

The Changing of the Guard: What Generational Differences Tell Us About Social-Change Organizations

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Both executive directors and staff frequently allude to generation-gap problems at social-change nonprofits – those organizations that are trying to change “the system” rather than simply work within it. Not surprisingly, their accounts differ along generational lines. One story, usually narrated by someone in or near the “Baby Boomer” generation, is about the impending crisis. Baby Boomers heading nonprofit organizations will soon be retiring and there is nobody to take their place. Young people entering the sector are not as visionary, competent, committed, or well trained as those who are leaving. What will happen to these organizations? A flurry of activity has taken place to address this problem, including the emergence of initiatives to prepare the “new” generation for leadership roles.

There is a counter-narrative, though, told by those from the younger generations. Old leaders running nonprofits have been sitting too long at the top of their organizations. They have ignored younger employees who bring new blood and new ideas. The crisis is that the Baby Boomer generation is *not* leaving, preventing a new generation from taking the reins. In this story, young people in nonprofits receive little respect, opportunity or support. To them, it is no wonder that so many of their peers choose to enter the for-profit arena where they have the chance to learn and grow.

As part of a larger project on the future of social-change organizations,¹ we probed deeper into this conflict. Is there in fact a generation gap? If there is, can we address it? Our inquiry suggests a complicated but hopeful situation. While older and younger generations share many of the same values and commitments – more than some

in the field might expect – they differ in their approaches to organizational life and the needs they bring to it. In fact, the social-change sector might do better to think of its challenge more as an organizational problem than a generational one. And while difficult, changing social-change organizations, and building better ones, is something to which the field can reasonably aspire.

The Generation Gap – in the Literature

If the popular literature is a reliable guide, it shouldn't be surprising that generational differences are on everyone's radar screen. In 1991, Douglas Coupland coined the term Generation X in a book that describes a new generation with different values and aspirations from those of the Baby Boomers who precede them.² The concept of Generation X rapidly spread through the 1990s, spawning a body of popular literature that described this new generation and the next, Generation Y, and the problems they have with the Baby Boom generation. These books, articles, and websites are for the most part written by, for and about Gen Xers, especially educated professionals working in the for-profit sector. So it is not surprising that titles that dominate the field are *Managing Generation X* (Tulgan, 1996), *Generations at Work* (Filipczak and Zemke, 2000), *Great Xpectatons* (Hornblower, 1997), *A Politics for Generation X* (Haslthead, 1999) and, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (Strauss and Howe, 1993).

Each piece makes claims about the misunderstandings between the old guard and the new, frequently referencing each other as evidence. GenXers are characterized as “slackers” who are less invested in their work than Baby Boomers. Those GenXers who aren't slackers are said to “work to live”, valuing their time away from the job. Baby Boomers “live to work” and tend to over identify with their job. GenXers who are

dedicated to their work are not likely to be loyal to any one organization, whereas Baby Boomers tend to stay in one place and expect loyalty to the firm.

GenXers work better in an informal environment where they can consult with their peers; Baby Boomers are more comfortable in hierarchical settings. While GenXers are more results oriented, Baby Boomers are more process oriented. GenXers are more technologically savvy and like to get things done quickly. In contrast, Baby Boomers -- who rely less on technology -- are slower, and tend to look at issues more in-depth. GenXers are impatient to show what they can do; they want less oversight and more responsibility. Baby Boomers want to supervise/micromanage GenX and expect them to “pay their dues” before giving obtaining real authority.

In their social attitudes, Generation X is more comfortable than Baby Boomers working across race, gender, and sexual orientation. Both GenX and Baby Boomers think the other generation is materialistic.

This litany of generalizations, of course, is so sweeping it raises doubts about the generation-gap phenomenon. The academic literature presents a more tempered view. For one, it reminds us that there are always generational differences (Mannheim, 1952), and the current gap, while perhaps unique in its nuances, is nothing new. Moreover, suggest some, the Generation X and Y phenomenon doesn't describe an entire generation, but rather a relatively narrow slice -- of white professionals. The current crop of generational analyses never addresses issues of race and class differences, which might be more significant than generational issues alone. (Kitwana, 2002; Levy, 1994) Finally, some scholars claim that Generation X is a self-fulfilling prophecy: those who identify with the claims of GenX *are* GenX (Kaminow, 1999).

Yet as dubious as the popular literature may be in describing social-change organizations (or any organizations), most practitioners in the field do sense an issue here. In fact, at one of the first meetings we convened of leaders as part of our project on social-change organizations, generational conflict emerged as a major and heated theme.

The Generation Gap – in the Social-Change Workplace

To see how generational issues might be affecting social-change nonprofits, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with executive directors (including an older cohort, over age 45, and a younger, under 40) and with young staff (under 40). The interviews paint a mixed picture. While they have much more in common than the popular literature suggests, the younger and older generations do differ from each other.

