

Leading The Next Generations

by Peter C. Brinckerhoff

The majority of the senior leadership in nonprofits today is comprised of Baby Boomers (born 1946–62). Sure, there are Silent Generation (born 1925–1945) CEOs and GenX (born 1963–1980) executive directors, but the bulk of the senior leadership is currently Boomers.

And we (I'm a Boomer, too) have our leadership styles down pat. Many of us have been CEO/ED for ten, twenty, even thirty years, and we are confident we know what we're doing as leaders. We've gotten into a comfortable rhythm of management, have studied all the key management books, have steeped ourselves in leadership lore and, so far so good.

The problem is that the people we are leading today are not the people we were leading ten years ago. In the main, the people who work for us are members of GenX and Gen@ (born 1981–2002). These people think differently, act differently, engage differently, and decide differently than any prior generation.

Here's the truth: the different generations that populate the staff roles of our nonprofits are really different cultures. That is, they are so differentiated in thought, motivation, priorities, and communications that they fit every sociological definition of a unique culture. I am sure you have worked hard to have your organization both culturally diverse and culturally competent. When you think of other generations, though, have you taken the time to become competent in their culture?

Generational competency

Your job as a nonprofit leader is that of a steward: you need to use all the resources at hand to get the most mission out the door every day. Obviously, if you don't lead your staff in a culturally competent way, you can't optimally use them to turn out mission. So here's the second key takeaway: Most Boomer managers need to adjust their leadership styles to get the most out of their GenX and Gen@ staff.

This is uncomfortable to consider, I know. So, let me give you one key insight, and then a checklist of leadership changes to consider.

If you're a Boomer, think back to second grade. You're taking an arithmetic test, and your teacher tells you to "Cover your work!" The expectation: you do your own work. And you did, on papers, projects, tests, research. This is not how subsequent generations were taught to work. With the exception of standardized tests, they did the vast majority of their work in groups—and that is what most of them prefer. They learned how to accommodate different group members' strengths and weaknesses; they learned how to reach consensus; and they learned how to speak up and contribute "in traffic" rather than just work solo. In short, we trained them to be the way they are, and this group training is why your 25-year-old staff person comes up to you after three days on the job and says "I have an idea, I have an idea!" and you think "How about your work here for a while before you tell me your ideas." Sound familiar?

At a glance

Nonprofit consultant Peter Brinckerhoff provides tips on how Baby Boomers can better lead younger generations. He notes:

- Boomer managers need to adjust their leadership styles to get the most out of their GenX and Gen@ staff.
- Younger staff expect and work more effectively in a transparent and inclusive environment.
- Welcome ideas and contributions; for example, put draft documents online to allow easy staff input.
- Pass out the praise; younger generations were raised on it and worry when they don't get it.

The key, says Brinckerhoff, is to remember that different generations on staff are really different cultures. You need to learn to lead them.

Then, of course, there's technology. The members of Gen@ have never known a world where they weren't connected 24/7/365. And that connectivity changes the way they see the world and work. This is a huge differentiator. One example is the word "work." Boomers tend to identify "work" as a noun, a place you go. If you're not at work, you're not working. GenX members think of work as a verb; an activity you do, anywhere, anytime. Do you see the potential for conflict?

How to lead younger generations

So, what can you do as a leader? Let me give you a few takeaways to mull over.

First, open up. Be more transparent with your organization's meetings, plans, budgets, ideas. Be inclusive in coming up with new ways of service. Also, make sure your internal committees have representatives of staff at all levels, including line staff members. This openness is the hardest single thing for most Boomer CEOs to do. We all still want to "cover our work."

Second, accept that every idea is a good idea until you come up with the best idea. And younger staff have great ideas. Perhaps not honed by experience, but they have a visceral need to contribute. One simple change in this area is to put draft documents online to allow staff to give you input easily. Also, get out of your office and wander around a bit—letting them make quick suggestions when they see you. And while you're at it....

Third, pass out the praise. Remember, GenX and particularly Gen@ have been told "Good Job!" at least 1,000,001 times in their lives, to the point where they may not seem to hear it, but if it stops, they get very insecure and think they've done something wrong. Don't wait until their annual evaluation to give them a simple "thank you" or "way to go."

Don't begrudge your staff the leadership they need just because you have to change your style and move into what is understandably uncomfortable territory. If you can be flexible enough to accommodate to a new leadership style, your mission—and the people you serve—will ultimately benefit.



Peter Brinckerhoff is an internationally renowned trainer, author, and consultant to nonprofit organizations. He brings years of experience in the field to his work, as he is a former board member of local, state, and national nonprofits, and has worked on the staff and as executive director of two regional nonprofits. Since founding his consulting firm Corporate Alternatives in 1982, Brinckerhoff has helped thousands of organizations become more mission-capable. He is the author of the highly acclaimed and award-winning books, *Mission-Based Management* (Third Edition), *Financial Empowerment*, *Mission-Based Marketing* (Third Edition), *Faith-Based Management*, *Social Entrepreneurship*, *Nonprofit Stewardship*, and *Generations, The Challenge of a Lifetime for Your Nonprofit*. In 2007 *Generations* was awarded The Terry McAdam award for "Best Nonprofit Book" by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management. It was the third time Peter has won this prestigious award. Peter's newest release is the third edition of *Mission-Based Marketing*. Raised in Connecticut, Peter and his family lived in Springfield, IL from 1977–2007. Peter and his wife now live in Union Hall, VA.

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