

WHAT WORKS:

Developing Successful Multigenerational Leadership

BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

The goal of the Building Movement Project is to build a strong social justice ethos into the nonprofit sector, strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in the United States as sites of democratic practice, and promote nonprofit groups as partners in building a movement for progressive social change.

To accomplish its goals, the Building Movement Project makes use of four core strategies:

- Changing the discourse and practice within the nonprofit sector to endorse social change and social justice values.
- Identifying and working with social service organizations as sites for social change activities in which staff and constituencies can be engaged to participate in movement building.
- Supporting young leaders who bring new ideas and energy to social change work.
- Listening to and engaging people who work in social change organizations—especially grassroots and community-based groups—to strengthen their ability to shape the policies that affect their work and the communities they serve.

IDEALIST.ORG: ACTION WITHOUT BORDERS

Action Without Borders is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. Idealist.org, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been growing concern about the breadth and depth of new leadership in the nonprofit sector. Until recently, the alarm was focused on the departure of the Baby Boom generation, those born between 1946 and 1965. This large cohort—so key to the development and growth of nonprofit organizations—was reaching the traditional age of retirement and there was fear that there were too few able leaders in the next generations to take their place. But this expectation of a mass exodus has given way to a new reality. The changing economic climate, extended life expectancy, and the desire to be remain active and continue their contributions are leading Boomers to remain in the workforce for a longer period of time.

This changing narrative of nonprofit leadership presents a new challenge. Leadership and workforce development are still top priorities for the nonprofit sector, but older workers continue to be a powerful presence.¹ At the same time, younger generations and for-profit professionals are entering the sector in increasing numbers.² With up to four generations at work, nonprofit leaders are now struggling to make room for the ideas and skills of newer generations, while figuring out how to support the continued presence of older, more seasoned workers.

The What Works study looks at the key factors that build leadership and commitment across generations. While it is true that generations differ in how they approach their work, there are remarkable similarities in what people want out of their work and workplaces. Rather than focus on well-documented differences, What Works examines what helps potential leaders do their best work, what constitutes a good workplace, and how to improve our ability to retain, support, and promote staff across generations. This report—a collaboration between the Building Movement Project and Idealist.org—offers a roadmap for how nonprofits can create dedicated staff, build their capacity to lead, and deepen their commitment to the nonprofit sector at little to no cost.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In order for organizations to achieve success, every nonprofit leader needs to understand what works—and what doesn't—when it comes to nurturing staff across generations and developing strong organizational leadership. Creating positive relationships at work and a cultivating a strong belief in the organizational mission work well. However, there are still some areas, mostly structural in nature, that need improvement. In particular, there are several key findings that, if acted on, can help groups create a vibrant multigenerational workplace:

“ Respondents felt that they knew what their job descriptions were, but did not know whether they were doing their jobs well. ”

FINDING #1:

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER.

Overwhelmingly, nonprofit staff members tell us they do their best work when they have positive relationships on the job, especially with their direct supervisors. The good news is that most respondents feel that they currently have these positive relationships.

FINDING #2:

MISSION, MISSION, MISSION.

A crucial aspect of the job that allows nonprofit employees to do their best work is a strong belief in the mission of the organization. It is important for staffers of all ages to believe in the importance of the organization's work, and to know how they contribute to its success.

FINDING #3:

CLEAR SYSTEMS SUPPORT GOOD WORKPLACES.

While relationships and mission matter, clarity about decision making, job requirements, and evaluation are also important factors for creating a positive atmosphere in the workplace. In addition, respondents pointed to the importance of spaces for peer support to discuss and apply leadership development skills.

FINDING #4:

EXPLICIT PATHS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT ARE KEY.

Respondents felt they knew what their job descriptions were, but did not know whether they were doing their jobs well. Survey respondents and focus group participants wanted clear paths for advancement, including knowing what determines success and how salaries are decided. They were also unclear about when doing a good job would lead to more responsibility and higher pay.

FINDING #5:

GENERATIONS HAVE A LOT IN COMMON AND SOME KEY DIFFERENCES.

There are still important nuances and unique generational needs that are important to recognize. Younger leaders need more leadership development support, while older leaders value a more collective belief in an organization's mission. However, there are also a significant number of similarities that can help unify colleagues across generations, including the importance of teamwork and collaboration.

We often hear about the problems in nonprofit organizations especially as the sector accommodates new generations. Our findings indicate that there are some simple yet crucial organizational changes that will result in employees doing better work and ultimately being more committed to the organization and the sector.

BACKGROUND

There are certain indicators of workplace satisfaction that have been developed over the years to predict job satisfaction and how long an employee is likely to stay with an organization. We used similar indicators in the What Works study to assess participant satisfaction with their current positions adding age of employee as an additional factor.

Most surveys in this field focus on for-profit companies, government agencies, or large nonprofits. The Federal Human Capital Survey (FHCS), administered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), ranks the best places to work in the federal government³. Federal employees are asked to evaluate their work experiences in several key areas, emphasizing mainly fairness, effective management, and leadership. Key indicators include questions about employee skills and mission match; strategic management (specifically around employee skill development and advancement); teamwork (including internal and external communication); performance-based rewards and advancement that are timely and fair; and other factors.

