

## BRIDGING THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE WITHIN NONPROFIT BOARDS

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The events and situations that each generation experiences play a significant role in shaping values, views and practices toward philanthropy. As nonprofit leaders struggle to engage up to four generations on their boards, communication and interactions related to giving, governance, decision making processes, and issues of succession will be challenged. This will require a paradigm shift in how nonprofit boards are structured and managed. Understanding the characteristics, motivations and resulting values of the different generations is vital to bridging generational divides and working toward common objectives within nonprofit boards.



### ***Traditionalists (born 1925-1943) – Civic Duty***

Traditionalists grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression and were instrumental in shaping today's political, economic, social and military policies in the United States. As children and young adults, they benefited tremendously from government and social programs as well as the growth of Corporate America. As a result, Traditionalists are loyal, hard working and faithful to institutions. Rules of conduct, respect for authority and contributing to a greater good are defining attributes of this generation. Traditionalists are driven to nonprofit involvement by a strong sense of civic duty and desire to uphold American values.

### ***Baby Boomers (born 1944-1962) – Political Activism***

Baby Boomers came of age during America's era of post-war prosperity. They grew up in a world of infinite possibility as rock'n roll ruled the planet and humans walked on the moon. But life wasn't always carefree. Boomers experienced the Vietnam War and other divisive social movements that shaped their political alliances and worldview. Their large numbers also drove them to be competitive in all parts of life and become skilled at exercising influence to get ahead. For Baby Boomer philanthropists, challenging the status quo is a driving force for their giving, and changing social, economic and political policy on the national level is the goal for their nonprofit involvement.

### ***Generation X (born 1963-1981) – Social Entrepreneurship***

Generation X grew up during a time when life seemed to be falling apart. As children, they watched the events of the energy crisis, Watergate, corporate downsizing, and AIDS unfold. They were "latchkey kids" who felt the brunt of tripled divorce rates and late-working, dual-income parents. They graduated high school and college facing stock market crashes, economic recessions and hiring freezes. As a result, Gen Xers have a strong survival instinct and look to philanthropy to promote their values related to independence and self-preservation. They gravitate toward and push for social entrepreneurial ventures that reduce or eliminate the need for nonprofits to rely on outside help for their economic livelihood.

### ***Millennials (born 1982-2000) – Grassroots Activism***

As each before them, the Millennial generation has a history of its own. Born into the world of the internet, cell phones and video games, they are technologically savvy with short attention spans. Raised by "Helicopter" Baby Boomer parents who pushed them to excel, Millennials are natural

multi-taskers brimming with confidence. This is a Harry Potter, Power Rangers generation of action-oriented team players who want to make the world a better place. They see opportunity in adversity and are ready to bypass any red tape that tries to get in their way. As grassroots activists unimpressed with the status quo, Millennials are powerful fundraisers and look to their involvement with nonprofits as a means to achieve equality on a global scale.

### **New Paradigms for Board Participation, Giving, Decision-Making & Succession**

Nonprofits must effectively engage multiple generations of board members simultaneously if they want to exist in perpetuity. Generational differences in values and attitudes toward nonprofit organizations will impact everything from mission and giving to issues of succession and governance. For example, a nonprofit board wishing to engage its Millennial bench strength will need to actively involve this younger cohort in rethinking the organization's mission statement to remain relevant. Another board undergoing leadership transitions from Baby Boomers to Generation Xers may need to adopt virtual meetings and communication technologies that save time. In all cases, clarifying board participation criteria and roles and developing a thoughtful process for onboarding new board members will be critical.

Generational differences within boards are a challenge to nonprofits because they undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of the enterprise if gone unchecked. However, they also represent an enormous opportunity for meaningful dialogue about participation and giving that serve to reinvigorate a nonprofit and help it plan for the future. The key is to find common ground across the generations. To do this, it is important to discuss the type of relationship board members want with the nonprofit and the causes and philanthropic experiences most significant to them. From there the right practices, structure and roles will follow.

Every generation has a set of collective experiences during child- and young adulthood that shape its worldview and inform its behavior toward life, work and charitable involvement. Understanding these unique histories will give us critical insight into current and future challenges and opportunities facing nonprofit boards. What are the generational dynamics of your board? Isn't it time you found out?

#### **Finding Common Ground** 5 Conversation Starters for Board Members

1. What values related to philanthropy do you hold dear?
2. What causes are important to you?
3. What should the role of the nonprofit board be?
4. What type of relationship to the organization and its board do you want?
5. What is the most effective way for the board to communicate and make decisions?

**About the Author:** *Amy Hirsh Robinson, M.B.A., is a leading expert on the changing workforce and the impact of generational shifts on organizations. She consults to Fortune 500 companies, privately held businesses and not-for-profits to prepare and retool leaders and their workforces to excel and compete in the New Economy. Her strategies focus on onboarding new employees to ensure the retention and engagement of top talent, managing and motivating a multigenerational workforce, and building competitive talent pipelines through effective succession planning practices. Amy speaks and publishes widely on workforce strategies for the New Economy and has been cited and quoted in publications such as Forbes, the Los Angeles Times, and the Huffington Post. See [www.interchange-group.com](http://www.interchange-group.com).*