Our interviewees flatly contradicted the popular literature, and the assumptions of some social-change leaders, on the question of Gen X commitment. Across age, position in the organization, and type of organization, respondents talked about their commitment to their work, their drive to make an impact on the lives of the constituents they served, and the importance of their job in their life. Younger people were actually more likely than their older counterparts – whether they were directors or staff -- to talk about how much they loved their job. Most were putting in long hours; and those who worked a nine to five schedule were as likely to be older directors as young staff. Across generations, they talked about how they were compelled by the mission of the organization and its constituents. Several younger staff openly discussed their aspirations to run either the organization where they worked or a similar group in the future. As one younger respondent who had already worked in his organization for nine years put it, “There is honestly not been a day I’ve not loved my job.”

Despite this startling similarity, we *did* recognize important differences between Baby Boomers and GenX/Y in three areas.

1. *Baby Boomers and Generations X/Y were motivated to enter social-change work in different ways.*

Younger participants – directors and staff alike – had come to social-change work through some significant personal experience. Several talked about how they had themselves been in situations that were similar to their constituents’, for example, as victims of violence or discrimination. One young director explained how he had “experienced a significant amount of violence growing up,” which he eventually directed towards organizing to build an organization aimed at reducing violence among youth.

Others mentioned a significant personal moment. A staff member in her mid-thirties described how she had nursed her mother through a long and painful death. The experience motivated her to leave her corporate job to find a position where she could work with women and children. As she describes it, she was looking for a place where she could express her spiritual side.

These personal accounts differed significantly from the responses of Baby Boomers. They talked more about a transformation they experienced through a more political awakening, an event or series of events that made them view the world in a different way. Older respondents described joining a social-change organization as the result of an educational process, learning an analysis or framework within a larger context of change. Their responses referenced having exposure to liberation theology, watching and learning about civil rights struggles, or joining the anti-war movement.

So despite their comparable levels of commitment, what motivates and animates younger and older people in the same social-change organization may be entirely

different. Younger people are highly motivated based on their own personal experience but often lack a framework for the change they seek, whereas older people have a framework but may not identify with those they work to serve.

2. Younger people were just as likely as their older peers to spend long hours at work, but were far more anxious about conflicts between work and family life.

Several of the younger people we interviewed, especially the young men, were locked in a struggle between their work, which they felt required enormous time and commitment, and their desire to have and be involved with their children in ways that meant spending fewer hours on the job. One young staffer who talked about starting a family explained, “I can’t keep twelve hour days forever... I would love to have this job for the rest of my life. I don’t know if that’s possible.”

The importance of time off then was generational in relation to the lifecycle. None of the older people we interviewed, including those who had raised a family, mentioned this conflict. Maybe they had gone through a similar struggle when they were young. If so, it now seemed completely out of their consciousness. The fact that they appeared unaware of the depth of this conflict among younger staff was surprising, and it is easy to see how these differences could result in unspoken expectations and conflicts.

3. Younger directors were far more likely to be experimenting with different organizational forms.

Older directors may at one time have used or had ambitions to create a different type of organizational structure. Over time, however, despite differences in size and function, the organizations under their leadership all seemed to take on a similar form, a kind of modified corporate structure, often with many mechanisms to solicit input from staff, but fairly uniform in style.³ Younger directors either talked about or were trying to

run organizations in different ways – with leadership circles, leadership teams, co-directors, staff collectives, and significantly flattened hierarchies. In some organizations, new structures were designed to spread the responsibility of the director among a small group, allowing those in leadership to take time off without jeopardizing the vision and direction of the organization. Others developed teams that had power and authority to make decisions as a way to involve staff in running the organization. In still others, structures that involved constituents were designed as part of their social-change agenda – a way to spread authority and influence within the organization.

What should we make of these findings? Despite what some older social-change leaders might fear, the challenge with the younger generations is not one of how to recruit them to social-change work. Young people in our interviews articulated the same values, dedication and commitment as older social-change leaders. Rather than how to attract young people to social-change organizations, the challenge is how to support and develop them so they can sustain the work they love and do well. And here is where the generational gap shows up. Especially on the question of work-family balance, but also in their desire for more participatory organizations, younger people in all the organizations tended to express a good deal of anxiety, if not frustration.

We saw two different responses to these gap issues. In organizations founded and/or run by Baby Boomers, it seems these dilemmas of younger people are barely acknowledged, much less addressed successfully. In organizations run by Gen X/Y leaders, younger people were at least attempting to find new ways to organize their work. The generational differences, then, speak more to the need to change how we *build and*

operate social-change nonprofits than how to convince a new generation of the importance of the cause.