These indicators have been used to rank for-profit organizations as well.⁴ The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College has done further research on whether age is related to employee satisfaction. They found significant differences between generations in terms of work overload, supervisor support, opportunities for development, and access to flexible work⁵—disparities that indicate workplace policies and access to benefits are not always age-neutral. In addition, several reports have documented the very real differences between the four generations working in nonprofits today, including how work is approached, the reasons people are drawn to the nonprofit sector, and how commitment to work and personal life is balanced.⁶ Most of the work done on generational shifts in the nonprofit sector has explored the effect of these differences on how we develop new leaders and prepare for transitions in nonprofit leadership.

Recommendations have been made for how to address these generational differences, including cross-generational team-building and intergenerational dialogue. Other ideas include balancing factors that make employees feel the most valued at work and developing flexible approaches to rewards, impact, and advancement based on each individual's unique needs.⁷

There has also been a rise in the number of social entrepreneurial organizations that focus on developing talent, measuring impact, and high-performing workplaces. Drawing on for-profit models, they use a variety of motivators—including rewards systems and tying individual job performance to organizational success—in a way that has proven appealing to a new generation of social sector staff and leaders.⁸

All of these indicators and propositions, however, have been impacted by the changing economic climate and its effect on employee morale. Organizations often cut benefits and training programs in times of limited resources and ask employees to do more with less. This can have a detrimental effect on worker satisfaction and, ultimately, on organizational success. In an op-ed published in the Chronicle of Philanthropy, Michael

Watson, senior vice president of human resources and diversity for Girl Scouts of the USA, wrote: “At a time when the nation needs nonprofit services, solutions, and support the most, the rising numbers of disengaged employees is a big problem. Such workers put forward less effort, are less productive, and provide lower levels of customer service.”⁹

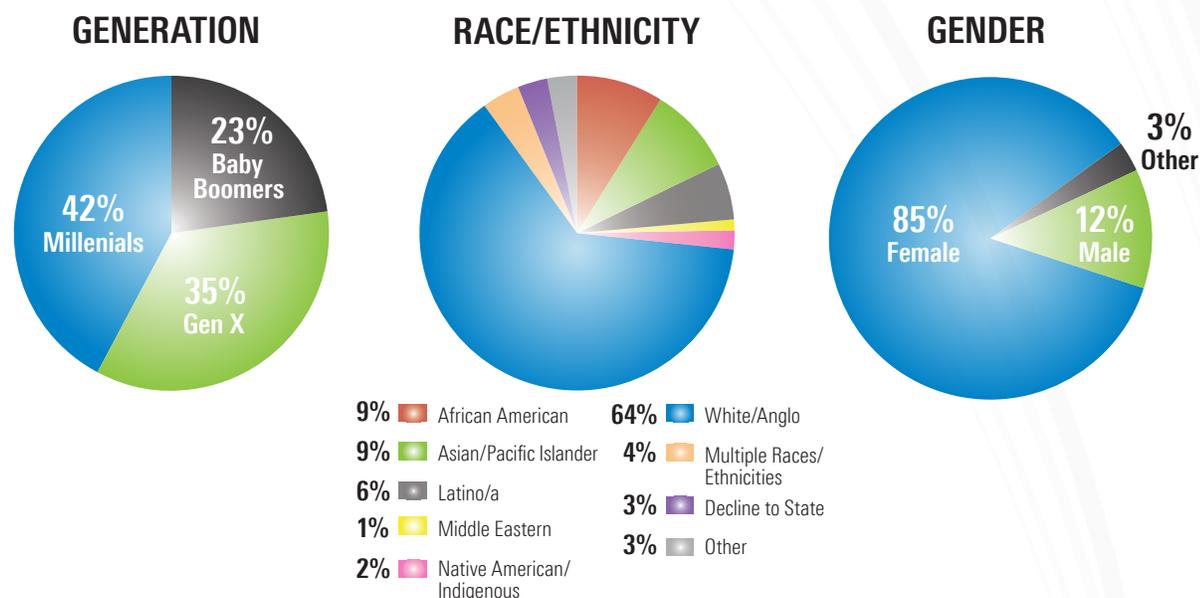
In order to ensure the nonprofit sector cultivates leadership across all generations, we must pay attention to the systems and structures within organizations that contribute to employees’ sense of belonging, security, and value.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on several sources of information. Using background research in the areas of leadership development, generational characteristics, high-performing workplaces, and new organizational models for nonprofits, we conducted informational interviews with nonprofit staff members to get a sense of what they enjoyed about their organizations. We used the information from these interviews to develop an in-depth survey that included questions about respondents’ current workplaces as well as their ideal workplaces.

The survey was developed with the input and support of an advisory committee that included researchers, academics, and nonprofit practitioners with expertise in generational change and leadership development. It was distributed via email, and just under 1,000 people responded.

Data collected from the survey was supplemented by focus groups conducted in Detroit, Washington, DC, and New York City. Nearly 40 participants discussed factors that contributed to their best work, as well as barriers and strategies for bringing those factors into their workplaces. Their responses added depth and detailed examples to the information we collected through the survey. Finally, findings and recommendations were reviewed by the advisory committee and compiled into this report.

