

Learn, Lead and Get Out of the Way

Heidi Hartshorn McPherson 09 June 2011

Over the past several years a favorite topic of many books, articles and even webinars has become the issue of next generation leadership (see, for example, Erickson 2010; Chronicle of Philanthropy 2009; Harvard Business Review 2010). While we speak of the next generation we must remember that the current leaders are mostly Boomers and can and should play a major role in moving the nonprofit and philanthropic sector to its next level.

There is a role for conversations about how those who are currently in leadership positions can prepare themselves and their organizations, and make room for the next generation of leadership to ensure the continued growth and professional responsiveness of the nonprofit and philanthropic community.

* * * * *

As a freshman in college I eagerly attended Intro to Psychology class. Having long been interested in the human condition, I was convinced that human relationships were the foundation of a strong and peaceful world. I assumed that as a Psych major I could be a part of the betterment of the planet that would come from a greater understanding and tolerance of human relations.

I came away from that first day crushed. Instead of celebrating the strength of individuals and what they can do to be part of humanity, we were all put into categories with associated characteristics, traits, strengths and weaknesses. The idea of individuals working together was lost.

In many ways the issue of leadership trending for the nonprofit and philanthropic world reminds me of that sunny day when I realized I needed to find another major! The issue of leadership rests not in the perceived strengths or weaknesses of the Gen Y, the Gen X, the Boomers or any other category we put our brothers and sisters into. The issue of leadership transition can be approached by a recognition that the current leaders, many of who may indeed be Boomers, but not exclusively, will play a critical and important role.

Many Boomers currently in leadership roles remember well the often surprising and unusual path that led them to their current leadership position—a happy accident, in some cases. Our professional careers may have begun with a passion—to save the planet, achieve civil rights, protest a war, address the problems of the homeless or issues related to poverty, to name just a few. In recent years we are also finding Boomers returning to their values and passions and entering the nonprofit sector, as the economic downturn has caused many to re-evaluate their professional career path and to perhaps revisit their values and commitment to their professional

development. As we categorize, theorize, write about and discuss this next gen of leadership, these new Boomers should also be considered.

Current leaders now find ourselves in a world of emerging voices, complete with nonprofit management and fundraising certificates, all sorts of advanced degrees and volunteer as well as professional experience that we can bring to our organizations. The challenge current leaders now face is the necessity to prepare our organizations, ourselves and our boards for the future so that the next generation of leaders, no matter what category they may be from, can adapt and build upon the work current leaders have provided.

In this changing world there are three things current leaders must consider to continue to advance the cause that brought them and their organizations to this time and place.

1. **Learn:** Evaluate the current state of the organization and your role in it. Are you still the right person for the job; is your board ready for the increasing demands of the community needs that you serve or support; do you really know what the needs are? Have you listened to your constituency, including clients served, staff members who are part of the team—at all levels—and the board who is ultimately responsible for the mission of the organization? Listen and watch for changes that are more than

generational, but also demographic. What is your role, and the role of new leaders, in a community and nation where cultural, immigration and racial groups once considered “minorities” are becoming major or even majority stakeholders?

Now is not the time for business as usual. It is time for you to perhaps put all the cards on the table and consider your organizational effectiveness and continued relevance. This is where listening will be critical.

2. **Lead:** In these challenging economic times, recovery is essential, and strong leadership, commitment to mission and collective knowledge of your organization’s values are critical. Current CEO/EDs must be ready to provide the leadership through their boards. Is it a merger with another organization; is it cutting or reorganizing an underproducing program or even making staff changes that will help you get your organization ready for the next few years?

Consider the issue of technology. How is leadership (or even management) defined in a world where powerful communications technology changes are driving the demand for more grassroots input and involvement with organizations? How are you and your organization getting ready for this?

3. **Get out of the way:** Many organizations may have a singular or narrow leadership bench—a strong CEO; a strong but narrow board; board-driven with little strong management. Current staff and the Gen Y, X and new Boomers can bring a technological, fresh perspective as well as the commitment to the mission so critical to the success of any organization, no matter the current structure. What is the best structure for the next phase of growth that the new leadership should be ready for?

As a leader of a board or a nonprofit/philanthropic organization you must be ready to consider the role you want or need to play inside a new structure, one that may require a new position in order to ensure a smooth transition and to allow the next gen of leadership for the organization to take the organization to its next level of growth.

Whether you are a Gen Y or X in a start-up or a Boomer with 35 years under your belt, if you lead an organization you would do well to take the time to look at whether your organization is ready, whether you are ready and how you can help prepare your organization for the transition of leadership they all say is coming. As young professionals stated in this journal, they wish to be “collaborators, network builders and ambassadors” (Philadelphia Social Innovations Young Professionals Editorial Contributors 2011), but the leadership must let them. Are you ready?

References

Erickson, T. J. (2010). The Leaders We Need Now. Harvard Business Review 88(5): 62-66.

Chronicle of Philanthropy. (2009, June 16). Grooming the Next Generation of Nonprofit Leaders: An Intergenerational Discussion [live discussion]. Available at <http://philanthropy.com/article/Grooming-the-Next-Generation/63363/>.

Harvard Business Review. (2010). HBR's 10 Must Reads on Leadership. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal Young Professionals Editorial Contributors. (2011, January). Creating Generational Win-Wins: A Call for a Cross-Generational

Leadership Needs Assessment in the Social Sector. Available

at http://www.philasocialinnovations.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=244:creating-generational-win-wins-a-call-for-a-cross-generational-leadership-needs-assessment-in-the-social-sector&catid=17:leadership&Itemid=28.

Heidi Hartshorn McPherson is the President of the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls and is a Boomer working with her peers on many of these

issues. She also serves on the Board of Delaware Valley Grantmakers and is a member of the Women's Funding Network.