



If knowledge is power, then the ability to harness change must be a superpower.

Why?

Because change is the only resource we can all count on to never run out, and with it comes the ability to innovate and reinvent ourselves – again and again.

Pretty cool.

Better yet, change allows us to take advantage of opportunities that may have never existed before – but only if it can be harnessed.

That’s why when we’re asked at Junior Achievement of Wisconsin (JA) which superpower we’d choose, “harnessing change” always wins, hands down.

And that’s why when it comes to choosing which superpower to pass on to the young people who will run Wisconsin’s businesses, lead its communities and steer its economy in the years to come, teaching this skill is what we’re

invested in most.

At JA, we call it a “growth mindset,” and it’s at the foundation of all that we do.

Founded in Wisconsin in 1941, JA has been a positive influence for decades by focusing on education, youth development and economic empowerment.

We work with business leaders, educators and community partners to help Wisconsin’s young people discover all their superpowers and harness them to ensure each new generation is prepared for whatever comes next.

Planning for the unknown

It’s not easy.

Harnessing change means more than adapting to new conditions or reacting to unexpected events.

To truly harness change, a leader must anticipate when, where and how specific disruptions or innovations will impact their organization, and in turn create an environment in which people

PREPARING WISCONSIN YOUTH TO UNLEASH THEIR SUPERPOWERS

BY JULIE GRANGER

are prepared for and can make the most of the opportunities to come.

When it comes to preparing K-12 students to make the most of their career opportunities, STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math) are still an important piece of the puzzle.

However, at JA, our focus is on teaching the skills that will help students prepare for their futures regardless of which career path they choose.

The need for this set of skills is clear.

The businesses, educators and community partners we work with feel the same sense of urgency to help students imagine and prepare for what it will take to achieve success in their chosen fields.

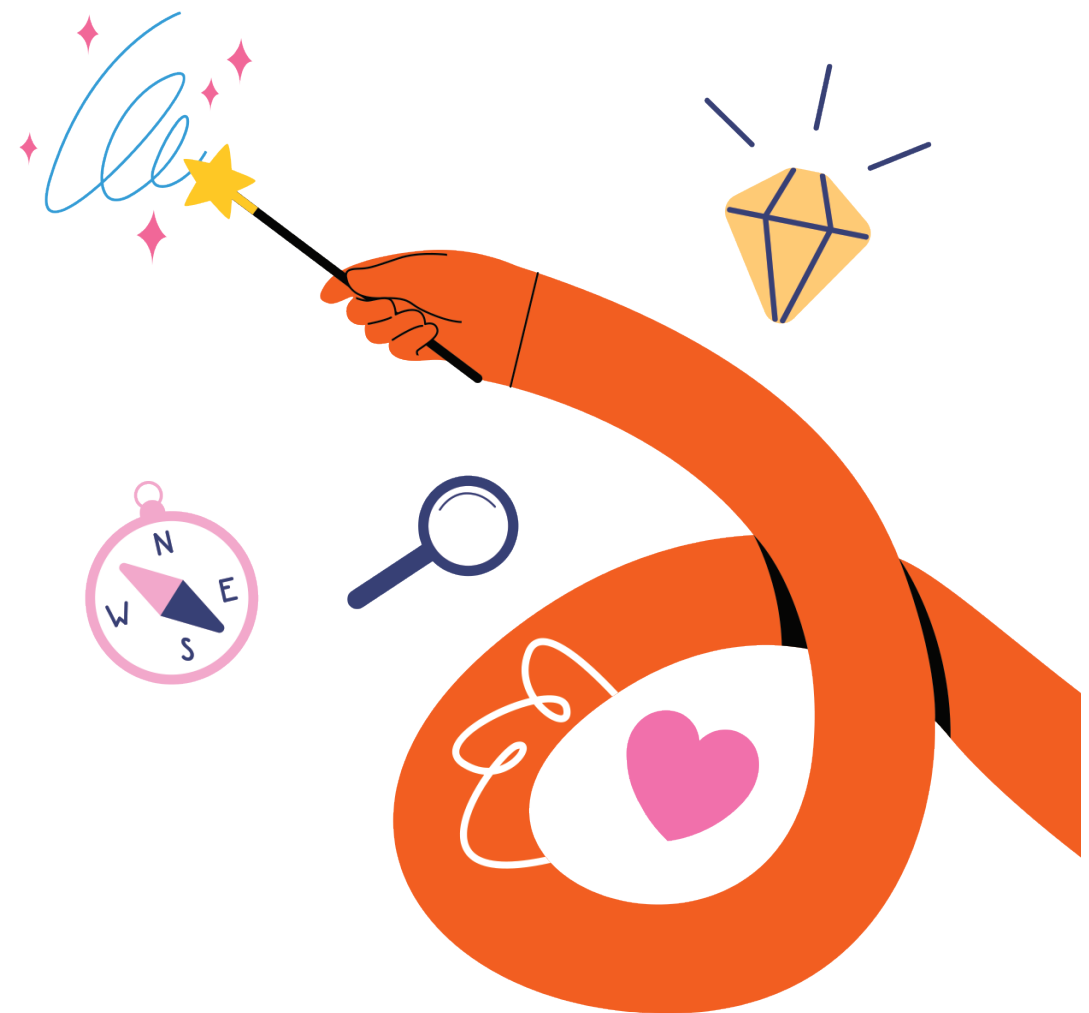
More and more, parents and teachers recognize the need to equip young people with qualities like perseverance and flexibility to navigate the ever-increasing pace

association, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, has projected a shortage of 2.4 million skilled U.S. workers by 2028, which needs to be addressed in the next decade to increase the state's economic competitiveness.

Furthermore, according to Buckley Brinkman, CEO of the Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing & Productivity, challenges in finding enough workers with the right skills are beginning to hamper growth in manufacturing across the state.

The "right" skills will vary from role to role, but consistent across all industries and sectors is the need for team members who can employ transferable skills and competencies.

These capabilities give employees the power to flex to changing roles and opportunities as their employers navigate a changing landscape.



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of change in the workplace and around the world.

Dr. Cory Hirsbrunner, superintendent of the Stevens Point Area Public School District agrees, saying these are turbulent times for young people.

“The ‘pandemic generation’ has faced unique challenges, with many students experiencing disruptions to their learning, socialization and mental well-being,” Hirsbrunner said. “The emotional and academic impacts of the pandemic continue to shape how students view education and their future paths.”

Wisconsin employers feel it, too.

Many are concerned with the deficit of workplace skills in the emerging workforce, while many young people continue to struggle with the transition from school to work.

The state’s largest business

Flexibility is key

In recent years, the emergence of the “skills economy” has changed how professional development and success are measured.

Instead of relying solely on traditional metrics like degrees or job titles, employers now emphasize the specific skills of individuals and their ability to acquire new ones.

The attributes of the skills economy include:

- Increased flexibility – where young adults can express their competencies outside of traditional formal education
- Continuous learning – where adaptability to acquire new skills in response to an ever-changing economy is a skill within itself
- Transferable skills – which can be applied to career

– CORY HIRSBRUNNER

success across a wide array of industries.

These skills lead to increased mobility and opportunities – for both the employees and employers.

Research conducted for JA and Citizens Bank shows that many of today’s students are open to this new approach and willing to explore new options in education and career planning.

The Wakefield Research survey of 1,000 youth ages 13-18 found that teens are generally positive about their futures, with 90% of them reporting being optimistic about their career prospects.

This level of optimism is in stark contrast to a 2022 survey of college students, which showed that many respondents questioned if they

were in the right major or were clear about which career to pursue after school.

The research also illustrates how teens are open to non-traditional education paths and believe new technologies may be more valuable than higher education degrees.