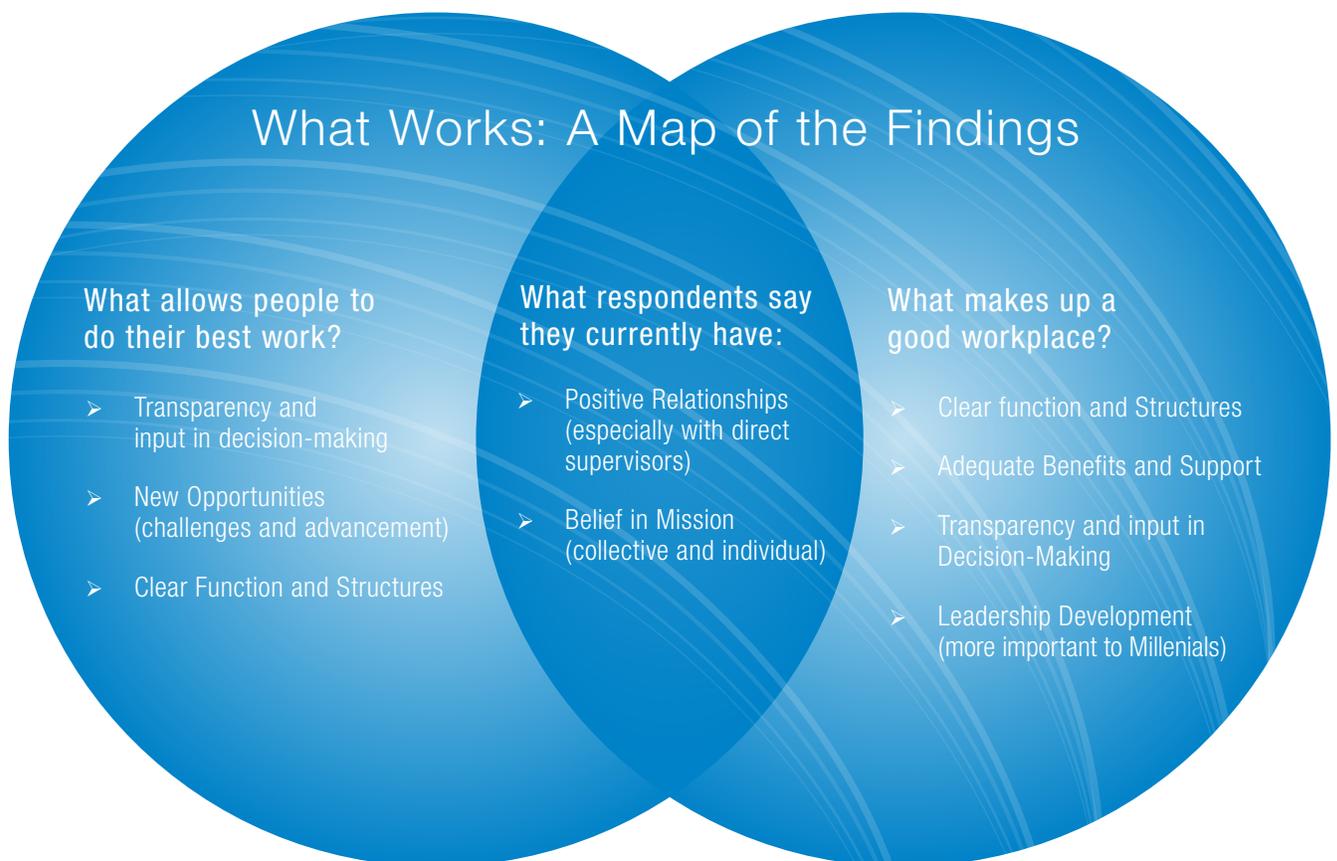


“I think consistency is an underrated value...consistency in your words and actions and consistency over time... [Y]ou need both, and I think that’s what gets people to trust you, or you to trust your boss.”

FINDINGS

Survey respondents were asked to consider two main questions: “What allows you to do your best work?” and “What components make up a good workplace?” In addition to comparing their answers by generation, we also considered how satisfied they were in their current workplaces, and whether what they said they wanted matched what they felt they currently had in their workplaces.

While many respondents were generally satisfied with their current workplaces, they pointed to major gaps when it comes to opportunities to develop their leadership and do their best work. Unless these gaps are addressed, organizations (and the nonprofit sector in general) stand to lose valuable potential leadership when the economy improves. Nonprofits also risk losing talent to organizations that do focus on developing their staff and building workplaces that support employees’ best work.



THE GOOD NEWS: WHAT WORKS WELL

FINDING #1: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

For staff, a positive relationship with a direct supervisor is the most frequently cited factor that allows them to do their best work. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents answered that positive relationships in the workplace—including those with a direct supervisor—are key. The emphasis on good working relationships held firm across generations, and was echoed by focus group participants as well. In fact, of those who answered, 80 percent noted that they currently have a positive relationship with their direct supervisor, and over 91 percent have positive relationships with co-workers.

When focus group participants were asked to elaborate, they cited several components that defined positive work relationships. These included mutual respect, shared or understood responsibility, and accountability on both sides of the relationship.

TOP 5: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DO YOUR BEST WORK?

