

Generational Changes and Leadership: Implications for Social Change Organizations

Summary of Findings

Generational Changes and Leadership is a study of social change organizations that examined differences between the Baby Boom generation and those who identify more with Generation X./Y with a special emphasis on young leadership. In person interviews were conducted with thirty-eight directors and staff working in sixteen nonprofits located in the northeast. Participants included older and younger directors and primarily younger staff.

Those interviewed were asked about their organization, their work, and their own background. The findings indicate that there are many similarities between the generations – commitment to social change, hard work, long hours – but also several differences. A summary of some of the findings is listed below.

Coming to Social Change Work

- Older participants frequently referred to their involvement in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which provided them with a framework for the ‘causes’ of the problems facing society. They entered the nonprofit sector to work in an organization where they could, ‘change the world’ and never left.
- Most of the younger participants were drawn to social change nonprofits because of personal experiences and a desire to help those in their communities or in situations similar to their own. Younger directors were more likely than their older peers to report having worked in the for-profit sector and all but one of the younger directors had attended an elite college or university that no doubt added to their credibility as young leaders of social change organizations.
- Younger staff in organizations with young directors often reported how the directors recruited them into their current positions.

Work/Personal Life Divide

- Younger participants in the study were committed to their work and to their organizations, putting in long hours on the job. However, many of the younger respondents were struggling with how to balance the demands of their work and having a life outside the job. Several, particularly the young men, worried about how to continue their work and make time for a family.
- Few of the older people interviewed seemed to have tension between their work and their personal lives. Several talked about their work as the most important part of their life; others had set clear work/personal life boundaries.

It was unclear whether they felt conflict when they were younger that had now been resolved.

Enjoyment of the Work

- When asked what they enjoyed in their work, all respondents talked about the satisfaction they found in helping other people, whether it was providing a service, advocating for reform, or providing venues for constituents to organize for their own political interests. For staff and directors who came from the communities being served, there was a special pleasure in being able to help others like themselves.
- Young staff members talked about how they enjoyed working in their particular organization because of its values and the people they worked with. They especially talked about the collegiality or family-like feeling of the staff.
- Directors – both older and younger -- mentioned the challenge of the position as a great source of enjoyment. They liked the creativity, problem solving and daily juggling (of time and resources) that the position required.
- In general, younger respondents were more effusive about their work, often talking about their 'love' of their jobs, and their desire never to have to leave.

Challenges in the Work

- Younger directors were focused on the challenges they faced of how to grow and change their organizations while still meeting the needs of their constituents. For older directors, the challenges lay in administrative tasks and the demands of funding.
- Some of the young participants were particularly struck by the inability of different groups to work together and expressed frustration that the larger goal of social change was subverted by individual 'ego' needs.
- Participants of all ages and at all levels within organizations frequently mentioned their impatience with the slow pace of change.

Organizational Decision-Making Process

- Overall, there was an unspoken value that involving staff members in decision-making was important in social change work. However, despite the directors' determination to include staff (and in some cases constituents), staff were often confused about the process, especially in organizations with older directors. Young staff members would talk about having 'input' into decision-making, but often seemed unclear about their real power and authority.
- The study revealed two major styles of decision-making. The first, used by older and younger directors, ranged from input to collective decision-making with high levels of staff involvement in decisions and a commitment of time

and energy from all staff. The second style -- more likely to be used by young directors -- operated on a flattened hierarchical model that gave staff autonomy and freedom to accomplish certain tasks, and required less time and energy of all staff.

- Younger directors were far more likely than older directors to talk about and try different approaches for making decisions. One organization had a leadership circle and weekly staff meetings, another had several team meetings led by the director, and a third had staff teams that made decisions, bringing any conflicts to the executive director. All of these processes were designed to maximize staff involvement.

Qualities of Leadership

- Vision, communication skills, collaborative style and concern about staff. were noted across all age groups and positions as qualities of good leadership in social change organizations.
- Older directors discussed leadership in two ways. Founders were more likely to focus on the values and skills that would be needed for their successor. Older directors who were not founders tended to describe leadership as a way to reflect on the qualities they have been able to bring to their work.
- Younger directors were more focused on building new leadership, both in their organization and as an important quality of a leader. They also talked about how good leaders need to listen to and get help from others.
- For younger staff members, vision and communication were key components to leadership. They were more likely to have high expectations of leadership and seemed surprisingly unconcerned about their own leadership qualities.

Training for Leaders

- The respondents in this study seemed to believe that any formal training on how to run an organization was unnecessary and perhaps even harmful. For the most part they were skeptical of graduate programs in administration or nonprofit management and felt what skills were needed could be learned from experience on the job.
- Several of the directors we talked with noted that they had gone back to get an advanced degree for 'the credential'. People of color and young people were more likely to talk about this need.
- The importance of life as well as work experience was noted by several of the younger staff members that were part of the constituencies the organizations served. Young staff members were also more likely to talk about the need to

learn more theory about the root causes behind the problems that their work was intended to address.

Race and Gender

- Race and gender, but especially race, are still subjects that are hard to address in social change organizations. Age does not seem to be a determining factor though older white male directors seem to be more on the defensive than their younger counterparts.
- Many of the people of color we interviewed – both staff and directors – noted divisions within their community between different groups. For leaders of color, this often meant fighting stereotypes that they were only interested in serving their own race/ethnicity. Older leaders of color were also more likely to talk about how the problems of race in the social change community worsened over in the last twenty years.
- Older and younger white directors and staff answered the questions about the impact of race and gender on leadership in terms of their organizations' efforts to hire and maintain a racially diverse staff. Race was often talked about separate from its relationship to power.
- In general, there was less overt tension around the subject of gender. When asked directly, most directors, men and women, thought that gender was not an issue in their organization, citing as evidence the number of women working in the organization, especially those in leadership positions. However, the staff did not always corroborate this response.

Future

- Most of the older directors had no intention of leaving their jobs. They often had built their life around their work, and the idea that they would do something else made little sense to them. They seemed at a loss imagining what they would do if they were no longer to run their current organizations.
- Younger directors' ideas about the future were similar to their older peers. Although several were conflicted by a sense that they should move on for the sake of the organization, leaving their position was something that they were clearly in no hurry to do. Like their older counterparts, younger directors talked about the importance of staying with the organization as a place to express their creativity and passion.
- Although they were clearly dedicated to their jobs and to social change, staff members of all ages were more likely to envision future work outside of their current organization. Their responses ranged from older staff members thinking of retirement, to young people talking about returning to school.

- Staff members who were in their mid-thirties to mid-forties experienced the most conflict. They were in supervisory or administrative jobs, but it was clear that they were not going to have the opportunity to head their current organization, so they struggled with what that meant for their future.