

# The Next Gen: Leadership Succession—What Do the Old Owe the Young?

Nancy Moses 02 January 2011

There's a lot of talk about leadership succession in the nonprofit world these days as we of the baby boomer generation approach an ever-changing retirement age.

It's a topic I've tried my best to avoid, since I'm sure I will live forever and be productive right up to the end. The problem is that's also what many in my cohort think.

My generation wants to stay put. They don't want to trade the fun of the game for a seat on the sidelines. They don't want to sacrifice their salaries, status, and sense of self-worth. They don't want to spend the rest of their years playing golf or bridge or poker, or driving the country in a Winnebago, or teaching reading at the neighborhood school, or babysitting the grandkids—all of the things their parents did in retirement. Moreover, even if these baby boomers wanted to retire, many can't afford to. The Great Recession took a big bite out of their retirement savings, and their homes are worth peanuts.

I believe retirement is especially angst-producing for successful senior women. They were the pioneers—the first female in their industries, their companies, their

organizations; many were the first career woman in their families. Their self-worth is wrapped up in their accomplishments, and their accomplishments are wrapped up in their careers. For these women, retirement is a non-starter: that was the consensus at a recent meeting on transitions sponsored by this region's top women leadership organization, the Forum of Executive Women.

Baby boomers have a point.

But so does the next generation.

Many of my younger colleagues in the nonprofit sector are expressing increasing frustration around succession—actually, the lack of succession. Those in their 30s and 40s have invested years in developing the skills, experience, political acumen, and networks required of nonprofit leaders. They resent being stuck in second-tier jobs because their bosses won't vacate their thrones. This makes for a very stagnant stratum at the top of the nonprofit pyramid and a very cranky cohort of next gen staffers down below.

Which brings me to the question: What do the old owe the young? Does the younger generation deserve your or my seat in the CEO chair? Or, are nonprofits better served with a fresh cadre of leaders? Are baby boomers simply evidencing their characteristic self-centeredness? Or are the next gens displaying their chronic sense of

entitlement?

If this quandary sounds familiar, it's because it is. Generational conflict has been around at least since the Prophet Abraham's children Isaac and Ishmael sent him out to pasture. There is no universal answer to the question of when it's time to vacate the stage for the next cast of characters. But what is clear is that there are some contented former CEOs out there whose experiences resonate. I've studied their secrets and have crafted a "next life" plan of my own so I don't find myself relegated to playing Mah Jongg in Miami. Here are the basics—assuming good health, of course.

First, I decided to view these transitions as gradual continuums rather than as major life events. I don't really plan to change much that's in my life, just to recalibrate it as time goes on. I plan to continue to consult, teach, and write, though I may do less of some and more of others. It's what I enjoy; it's who I am, and that's not going to change with age.

Second, I plan to seek out settings where wisdom is an asset rather than where age is a liability. I will mentor. I will teach. I will become the wise woman who is available to share—with those who wish it and deserve it—the fruits of my experience.

Finally, I am counting on my friends and family to do what I can't do myself, and that's to tell me when my mind is not

as sharp and my ideas are not as fresh. My clients and colleagues deserve the best of me, so I want to stop when I'm at the top of my game.

What will happen when I reach that point? I have a plan for that too, but that's for another time.

Now, let's reconsider the question of the leadership succession: What do the old owe the young?

Perhaps this is actually the wrong question. Perhaps the right question is:

What do you owe to yourself?

And, more importantly, what do you owe your organization? To society as a whole?

**Nancy Moses' column, *The Next Gen*, appears regularly on this website. She is a planner for nonprofits who is writing a book about next Gen nonprofits. Nancy can be reached at [nancy@nancymoses.com](mailto:nancy@nancymoses.com).**