- 1 Positive Relationships, especially with direct supervisors
- 2 Belief in Mission
- 3 Transparency and Input in Decision Making
- 4 New Opportunities (challenges and advancement)
- 5 Clear Function and Structures

FINDING #2: MISSION, MISSION, MISSION

The mission-driven organization is the second most important factor to staff. Respondents told us they did their best work when they had a belief in the mission of their organizations and could see how their work contributed to accomplishing that mission. Almost 87 percent of respondents were committed to the mission of their organization, while even more reported that they know and understand that mission (94 percent and 90 percent respectively). Seventy-seven percent of survey respondents believe that their work supports their organization's mission and is important to the success of the organization.

“ [One] of the things that makes me feel good about my job is that I’m making an immediate impact...that our work is relevant and very timely. ”

CREATING A BETTER WORKPLACE

FINDING #3:

CLEAR SYSTEMS SUPPORT GOOD WORKPLACES

TRANSPARENCY AND INPUT INTO DECISION MAKING

Giving staff the freedom to make independent decisions is a vital component of encouraging staff to do their best work and creating a good workplace. Knowing how decisions are made, and the role that the staff member plays in making those decisions, are equally important.

Unlike their relationships and contribution to the mission, respondents reported that their workplaces lacked opportunities to influence the decision-making processes. Only 47 percent of respondents indicated that they had input into choices made in their organizations. These decisions range from having a say in how new projects or work are selected, to sharing information concerning organizational resources and how they are allocated, and creating a shared understanding of organizational and individual priorities.

DEFINED BENEFITS AND SALARIES

Adequate benefits and support are extremely important to establishing a good workplace. Over 90 percent of survey respondents answered that a fair and competitive salary contributes to a positive work environment. Even though belief in mission and a positive relationship with a direct supervisor are important, these factors do not replace the need to adequately compensate employees for their time and effort. And while 64 percent of respondents were satisfied with their benefits overall, participants in focus groups repeatedly mentioned that their salaries were inadequate, especially given the amount of work they were expected to do.

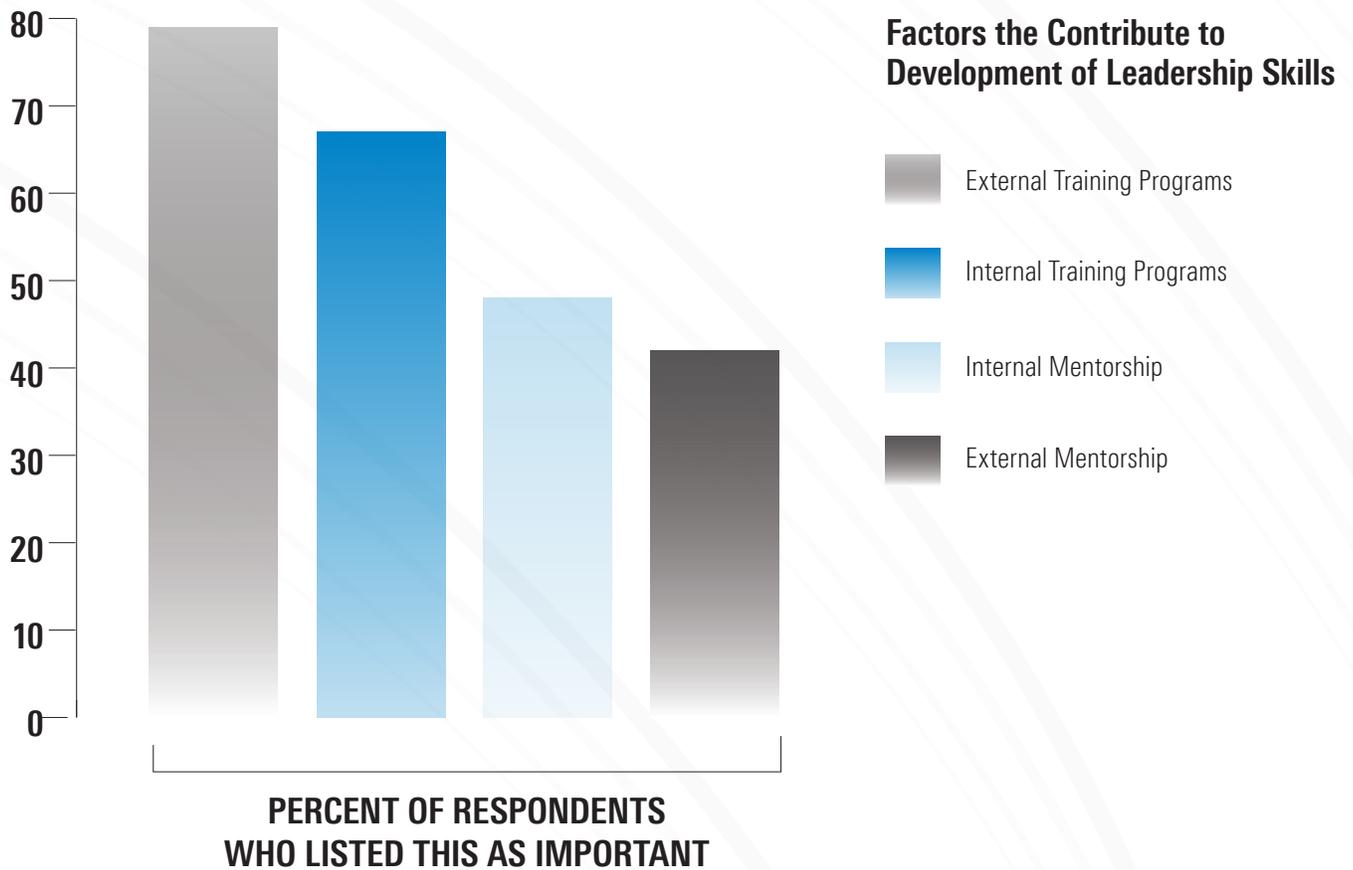
It is also important to establish clear guidelines around how salary levels and increases are determined. Only 28 percent of survey respondents knew how salary decisions were made in their organization, and just over 20 percent felt there was a formal system in place for determining promotions and advancement.