Forty-nine percent of teens said a high school degree, trade program, two-year degree or other enrichment program is the highest level of education needed to prepare them for their anticipated career path.

Even for those teens planning to go to college, most believe on-the-job experience is important when preparing for their career, with 56% of teens reporting that real-world and on-the-job experience is more

beneficial than obtaining a higher education degree.

Teens still need help

Despite a positive outlook overall, teens still need support to help them connect the dots from classroom to career.

Thirty-three percent of teens surveyed reported being concerned they don't have sufficient skills to reach their career goals.

Additionally, 36% were concerned with being able to afford the education or skills development programs needed to reach their goals.

"In a world increasingly defined by change – whether technological, political or social – helping students develop resilience is critical," Hirsbrunner said. "They need to be prepared not just for the academic rigors of college but for the realities of a rapidly shifting job market. Teaching them how to adapt, problem-solve and think critically is essential for their success."

In light of these changing dynamics, JA provides experiences that simulate the application of real-world concepts in post-secondary environments.

The strength of our partnerships between local businesses and educators helps us provide students with access to networks and pre-employment opportunities.

It's all part of bringing the real world to students, opening their minds to their potential and helping them be the change they want to see in themselves, their careers and their communities.

Our survey results show teens are cautiously optimistic in their view of the influx of technology-driven productivity tools penetrating the workplace.

Nearly 40% of teens surveyed believe AI will provide new job opportunities, and 30% believe it will have no impact on their ability to get a job.

At the same time, 49% believe

learning AI and technology advancements are more valuable than a traditional degree, and 80% of teens feel prepared to acquire new skills from technological advancements.

Hirsbrunner said she sees the writing on the wall.

"With the rise of AI, automation and other rapidly evolving technologies, it's more important than ever for students to have a strong foundation in STEM subjects, but also the soft skills that help them work alongside AI," she said. "This includes critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence and the ability to collaborate effectively with diverse groups."

The way forward

A world of change is ripe for ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

For more than 80 years, our goal at JA has been to provide young people with a strong foundation upon which to reach their dreams, wherever they may lead.

How we deliver on that goal continues to evolve to meet students where they are today and where they will need to be.

We continue to build on our experience as a community asset across Wisconsin's diverse communities while engaging leaders from dozens of the world's most successful businesses and organizations that call Wisconsin home.

But now more than ever, we're channeling our energy to adapt to the changing needs of students, providing access to new networks and opportunities and empowering them to develop both the skillset and mindset they need to live choice-filled lives.

Our traditional K-12 classroom programs continue to focus on preparing young people with the skills they need to transition into the workplace, succeed in their careers and enrich our local communities.

Our volunteer classroom mentors serve as role models and help students understand the connection between what they learn in school and what they will need to succeed in work and life.

JA's young adult programs are sparking growing interest.

Across the state, there's an increased demand for high school programming that takes students deep into the business world and helps them understand complex topics like risk and investments for long-term financial stability.

Perhaps our most exciting growth is happening in the post-secondary education space.

For several years, JA has been watching data that supports the need for our programs to be adapted for young adults struggling financially with independent living after school.

Now, JA of Wisconsin Northwest is taking the lead in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Stout and -Eau Claire as part of a pilot curriculum being offered to 18–25-year-olds to meet the needs of Wisconsin universities and their students.

JA is excited to be part of this new opportunity to help support one student at a time for their "last mile" of academic learning, enabling youth to be successful in their next steps in life.

Jack Welch, the late CEO of

General Electric, said "change now before you have to."

Adapting and improving is a continuous process.

But harnessing change takes a shift in thinking.

With a new focus on transferable skills and competencies, JA students gain knowledge, acquire skillsets and develop tools to successfully navigate the accelerating pace of change across our educational and career landscapes.

Inspired, prepared and equipped with the tools to face change head-on, Wisconsin's young people will be ready to unleash their superpowers to lead all of us toward a brighter future.

