**Are You Really Listening?**

Transcript of America’s Promise Alliance Google Hangout Broadcast with Tanya Tucker, Craig McClay & Javienne Ertha

**Tanya Tucker:** Hello, welcome everyone, and welcome to our Google Hangout, “Are You Really Listening?”. And this is an opportunity to share some proven techniques on how to better listen to, connect with, and really gain the trust of youth within your communities. My name is Tanya Tucker, Vice President of Alliance Engagement here at America’s Promise Alliance. I am happy to be joined today by Craig McClay, and Craig is Youth Engagement Advisor for America Promise Alliance’s Center for Promise at Tufts University. Craig was also a lead interviewer for APA’s report, Don’t Call Them Dropouts. Thanks for joining us today Craig. With Craig is Javienne, who is a 21 year-old young women from Roxbury, MA. Thank you for joining us Javienne.

Let’s dive right in, shall we? So Craig, I want to start with you and get some background on you and what really motivates you for this work. You obviously have a passion for this issue. What makes you do the work you do?

**Craig McClay:** I wanted to start off by saying thank you to you, to America’s Promise Alliance and Center for Promise for this opportunity to share and to listen and learn myself.

- I grew up in LA, and I saw a lot of things going on in the family and the neighborhood where it was just matters of miscommunications or misunderstandings that led to severe consequences.
- Fast forward, and I moved to Boston back in ’88 and I am seeing the same thing at a much higher level with people who aren’t as close to me, but impacting me in a way that didn’t feel right.
- I got involved with young people because I was trying to find a job that helped me feel alive, charged, and energized. And the best feeling came when I was working with young people, especially in group settings. Watching young people literally, physically, and otherwise transforming in front of my eyes. I got to see another side of young people that most people don’t get to see. Life in those areas is difficult, and in those areas, a lot of people have to wear masks and guards to protect themselves and navigate that reality.
- But I saw a different side of it; I was able to see a side of it that made an impact. I was able to see that side, that magical light that lights up inside of them and you can see that you are really making a difference.
- Additionally, when I was 17 I had a job where I was charged with hearing stories from elderly people. I had a recorder and 7 questions I would ask them, and listening to the richness and diversity of the lived experience through the eyes of other people just really got me going.
- So from the fire and the passion, and I genuinely enjoy hearing other people tell their life stories and share, and that really gets me going.
• I also enjoy doing things, I’m one of those people that likes getting up and moving doing things so that also gets me going.

Tanya: That’s wonderful. So why do you think youth voice is so important?

Craig:
• I think youth voice is very important because again, a lot of the stuff that I saw in my immediate spheres I just saw as misunderstanding and miscommunication. At least where I came from going up in LA, young people are supposed to be seen but not heard from. This is actually counter to what we are trying to train young people to do in life.
• Any issue that concerns young people directly needs that insight from young people. You know when you deal with domestic violence; you speak with people who have been domestically abused. When you want to learn more about burn victims, you don’t go and talk to lifeguards, and you go talk to people who have experienced it.
• You see what they are seeing, and encourage them to come up with some solutions that can address their needs in the best way possible

Tanya: One of our communities has a tagline for all the work that they do with and for young people. It says, “Not about me without me”. I’ve always loved that tagline and what you speak about really speaks to that. We have a lot of practitioners in communities, programs, collaborative efforts, leading organizations that are really trying to connect with young people. How do they find young people; particularly young people that we don’t see as traditional young leaders, those who might not be involved in activities or really engaged at all.

Craig:
• First thing I would suggest is just to get out into the community. You can post handbills, flyers, and things like that. Go to places where young people will hang out and put that information around there.
• The second thing I would suggest is when you are out in the community, talk to as many people as possible. I like to connect with the local juvenile justice officer and talk about who they are serving and what I am trying to do, and see if they have someone they would recommend. I also like to connect with the local church, to see where they are and see if there is a bridge that can connect what I’m doing with what they are doing. I also like to hit the local stores where youth buy things. I’m not just leaving a flyer there and that’s it. I like to engage with the person there behind the counter, see what they are about, and tell them what I’m about.
• I once heard someone say that in looking for a mentor, it’s kind of hard to approach someone directly, but if you can approach someone around that person, and have that person guide that person towards to you, and then it’s a much easier sell. So that’s the approach I use, I go to all the local agencies, and all the people I know and I make it a point that they all know who I am and what I’m doing.
• 9 times out of 10 when you talk to someone in the neighborhood they know of a young person who can benefit from the program better than you. And they have the person to
guide that person over to you. That word of mouth, intimate connection is very important to have.