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS TRAINING

According to survey participants, spending time with colleagues to discuss challenges, leadership, skills, and lessons is more useful for developing their leadership skills than training alone. However, training was still ranked high—in fact, 79 percent of respondents overall said that external training is mostly or completely important to developing their leadership skills, while 67 percent said the same about internal training.

Mentorship, on the other hand, was not as highly valued. Just 42 percent of participants reported that external mentorship was mostly or completely important, while slightly more respondents—48 percent—said that internal mentorship was key.

“ [What’s frustrating] is giving input and people nodding and then completely ignoring what you say. Or actually dedicating time and resources to put input into the organization and then not implementing the suggestions that were made—that’s very frustrating. ”



WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

When asked to rank the importance of working flexible hours, almost 68 percent of respondents included it among the top five factors that are essential to creating a good workplace and helping them do their best work. Focus group participants pointed to other types of flexibility in the workplace that would help them as well, including the option to work from home. They also mentioned the freedom to make decisions independently as a crucial part of flexibility. In addition, they wanted more control over their time, as well as the freedom to make decisions about how to use their time. In light of these findings, it should come as no surprise that survey respondents who were more satisfied with their work tended to have more flexibility in terms of hours, and more input into decision making.

“ Your first job—from when you’re first out school until about 10 years I’d say, the roles you play are project management types of roles where you need to think about attention to detail, and all that stuff, but then the next position you’re leading your own team—that attention to detail is a bad trait because then you get into micro-management. That is the hardest transition to make. ”

FINDING #4:

EXPLICIT PATHS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT ARE KEY

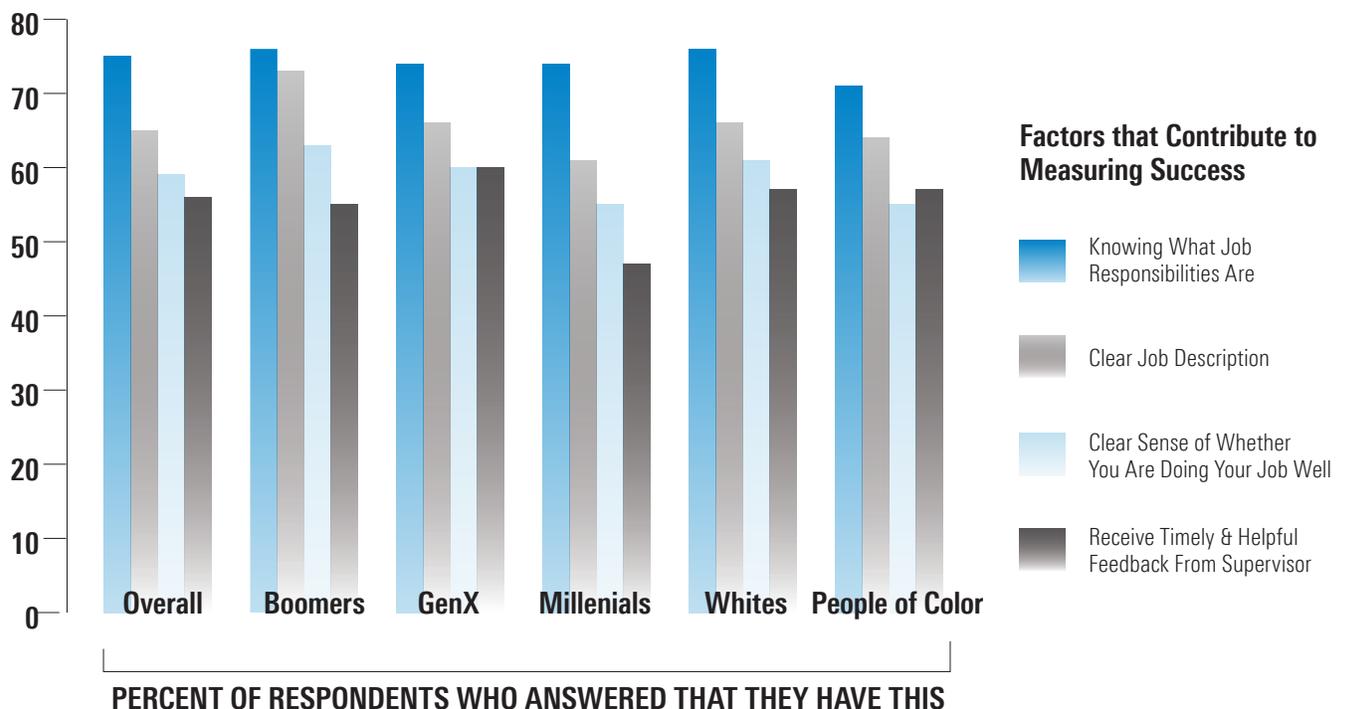
NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

When asked about new challenges at work, respondents said that new opportunities were important when they were tied to career advancement options. People wanted to advance professionally (beyond personal learning and growth) by taking on challenging projects. Focus group participants also mentioned other benefits that come with taking on additional work, including the opportunity to experience more professional growth.

