



Here's a prescription for filling the coming leadership gap.

By Bruce Glasrud

As they move toward retirement age, baby boomers are finally getting around to asking, "Who's going to replace us?" The boomers are, at long last, deliberating about how to put Generation X and Generation Y on the leadership on-ramp.

Predictably, there'll be a plethora of programs through which boomers will want to impart their wisdom on nonprofit leadership. Symposia, brown-bag lectures, mentoring programs, and the like will sprout as boomers seek to mold young leaders. Besides, they were looking for a pretext to get a training grant anyway.

Boomers will wax on about how they started their nonprofit career amid campus protests, Woodstock, and "classic" rock. Generation X and Generation Y will squirm in their seats and text-message each other about going out for a much-needed drink after the torture session ceases.

Let's look at the real issues behind Generation X and Y in the nonprofit workplace. To begin, consider the nonprofit experience through Gen X and Ys' eyes:

• **Generation X and Generation Y are often eager and idealistic.** Yet they're frequently disillusioned when they find glaring gaps between an organization's external values and its internal culture. They come to the nonprofit sector to find a kinder, gentler workplace than in the corporate sector. Despite our warm, fuzzy missions, they might instead find a working environment as toxic as they could ever imagine. Suddenly, being a corporate drone with a bigger paycheck doesn't seem so odious.

• **Being the most tech-savvy people in history,** Generation X and Y are frustrated when their

boomer boss and co-workers are behind the times. It's not merely a question of nonprofits having outmoded equipment. It's more a matter of nonprofit leaders having archaic visions of how to use the equipment they have. A Gen-Y friend recently quipped of her techno-dweeb boomer boss, "You can always tell when Jenny's been using her word processor. There's whiteout on the computer screen."

• **Nonprofits often employ archaic management theories.** Furthermore, they frequently have stale research and behind-the-times viewpoints in their organization's own mission sphere.

• **Many nonprofits are so stuck in the past** that almost any change, much less a transfer of leadership, seems impossible until the old guard retires.

• **Generation X and Y often have to deal with the "We've always done it this way" syndrome.** A rigid, set-in-their-ways organization isn't what Gen X and Y want to hang their hats onto long-term.

• **Frankly, dear baby boomers,** many Generation X and Y workers don't see you as legends and role models who "changed the world." They instead perceive you as people who could have changed the world but blew their chance. Many view you not as a generation to look up to but a generation they'll need to mop up after.

Generation X and Y have their own ways of leading, ways that are better suited to the onrush of future change and challenge. They're masters of networking and already know who among their ranks are the future movers and shakers. Heck, in the time boomers take to decide how many doughnuts to get for a meeting, Gen X and Y have already texted each other and put an entire event together.

So, here's a prescription for filling the future nonprofit leadership gap:

• **Let Generation X and Y tell boomers** what leadership is needed for the future, not the other way around.

• **From the bottom up,** not the top down, allow Generation X and Y to identify their own training and mentoring needs.

• **Don't assume** that trainers and mentors need to be experienced boomers.

• **Eschew thoughts** of back-in-the-day wisdom as suitable for tomorrow's challenges.

• **Rely on Generation X and Y** to step up to the plate of their own accord — once the boomers quit hogging all the bases. Rather than boomers coming up with schemes to leave legacies, transfer wisdom, and lead the next generation into the light, boomers should mostly just get out of the way. Bob Dylan's lyrics apply well:

*Your old road is
Rapidly agin'.
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand,
For the times they are a-changin'.* ■

Resources

Glasrud, Bruce, "Advance to the Future or Retreat to the Familiar?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 6.

Grinnell, Robin, "Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 6.

Santora, Joseph, Planning for Leadership Succession: Are You Ready?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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