- The last thing in terms of connecting with young people, is I looked to even the places where the likely suspects won’t necessarily be. I’ll connect with the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, the store where the guy sells fish & tackle bait, and really spread the word as far as possible.

**Tanya:** That’s great. It sounds like our folks should create some of those connections with unlikely partners that they might not have right now. So Javienne, I want to turn to you. I want to learn **how you met this character and what started your relationship here?**

**Javienne:** I actually met Craig when he was walking through my neighborhood passing out flyers and talking to people. I was actually in the kitchen when he was talking to my mom, and apparently they had gone to high school together. My mom was asking him about jobs, and then she called me outside. He started talking to me about how he has this job for me, and he wanted me to look at these jobs and go to the interviews. I thought this was a great opportunity to find a job because I hadn’t had a job in a long time.

**Tanya:** When you first met Craig, was there something about what he said, or how he said it, or how he showed up at your door that made you open to trusting this guy?

**Javienne:** He was really close to my mom and she was talking to him like they had been friends for a really long time, and she was like go to the interview. So I went to the interview and he was very talkative, and you he talks a lot, and so I thought he’s going to drive me right in, and sure enough I went to the interview and that was exactly what he did.

**Tanya:** That’s awesome and I’m glad you guys are still connected today. We have a question from one of our viewers that I want to throw out to you guys. And both of you can feel free to answer. The question is **what do you do for a young person, grade 6 that sees no point in education?**

**Craig:**

- That’s a great question, and my short answer is that you have to inspire that person. You have to find a way to breathe life into their lungs, literally. I think a great way to do that is to just expose them to the different possibilities.
- Our brain lights up when we experience new things, we feel alive when certain things happen. Maybe taking that young person out of their normal experience, taking them to a new part of town, doing something that they wouldn’t have normally done, and then open up a conversation about it, because now they are a little more open.
- Another great way to engage them is to present them with a challenge. Make it a doable challenge, but something that is not too easy, where they are breathing and then they aren’t. Make it a little bit of a challenge as well as something that is completely new. I also feel that it’s a great opportunity for a young person to inform you about what they are seeing, and a chance to listen to them.
• That doorway can really open up if you take the time to listen to that young person and hear what they are seeing. Maybe there is something that is a little deeper in there that can be used as a greater lever to use to get them back on track and enjoy education again.

**Tanya:** that’s great. I want to encourage people to keep the questions coming because this is really about you, and your needs, and your questions so we want to make sure we get to those. You all have some great suggestions for the questions that you heard, type those in because we are all experts here. Craig, you really opened the doorway to the next part I want to get to, the listening piece. **What does it mean to really listen to young people, and what does that look like?**

**Craig:**

• I think there are 4 major tenants when it comes to really listening. We live in this world where we are surrounded by sounds, everyone’s walking around with their iPods and things with very loud volumes. The tools that you use to listen are your ears. I would suggest for everyone to recalibrate your ears, find a very quiet space, just 30 seconds, because I think it’s aggravating to talk to someone and for them to not hear what you are saying because their ears are blown.

• I think the first thing is to be fully present. You can’t be distracted by the technology we have present, you have to be there giving your full attention. There is nothing better than being in a deep conversation and getting so lost in the conversation and getting that connection.

• Another thing is to be aware of the intended emotional charge around the issue. You want to acknowledge, information is knowledge, and you should ask questions if something isn’t clear.

• At the end of the day, listen as if your life depended on it. Sometimes it might backfire, but sometimes it really makes people feel as if they are really heard. In one of our projects, we did this, and at the end of every session, young people were saying that they felt heard. That someone listened to me, and I feel so much better now. Again, that direct impact, being in that moment, is one of the reasons I do this work.

• The other part of it too is that part of the reason why I do this. I actually enjoy listening to these stories. I make that other person understand that this isn’t a burden, this isn’t just a job. I am at my strongest, my shoulders are broadest when I am at this level. That’s speaking for me, but I think that if someone sees you enjoying what you’re doing in the service of something bigger then those are some great things to kind of follow.