However, survey respondents indicated that they did not have enough chances to challenge themselves and grow professionally at work. While 70 percent of respondents felt successful at their jobs, a little more than half noted that they were growing or learning in their positions, and only 53 percent responded that they were encouraged to try out new ideas.

CLEAR ROLES AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Survey respondents indicated—and focus group participants repeated time and time again—that they want better defined roles and job descriptions in order to understand what they are expected to accomplish and how this influences their chances for promotion. While 65 percent of respondents answered they had a clear job description (with Boomers feeling just slightly more confident than Gen X and Millennials), a smaller percentage responded that they had a good sense of whether or not they were doing their job well.



“With nonprofits, the assumption that I find is that when someone is really good at their job, they’re going to move up the ranks, but that doesn’t mean that they’re going to be good managers. . . If someone is moving up, they need to go through a series of trainings of some sort that teaches them to be really great managers.”

As explained below, focus group participants manifested this desire for even clearer functions in two ways.

- 1 **Participants wanted clear measurements of success and to know specifically what they were responsible for achieving; and**
- 2 **They wanted a way to define the boundaries of their roles and to control the parameters for new and additional work.**

TOP 5: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CREATE A GOOD WORKPLACE?

- 1 Clear Function and Structures
- 2 Adequate Benefits and Support
- 3 Collective Belief in Mission*
- 4 Transparency and Input in Decision-Making
- 5 Leadership Development**

**Less important to Millennials*

***Less important to Boomers and Gen X*

In terms of measuring success, focus group participants mentioned that constructive criticism was appreciated. Timely input and feedback in and of itself was not as important to survey respondents (this ranked seventh out of 10), however focus group participants indicated that relevant feedback that advanced learning or opportunities for growth was useful. While almost 80 percent of survey respondents noted that they have a positive relationship with their direct supervisor, only 56 percent felt they received timely and helpful feedback from that supervisor. Overall, 59 percent of respondents felt they had a clear sense of whether they were doing their job well.

When focus group participants spoke of the parameters of their work, they mentioned that they felt their time and resources were stretched to the limit. Only half of the survey respondents felt that they had a manageable amount of work. Focus group participants remarked that knowing what they are responsible for and how to have open discussions about new work would help them evaluate priorities.

FINDING #4:

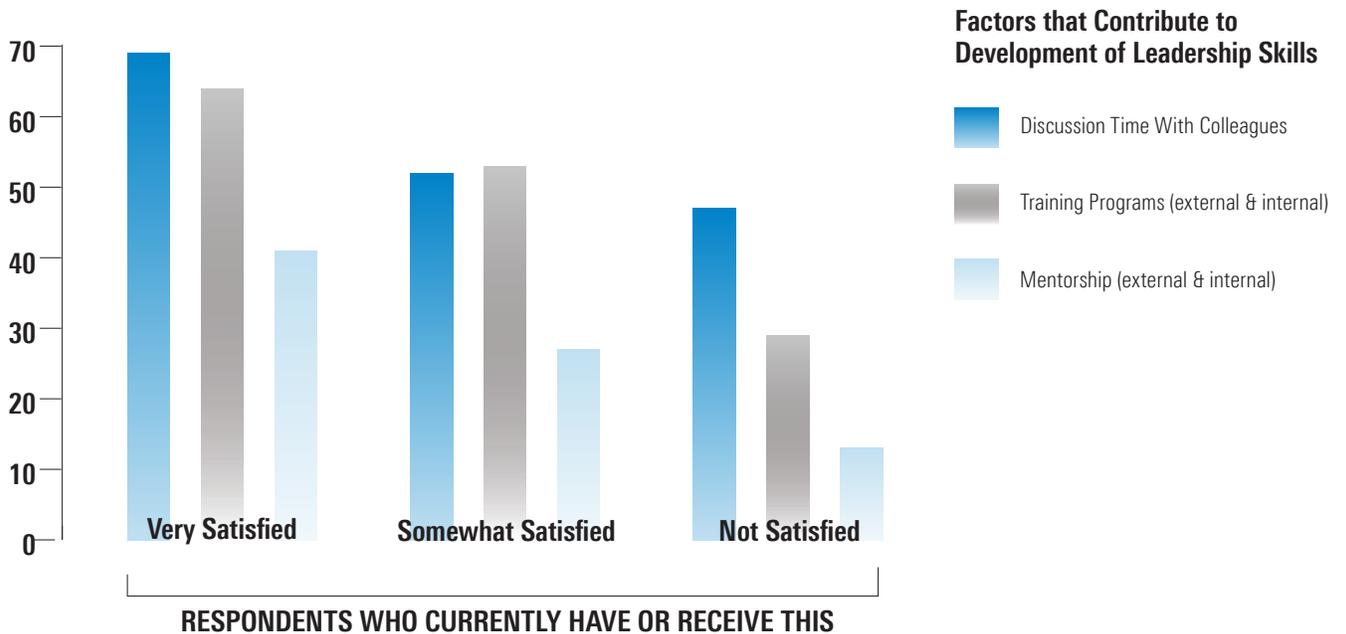
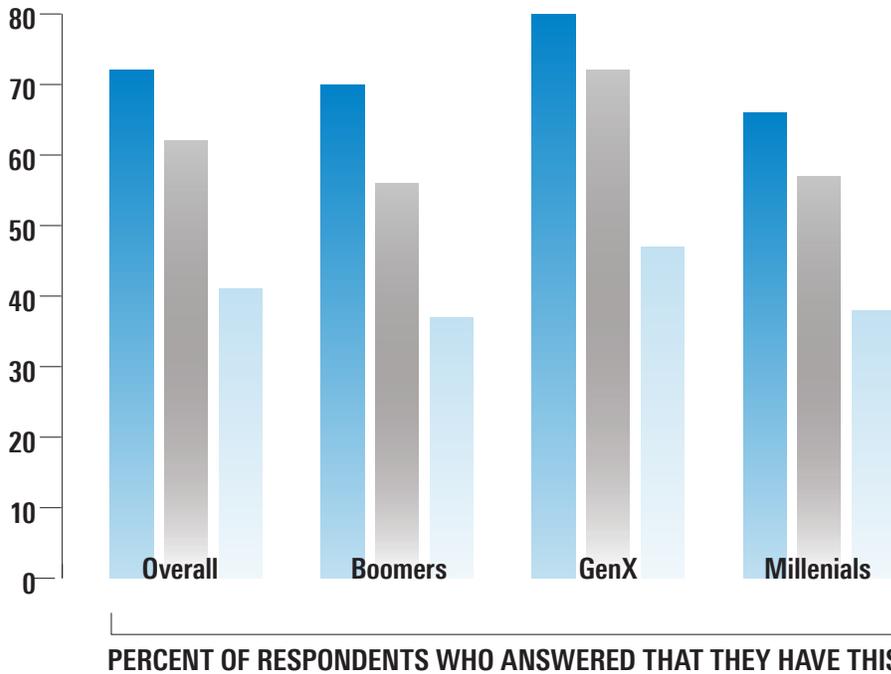
GENERATIONS HAVE A LOT IN COMMON AND SOME KEY DIFFERENCES

