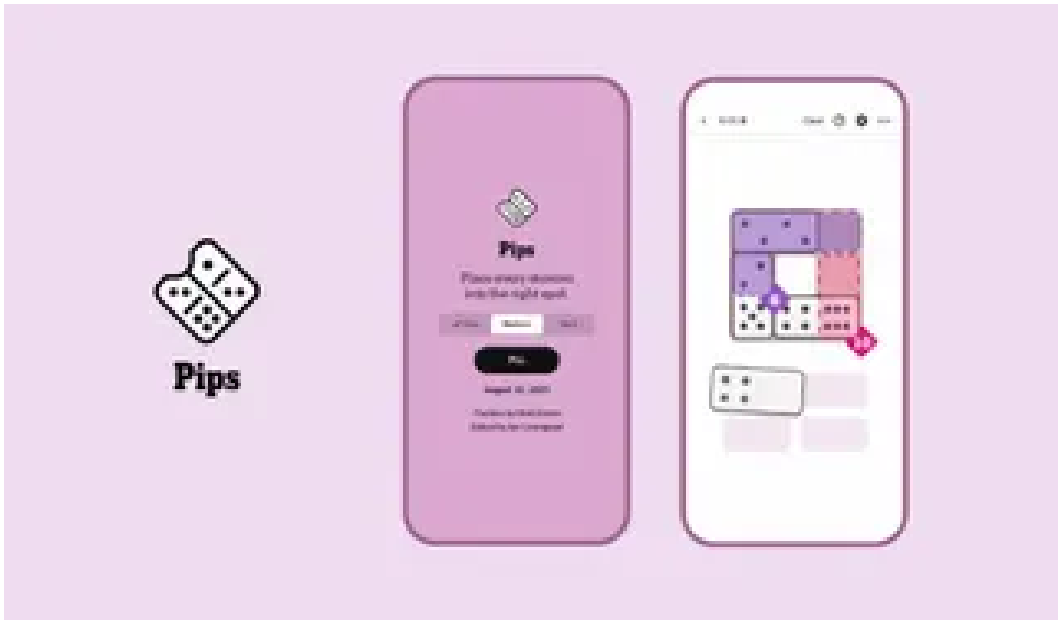

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