NONPROFIT SECTOR AND MOVEMENT CONTEXT

As part of the largest generation, Baby Boomers have and continue to make an important impact on U.S. society and history. Like many others, nonprofit sector leaders have begun to pay attention to the aging of this large cohort, who began turning sixty-five in 2012. From hundreds of interviews over the last decade, Building Movement Project has identified some key trends in the sector that impact how we look at and think of leadership, detailed below.

Baby boom generation leaders are extremely proud of what their generation accomplished through the various social movements of the 1960s and '70s—including the Civil Rights, anti-war, and women's movements and various identity-based mobilizations. They are less enthusiastic about their work in the '80s and '90s when, in the face of government cutbacks and the rise of the conservative right, they turned to creating and working in nonprofit organizations.[1] However, there they made long-term commitments to social change work and built institutions anchored in communities.

Despite their lack of management experience and the lack of nonprofit leadership training available, these leaders learned on the job how to grow and sustain complex, effective organizations. Ironically, the more successful they were in building their organizations, the more they had to work to keep pace with the growing demands from the community and the increasing need to identify sources of funding as traditional sources diminished throughout the 80's and 90's.

As these baby boom generation leaders edge towards traditional retirement age, they have several reasons to be anxious about their own future and the future of their agencies. On a personal level, they worry about whether they have the financial means to retire, particularly in

a changed economic environment where more of the responsibility for retirement and economic survival in old age has been pushed onto the backs of individual retirees. Some are growing tired of their role as organizational leader and are interested in trying something new, but unclear about their options and worried about making enough income to sustain themselves and dependent family members.

Older leaders agree that in order to remain vital and contribute to progressive social change, they need to communicate with and engage younger leaders. At the same time, they have mixed feelings about younger generations. They are impressed by younger leaders' capacity, but unsure of their long-term commitment to the work. When it comes to transitioning leadership, many older leaders do not know how to transfer the skills and experience they have gained during the past three decades to new leaders.

Several reports have examined younger leaders' perspectives (especially those working for social change) on nonprofit leadership. These next generations – Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) and the first of the Millenial cohort (born between 1980 and 2000) – often express views contrary to the prevailing narrative that the sector is facing a crisis of leadership as the Baby-boomers approach retirement. They see themselves as a new generation of leaders who are committed, effective and able to take the helm; but they also understand leadership in ways that differ from their older counterparts.

Gen Xers talk about how difficult it is to find leadership positions in existing organizations because of the value placed on on-the-ground experience that Gen Xers have yet to develop. Yet they also feel they are expected to arrive with higher academic credentials, even though that knowledge is often not trusted or used. They note that the simple fact of growing up in the post-Civil Rights movement period makes their values and motivations suspect to some

1 Kim, Helen S., Frances Kunreuther. *What's Next? Baby Boom-Age Leaders in Social Change Nonprofits*. (Building Movement Project, 2007)

boomer leaders, and they're looking to legitimize their ability to take on responsibility and authority.[2]

The Millennials are still emerging, but are seen as confident and idealistic, and already in positions where they're making an impact. This generation is distinguished by combining the hopefulness of the Boomers with the realism of the Xers, combined with their status as the first generation of digital natives (those born during or after the general introduction of digital technology, who – through interacting with digital technology from an early age – have a greater understanding of its concepts).

DIVERSITY

In addition to generational divides, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and immigration status (among many others) play a large role in the ways leadership changes and transitions have unfolded.

In Daring to Lead (2001) only 17% of executive directors were people of color. That number was the same five years later in 2006, and increased to just

Do you want to be an executive director someday?
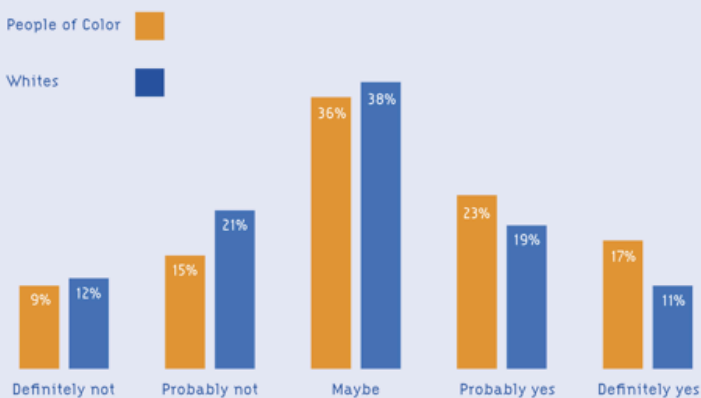
Taken from *Ready to Lead* (2011)[4]

18% in 2011.[3] Yet people of color are more likely to express interest in becoming executive directors, so there is a significant disconnect.

In predominantly homogenous organizations (white, straight, upper class, able-bodied, etc.), younger diverse leaders struggle with being recognized as capable decision-makers, and with taking on power and keeping their identities. Even when they do move in to positions of leadership, the sector has yet to treat these leaders in the same way. Not only are they asked to do more because of their race/ethnic identity – whether it is to sit on advisory committees, present on panels, or speak at conferences – but it does not necessarily translate into receiving more support or resources. In fact, leaders of color are often held to a higher standard than white-led groups, especially in their quest for funds.[5]

More work is needed to fully understand and address these dynamics, and to provide tools and resources for younger diverse activists stepping into leadership positions. The reports from Building Movement Project throughout this toolkit speak to some of these questions, and point to further research to be done.

LEADERSHIP TOOLS

The exercises in this section will help you assess and understand the challenges facing the sector, and both the barriers and opportunities for identifying new – and

2   Kunreuther, Frances. *Up Next: Generation Change and the Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations* (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005)

3   Cornelius, Marla, Rick Moyers, and Jeanne Bell. *Daring to Lead 2011: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the Meyer Foundation, 2011)

4   Cornelius, Marla, Patrick Corvington, and Albert Ruesga. *Ready to Lead?: Next Generation Leaders Speak Out* (A National Study Produced in Partnership by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Meyer Foundation and Idealist.org, 2008)

5   Kim, Helen and Frances Kunreuther. *Vision for Change: A New Wave of Social Justice Leadership* (Building Movement Project, 2013)

in many cases existing – leaders. They will also begin to surface and explore some of the assumptions we carry about leaders and their place in the sector and larger movement for social change. In addition, you will find suggested reports to read for more background.

The next section of *Leadership Tools* will look at the unique qualities of each generation and how those can be used to build bridges across divides.