COLLECTIVE BELIEF IN MISSION

When it comes to helping employees do their best work, an individual belief in the mission of the organization was important to all generations. However, Millennials ranked a collective belief in the mission much lower than Boomers or Gen X (ranked seventh out of nine for Millennials, as opposed to second out of nine for Boomers and Gen X). However, Millennials strongly believe that their work must be important to the accomplishment of the mission (They ranked this as the number one most important factor in creating a good workplace).

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leadership development is less important to Gen X and Boomers, but very important to Millennials. This makes sense given that they are the youngest workers and have identified skills-building as a key piece of their career development.



“ It doesn't have to do so much with age. The best collaborations I've seen are with the young organization that's open and the older organization that's open, and the wisdom of the older organization [is combined with] the innovation and the energy of the younger one—whether it's organizations, or just people, who are working together. ”

It is interesting to note, however, that time with peers to discuss the implementation of leadership skills was more important across generations than leadership training. In addition, while Boomers and Gen X did not rank leadership development high on the list of staff development activities, career advancement opportunities are highly important to these generations, a priority they share with Millennials. While survey respondents did not universally agree on the importance of leadership training, people who were satisfied with their work were more likely to have received such training.

TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION

When asked what makes a good workplace, teamwork and collaboration came out very low on the list for both Gen X and Baby Boomers (ranked the ninth and tenth most important elements out of 10, respectively), and not as high as we might expect for Millennials given that the collaborative nature of younger generations has been so well documented (ranked the fifth most important element out of 10).

However, when we looked more closely we saw that most people are already working in team structures (85 percent overall) in addition to doing independent project work (94 percent).

People who reported that they were not satisfied with their current positions had a lower level of opportunity to work in a team setting, but were just as likely as satisfied employees to work independently. In addition, those who were satisfied were more likely to have a balance between independent work and work done as part of a team.

DIVERSITY

When participants were asked to rank diversity among the factors that contribute to a good workplace and help them do their best work, they indicated that it was less important than other elements of the workplace. However, 62 percent of respondents overall reported currently working with a diverse group of colleagues, with Boomers having the highest response. Even more important, those who reported that they were satisfied with their current position were more likely to work in a diverse setting than those who were somewhat or not at all satisfied with their positions (73 percent of satisfied workers compared with 59 percent who were somewhat satisfied, and 52 percent who were not satisfied).

LAST 5: WHAT IS LEAST IMPORTANT TO DO YOUR BEST WORK?

- 1 Workplace Flexibility
- 2 Input and Feedback from Others
- 3 Outside Support and Relationships
- 4 Leadership Development
- 5 Collaboration and Teamwork

LAST 4: WHAT IS THE LEAST IMPORTANT WHEN CREATING A GOOD WORKPLACE?

