

UNDERSTANDING THE GENERATIONS

AND BRIDGING THE GAPS

During the past decade, there has been a rising sense of alarm in the nonprofit sector about the future of its leadership. Study after study has pointed to an impending crisis, with roughly 75 percent of executive directors/CEOs reporting that they plan to leave their jobs within the next five years.¹ Concerns about how to identify new leaders and issues of workforce development have become high priorities for those thinking about the sector's future.

However, this supposed crisis has proven to be somewhat exaggerated. Many long-time leaders are experiencing anxiety at the prospect of leaving their positions, both for their own personal financial and professional stability, and for their organizations. This has meant that multi-generational workplaces are now the norm in the nonprofit sector, begging many questions and much further discussion about the best ways to structure leadership for all parties involved, while still planning for eventual leadership transitions.

Talking with current and emerging non-profit leaders in their 20s, 30s, and early 40s in numerous interviews, focus groups, and meetings, we have found these younger (post Baby Boom-age) leaders want to work with older generations to look at the causes and forces that have shaped the sector and the broader environment today and plan future directions to pursue. For younger leaders, the next decades will mean a different type of sector, with a different kind of leadership, one that will build on and move forward from that which exists today.

Younger leaders may appear to look and act differently from older leaders, but all of our conversations and research have found that nonprofit leaders – young and old – share the same level of commitment, and are dedicated to creating a more just and equitable society.

WHAT IS A GENERATION?

For decades, sociologists have attempted to understand what forms a generation and the meaning generations have in society. Here, we use the term 'generation' to define a group of people that was born in the same era and has a shared memory of important events and similar assumptions about what matters, based on their common experiences. Naturally there are generational subgroups marked by region, class status, race/ethnicity, etc. Though the characteristics of each generation may be a simplification, defining generations in broad strokes helps navigate the large shifts that will be taking place over the next decade in nonprofit and social change leadership.

The following breakdowns of the generations help to sort out the differences, and similarities, that each possess.

TRADITIONAL/VETERANS OF CHANGE (born prior to 1946): In their late sixties and seventies (67 to 87), most in this generation are cutting down at work or taking on other tasks. In social change work, this generation often pioneered the formation of new organizations. They currently comprise about 5-10% of workforce, but are coming back into the workforce in part-time positions, and sometimes in volunteer positions. They are noted for their top-down style of management, sense of propriety and loyalty, and emphasis on commitment, especially to their organizations.

BABY BOOMERS (born 1946-1964): Boomers are the biggest cohort (around 76 million people in US). While they are identified with movements of the 1960s and 70s, taken as an entire generation in the general population, they are actually more conservative on social issues. They believe in hierarchy, but also try to be more inclusive in the workplace.

¹ Kunreuther, Frances and Patrick A. Corvington, *Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007)

GENERATION X (born 1965-1979): Gen X is 35% smaller than the Baby Boom generation (only 45 million) and considered a sandwich generation between two bigger cohorts. Through the 1980s and 90s, GenXers were considered slackers and accepting of the status quo. In the new millennium, however, GenXers have become the entrepreneurs, the business-minded and self-reliant leaders. They are more skeptical than boomers, yet serve as a bridge between Boomers and Millennials as they are able to understand and identify with both groups.

MILLENNIALS (born 1980-2000): The Millennial generation (also called Gen Y or Echo) has as many people as the Baby Boom generation. Millennials (age 13 to 32) are already in the workforce, though it is worth noting that the recession is having tremendous effects on the current employment of this generation. At first only associated with being children of Baby Boomers and raised in the age of technology, this generation might now come to define what it will be like to come of age in this new economy.

LEADERSHIP TOOLS

The exercises and reports in this section will help users gain a better understanding of their own generations, as well as discover the preconceptions held about others. Bridging the gaps and working across generations takes time and intentional practice. Each individual in an organization – not just senior leadership – has a part to play in creating a productive and thriving multigenerational workplace.

The next section of *Leadership Tools* will look at the specific roles each generation can play in a multi-generational workplace, and the tasks to accomplish.