**Tanya:** So it’s listen with your full body, don’t be afraid to ask those critical questions. **Do you think as adults, we are sometimes afraid to ask those questions because we are afraid of what the audience might be?**

**Craig:** Absolutely. It also is kind of knowing your audience, and knowing what questions you can ask that can push the conversation along, and what questions might shut it down, those conversation cul-de-sac. You want to shut it down.
**Tanya:** Javienne, I’d love to get your perspective as a young person, what is it like to really be heard by an adult. What does it look like from your end and what does it mean to you as a young person?

**Javienne:** As a young person, it’s a lot about respect. Older people are all about respecting other people, so I felt as if someone listened to me, I was respected. When someone sought out my ideas, my ideas are being not just heard, but used to get things across to them, it means that someone is going to turn my words into actions that can come true. It’s not all about if they take in what I am saying, but more about what they are going to do about it.

**Tanya:** So follow through on your part is big, don’t just listen to what you are saying, but act on it if you are an adult being asked to act on it. Okay, so a reminder to please give us your questions, we would love to answer them. Let me go on from listening. This is all about relationships, don't just listen, but how are you going to follow through and act on what they said. It’s about building really authentic relationships with young people. **How do you sustain those once you find the young person and made that connection, how do you sustain these for the long haul?**

**Craig:**
- I think Javienne set us up really well for that, it is about taking action. It’s about having a purpose-driven mission that will improve the quality of life for that young person. It is also important that as you move forward, you learn how to communicate critical information and growth to that young person. Using feedback as a mechanism to help that young person grow, but receive that feedback also for you to grow as well. Relationships are not just one way, it goes both ways, and I found that 1 thing that was really powerful for me when I first started to work. This one guy said to me, “I need your expertise on something”, and I was 16 and didn’t think that I had any expertise on anything. But that really got me going, and since that day when we started doing work together, again with that purpose-driven mission to help something bigger than me, but being able to get behind a young person as they do that, it’s a great way to maintain a long-term relationship.
- Also, as long as you are in a relationship with a young person, you have to figure out where the relationship is going, set some goals with the young person about what they want to accomplish. In these conversations, you will find a richness in the relationship that will last a very long time.

**Tanya:** We have another question from one of our viewers, and they want to know **how do you engage young people that were once passionate but have lost it?**

**Craig:**
- I’m going to go back to that inspiring piece. I think you can’t say enough about that. Being able to go find a young person that you don’t have an obligation to, and they don’t have an obligation to you, that you can speak to, and motivate them, and say that I see something in you, and what I see in you is very good, and I want you to grow with it. Present them with a challenge, this is what we are going to try and do together, and taking the actions necessary to help them achieve that challenge.
• I also think young people need to find ways to expression themselves. The expression piece is very important. Another thing, the last thing, I want to say on this is that when we talk about building relationships with young people that you have to help that young person with everything for the rest of their or your life. But that is simply not the case, you can be the hub of the network for that person, and connect them to other people that can do the work that you don’t have time, skills, or understanding to do, and this can be just as supportive and effective.

Tanya: I think that was a critical point that you made, that one person doesn’t have to be everything for that one person, and so having a community of folks rallying around a person is key. We’ll keep going through audience questions. This is a really good question. It is how many young people can you reasonably has an authentic relationship with at a time?

Craig: It’s kind of hard to quantify, because it’s a function of where you are, how many people you have access to, what occupies the 8 hours of your day, and what charges that, are you at work, are you on the computer, on paper, etc. it is also about what drives your passion, and in some cases, some people might have their own family with multiple kids and that could be authentic relationships. I think reasonably it is what could not knock you off balance. It’s hard to quantify that but I would say know your limits and don’t knock off yourself off balance. You have to be able to take care of yourself in order to help others. You don’t want to burn yourself out, and it is very hard to guide someone else’s life when your life is falling apart.

Tanya: Definitely good point. Craig, would you think another indicator of perhaps stretching yourself too thin is when you stop following through on your commitments? I would think consistency and following through on your commitments is key to the relationships. I think when you start showing up later than you said or cancelling things or things like that; that would be a good indicator that things are out of balance.

Craig: Exactly, and to add to that, and I think something we don’t talk about is if that the relationship has to change. I think it is one of the most damaging things in the world to severe all ties in a relationship. I think there is a way to go about it, and have a conversation about having to pull back your responsibilities back a little bit. So that the young person understands that it is not because you don’t like them, as that is how it is often read, but it’s just about having the conversation so its transparent, I think that is very important.