- 1 Input and Feedback from Others
- 2 Collaboration and Teamwork
- 3 Workplace Flexibility
- 4 Diversity*

**Slightly more important to Boomers*

CONCLUSION

Overall, nonprofit organizations that want to create a vibrant multigenerational workplace can build on what they are doing well to value their employees and encourage employees of every generation to do their best work. According to our results, organizations have been very successful in nurturing good relationships at work—especially between supervisors and their staff—a factor that all generations value. However, there is room for improvement when it comes to creating systems and structures that support a positive and productive workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several key and interrelated practices that organizations can institute that support staff to both feel good about and do their best work. For example, transparency in decision making can be increased, but unless this is tied to an overall system of communicating what decisions have been made and how those decisions are made—including how individual employees can be a part of that process—increased transparency itself will not be as effective.

Similarly, it is important for organizational leadership to adopt and promote the changes recommended in this report. Modifications at the programmatic or individual level fall short of organizational transformation. Time and again, we heard from survey respondents and focus group participants alike that feeling undervalued for their work and their contributions to organizational success leads nonprofit employees to feel less motivated to perform to their top potential.

By focusing on decision making, leadership support and development, and eventually promoting standards for the field, nonprofits can help innovative ideas flourish and implement them more readily. With that in mind, here are three key areas where organizations can make a big impact on building leadership across generations:

1 Integrate support for leadership development, applied skills-building, and opportunities for advancement into the daily work of your organization.

Leadership development is not a separate task that takes place at allotted times or solely at a training session outside of an organization. Training should remain an important piece of building leadership, but it should be integrated into the daily practice of the organization.

Focusing on developing positive relationships remains vital to developing a strong workplace, and of course, the mission always matters. Employees thrive when they have a sense that there is a collective understanding of organizational mission. Allow for generational differences here by making sure people know where their work fits into the larger mission of the group, and why that work is important to its success. Here are some specific steps you can take:

- **Develop peer support groups and reflection spaces for employees to discuss their work, challenges, and learning. This includes supporting participation in outside peer networking and support groups as well.**
- **Tie individual evaluation and performance to the success of the organizational mission.**
- **Link new work opportunities directly to advancement, whether within or outside of the organization.**

2 In order to fully integrate leadership development, use understandable and consistent decision-making processes, and communicate opportunities for advancement clearly.

While not everyone feels they need to be involved directly in every decision made at an organization, it is important that staff know how those decisions are made, who has input, and where they can add input if they desire to do so.

In addition, a clear and equitable process for making those decisions is important: Nonprofit staffers feel frustrated because they do not know about the plans the organization has for them. Often it isn't until they attempt to leave that staff discover they were being "groomed" for a leadership position. This information should never be a secret from employees. Rather, it should be treated as an opportunity for staff to make decisions and participate in their own development. Here are some key strategies:

- **Establish clear measures of job success and opportunities for career advancement. Be unambiguous about what is expected of people and when they are meeting or exceeding those expectations.**
- **Develop standards for salaries and benefits, including how salaries are determined and how raises can be earned.**
- **Be specific about what type of commitment is expected over how long a period of time—especially if there is limited opportunity for growth in an organization—before you will support someone to advance outside of the organization.**

3 Different leadership structures can support broader opportunities for growth and developing leaders.

In many cases, it is the structure of leadership itself that limits the growth or participation of employees across all generations. Even in small organizations where growth seems limited, altering the way that decision making and responsibility are distributed can provide significant opportunities for leadership development, a change that can build a deep base of talent and skills within organizations.

If current structures limit this, it is time for the field to embrace alternative leadership models, even if we feel they have been attempted before. Instead of replacing the existing hierarchy, the ultimate goal of these changes is to increase the effectiveness of organizations in the long-run. Try utilizing these recommendations:

- **Implement shared models of decision making, including distributed leadership, co-directorships, and intergenerational leadership teams.**
- **Distribute responsibility for decision making beyond program design and implementation. While it is a good place to learn, include a path towards participating in decisions that affect the direction or growth of the organization.**
- **Encourage the development of outside partnerships and relationships— sharing power and accountability includes external visibility.**

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Recession turns a Graying Office Grayer* (Pew Research Center, 2009)
- 2 In this report, Gen X refers to those born between 1965–1979, Millennials refers to those born after 1980.
- 3 *Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey 2010* (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2010)
United States Agency of International Development
<http://www.usaid.gov/careers/2010FedView_AMR_AM_AID.pdf>
- 4 “100 Best Companies to Work For”(Fortune Magazine, 2010)Cable News Network
<<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/bestcompanies/2010/>>
- 5 *Age & Generations: Understanding Experiences at the Workplace* (Sloan Center for Aging & Work at Boston College, 2009)
- 6 Up Next: Generation Change and the Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations (Building Movement Project and Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005), “Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social and Intrinsic Values Decreasing” (Journal of Management, Published online before print March 1, 2010, doi: 10.1177/0149206309352246)
- 7 *Sustaining Non-Profit Talent: A Multi-Generational Value Proposition* (MetLife Foundation/Civic Venture, 2009)
- 8 *Conversations with Social Entrepreneurs* (CommonGood Careers, Building Movement Project, 2010)
- 9 “Nonprofit Leaders Must Act Now to Improve Sagging Morale” (10 Dec 2009, Chronicle of Philanthropy)

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Or visit the websites of the project partner:



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