The Prospects for Change

What can we do? We see at least four starting points:

1. Older and younger generations both need to guard against history repeating itself.

In many ways the study showed how easy it would be to repeat the past. The Baby Boom leaders we interviewed had often been at their jobs for well over a decade and for the most part had no intention of moving on. The younger directors, especially those who founded their organizations, were already headed in a similar direction. Although many talked about the need to not stay too long in their current position, they often spun out scenarios that made it clear that they might need to stay in their current position for years to come. It seemed unlikely they would leave their organization anytime soon. These directors were also trying to fashion an organizational structure, as had their predecessors, that fit their needs but that could lead to the exclusion of a new generation of younger staff as the years progress. Although they struggled with how to develop new structures, younger directors need support for thinking about how to implement these models effectively.

It is not only the organizational form that younger people have inherited. The culture of social-change work – never being able to do or give enough – seems to be effectively passed on from one generation to the next. And though this did not cause a problem for everyone, it was painful to see how some young people, so dedicated to social justice, were left without guidance or tools to solve this very basic dilemma. There seemed to be no serious consideration of how to create manageable jobs that allowed

time for other types of civic engagement, family life, and relaxation for those who did not want to dedicate themselves entirely to their work. The unspoken question was how social-change work could be more than “just a job” while limiting the reach the work often had into every aspect of the staff members’ and directors’ lives.

2. Directors need to develop a management and organizational development philosophy that reflects their values while supporting younger workers.

Baby Boomer directors were quick to confess that they had little or no interest in the management of their organizations. They were in it for the *work*, not for what they saw as the administrative tasks that came with building an organization. That indifference to management may account for some of the challenges younger workers face working in these organizations. The disdain by Baby Boomer directors for the work of managing the organization led to the creation of chief operating officer positions in several relatively small groups. However, the separation of the structure from the content of the work rarely seemed to solve the structural problems that faced younger staff.

Our interviews also suggest that it made more sense for management to be integrated into the social-change work and values of the organizations. We saw that Generation X is making significant strides in grappling with the challenges of *management and mission*, and how both could operate hand in hand. This trend -- for innovation and experimentation-- should be encouraged and supported. The younger directors we talked with were enormously thoughtful about their management style and the structure of their organizations. Their emerging ideas about structure and management are just what we need now in a sector that often is confused by the dominance of either for-profit business practices or outdated nonprofit structures.

3. Baby Boomers need to make active development of younger staff a priority.

Older directors have much to pass on to a new generation. However, they need to have ongoing, consistent and productive contact with younger people in order both to share what they have learned and to learn about what Generation X has to offer. A few of the older directors we interviewed were true models on how this could be accomplished. For example, a young staff member reported that her director repeatedly gave her opportunities to attend important meetings, spending enormous amount of time both before and after discussing strategy and processing the outcome. The staff member felt her ideas were valued, she was trusted to take on real responsibility, and she received the support she needed to do the job. She not only learned how to manage challenging situations but she also began building her own relationships outside the organization, a crucial element for successful leadership. In describing the director of her organization, she told the interviewer, “he’s all about building new leadership.” Unfortunately, this active leadership development of younger staff was exceptional.

4. Changing of the Guard: Recognizing the Contributions of Generations X and Y

Finally, it is important to recognize the similarity of commitment between Generation X/Y and Baby Boomers. But that means that it is time to place the movements of the 1960s and 1970s in their historical context, as important events that shaped many of our lives and as crucial lessons for learning. Baby Boomers are not the only ones who care about social change or who know how to make it happen. Older leaders often work hard to build a first generation of organizations that has made a tremendous impact on the lives of many people. Now they need to use the creativity, will and imagination it took to start and run these organizations to determine how they can

make it possible for the next generation to take on the future social-change work. Rather than yearn for the movements they were part of when they were young, older directors need to look for, listen to and support the new emerging ideas for social change. These older directors can learn from the personal motivations of the next generation and they can help Generational X and Y how to develop their own framework for creating change.

Younger people are bringing energy, ideas, and hope to their work in social-change nonprofits. It is now up to the older leaders to fan these young flames, work in partnership, or move aside so that the next generation of social-change organizations and their leaders can succeed.

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¹ The Building Movement project is funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation. For more information about the project or a full copy of the generational change report, e-mail frances_kunreuther@harvard.edu.

² There are many different definitions of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, usually spanning huge time periods. Most common age references (give or take five years) are: Baby Boomers, born 1945-1964; Generation X, born 1965 – 1980; and Generation Y, 1981-2000. When someone is born may be less important than the generation they identify with.

³ The one exception was a collective that had no paid, full-time staff.