Tanya: In terms of transitioning the relationship, I would also imagine there are key points in a young person’s life, you know perhaps you start a relationship with a young person in middle school, and does the nature of that relationship change when they get to high school, and then again when they go off to work or college, and those key transition points. How do you help adults deal with changing the relationship that way?
Craig:
• That is a challenge, but I always go back to the goals of the relationship. Where is this ship going. It’s not like it always has to have a specific destination, but let that beacon so that when those transitions do come up, it’s not as difficult.
• Again, I cannot express how important it is to be transparent and keep the lines of communication open. That makes it a lot easier.

Tanya: You’ve talked a few times about creating goals with the young person you are connecting with and creating relationships with. What does that look like? Is it one conversation, or a series of conversations? How do adults broach that subject about the goals of our relationship?

Craig:
• I think it is definitely an ongoing conversation. In doing that, I like to look at what we are doing, but I look at the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional. The spirituality can be left behind.
• A lot of the young people I work with have a challenge with school, which is a very clear, very doable point of entry right there. Let’s get you back in school, getting your GED or high school diploma and on a track to either college or career. They can choose, but you can guide them.
• The second one is the physical stuff. Health is very important, and being aware of the elements in your environment. You want to surround yourself with things you like and want to be a part of, and then connecting people with that network. I am a very big person on relationships, and connecting people.
• The emotional piece. It is often said that we are emotional people who sometimes think, and we are not thinking people who sometimes feel. In realizing that, emotional stuff is one of those things like listening that we were never really taught how to understand why or how I am feeling like this, what it is that I’m bringing that is actually creating the situation that has me feeling this way. So it’s a self-awareness piece, it’s an awareness of how other people are feeling. It’s the social awareness of what you are bringing to the situation is another important thing to learn
• This is how I start off on setting the goals, I look at those 4 dimensions, and then I have that conversation with the young person and ask them where they want to go in those directions.

Tanya: So Javienne, I want to get back to you and ask you, what has it meant to you to have Craig in your life and other caring adults in your life helping court you and guide you...what has it meant to you?

Javienne: It means a lot to me. Having people to talk to and talk to me about my problems. I need people out there who show me that they care and they are willing to help me get further in my life and do great things. Craig’s not the only one I still talk to from my youth job; I still talk to a lot of other people from there. It’s about building connections you can keep, and that someone is really actually there for you. That’s how you know, Craig and I had a connection, we still have a connection, that’s why I’m here today and I’m very happy to be here.
Tanya: I want to give the audience a last chance to get in a few questions in while I lob my final question to Craig & Javienne. So if you do want to get some questions in, do type them in now. I was wondering now for both of you if you have some final words, any pieces of advice, to those out here trying to do this work with youth, trying to engage young people, trying to really amplify youth voice. What would be your advice to these people to continue this work and to do the work better?

Javienne: I’ll go first. Working with the youth is a great thing, when I worked with TE we did a lot of events that brought in a lot of people, a lot of people struggling there and a lot of parents. Now I work in a high school where I serve lunches and do a lot of odd jobs. I’m still working in the youth field. So many of the youth need the help, but the help isn’t out there. People need personal help, it’s not just about community centers and places they can go. At TE we did a lot of great work in my neighborhood, we built a park along with other higher ground and foundations. Now when I walk past that park, I feel great because I know that kids from 10 years, 20 years, 30 years from now and all the kids that are going to be so happy that we did such a great thing. I’ve lived there my whole life and we have never had a full park like that so it’s a great opportunity to have that job and just do great things for people that you know is going help them.

Craig:

- The only two points I’m would add is that I think a lot of times when we think about doing this work we think of everything in a formal setting.
- But there are so many informal opportunities when we can shape and guide a young person or our peers. Think when you walk down the street, some young person is looking up to you and learning from you. It’s as simple as that. The way you interact with other people at the grocery store, or the car wash, or whenever you are in public, those are opportunities to be that model, so to speak, for a young person. It doesn’t always have to be so formal and regimented.
- The other piece I would add to this is a matter of timing. A lot of people go into this and think okay I’m going to have this impact and I’m going to see it right away. And while you do see something right away, but sometimes the ebb and flow of life pulls your up and pulls you down and just being aware that this is a process. It’s something where the young person you connect with is open arms one day and the next day giving you the stiff-arm. I would say to try and work through that stuff. Don’t put yourself in harms’ way obviously, but it is a journey and life usually throws us curveballs. Hang in there and know that timing is off the essence, and don’t give up after you perceive to be a failed attempt to connect because sometimes it’s just a matter of shaving away, chipping away, a little bit by little bit to where you get to that magical point where you actually connect.
- Sometimes quite honestly there might be some young people that are just testing you. So my suggestion is to bring your erasers.
- I would say those are the two main things, but every opportunity in front of a young person is an opportunity to help shape and form and direct and guide them. And then timing; it is going to take some time.
Tanya: Okay so we have a couple questions from the audience. The first is can you speak on youth leadership development and tips to run a successful program. A lot of our folks beyond the amplifying the youth voice really want to help them develop into young leaders. So do you have any tips or good practice on that?

Craig:
• Oh man, the leadership stuff. It’s one of those things where if we want to see young leaders to develop, you have to provide opportunities for youth people to lead.
• In the work that I’ve done before, it’s been all about developing the leadership. The young people were front and center on everything, making the decisions, making the flyers, doing the outreach, determining the logistics, and developing the content.
• We’ve got to pave that way for young people to do that work with some guard rails up to support their success. It is very important that that element is added because it’s what keeps them going.
• It’s assumed a lot that leaders are born and can’t grow. I push against that. I think that everyone is a leader; it’s just a matter of do they have the opportunities and the supports they need to actually demonstrate that skill with the broader audience.
• I think we have to give the young people the opportunity to lead if we want to see them develop as leaders.

Tanya: There was a question about balancing. Balancing a large number of youth volunteers and their responsibilities without pushing them away. It’s about your working with a large group of youth volunteers, with lots of responsibilities, so how do you balance the leadership opportunity but also not push them away?

Javienne: I was thinking in a way that he still talks to a lot of people and still has those connections. It’s all about that bond. It’s one of those things that when you first build something, it’s going be held forever. It’s once you start of, it’s getting them in to know that you are there for them, and that you are going to help them any way you can. So even if it’s a lot of people, it’s a different bond for every person.

Craig:
• I was just going to say, being clear about what the expectations are for the volunteers, and being on the same page and being very specific about what the role is. You can divide those roles up over time.
• For example, having a holiday event when you are giving away toys. You can have people take the first shift, some can take the end shift, some can take the middle, and maybe you need people over here helping with the food. Or we need help getting people through the doors. There are always a lot of various things peoples can contribute to the success of the event and to balance the purpose and the substance of getting people through the doors, it’s just about being very clear with that vision at the beginning.

Tanya: And I think that question speaks to that notion of if we are working with young people and in particular giving them youth leadership opportunities, they always rise to the occasion. And so,
we have to be ready as the adult leaders to add more responsibility and keep up with the young people. So I think we need to plan for that as well as part of our programs. Before we end our Google Hangout, any last question or two that the audience wants to throw out there? I see some writing going on so it seems like we’ve got another question.

Craig: Tanya, while we have a second here, I would like to mention that I have some other tools to kind of do this work. I didn’t want to get into the details of that because I could talk forever. However, if people are interested they can reach out to us and we could have further conversations offline to help and support other programs out there.

Tanya: Question that we just got in: most effective ways to teach 14-24-year-olds soft skills?

Craig:

• That’s what everyone is talking about these days, soft skills. For me, that falls into the whole emotional realm of things. It’s a tricky thing, because when you talk about getting along with other people and be able to navigate the challenges and opportunities that are presented to us in the work situations, it takes a lot for us to kind of know what is going in.
• I would say feedback is a great tool for that.
• There are also a lot of interactive exercises that can be used to surface it so people can talk about it. I think talking about it is really important.
• It’s kind of like the bi-product. You have to have a purpose, and while working to this purpose, along the way provide some guardrails and guards to let anybody, really, know what is happening.
• I think having good timing and pulling someone aside and saying hey, just standing in observation, I noticed this, and maybe talk about the impact that it had. And then going into what they saw from their side and what did you do to ratify this.
• Broad observation, impact of your observation, and then what do you see on your side and let’s try to figure out how we can fix this because we don’t want that impact anymore. It’s not good for us, your organization, or your products or services as well.