

BEYOND X AND BOOM: DEVELOPING A GENERATIONAL RENEWAL STRATEGY FOR YOUR ASSOCIATION

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Today's association leaders are focusing considerable attention on generational difference. It is often framed as a clash between the Baby Boomer generation (people born, roughly, between 1946 and 1964) and the generation that followed, dubbed "Generation X." The two generations, researchers suggest, have contrasting values, approaches, and styles that appear to create conflict, particularly in the workplace.

Associations and other membership organizations are paying careful attention to these issues, not only because they may influence the dynamics among staff (senior management tend to be Baby Boomers, while Generation X is now moving into middle management), but also because of the important implications these differences will have for the core structures and activities of associations. Different generations may reach different conclusions about what it means to be a volunteer or what value can be derived from being a part of the association at all.

Yet, with the very essence of associations possibly at risk because of generational shift, many of our community's responses to these trends have been surprisingly superficial and tactical. Some groups have created young-professional networking groups or committees in an effort to better engage younger generations, but this approach often does nothing more than perpetuate the exclusion of younger members. Other organizations tweak marketing messages or timidly explore new technologies with the hope of attracting younger members, yet fail to achieve even modest increases in participation, much less true engagement.

What is needed is a more strategic response—one that better recognizes the depth and complexity of generational differences and drives new solutions to these new challenges on an ongoing basis. In

short, every association must have a generational renewal strategy: a clear concept of how it will effectively include and generatively engage members of all ages. Associations need a strategy for generational renewal at least as much as they need an overarching strategic direction. For more than a few associations, the choices to be made on this issue will be make-or-break.

Associations that want to develop their capacity for generational renewal will discover, as they look more closely, three significant opportunities on which they can build an effective strategy:

1. ENGAGING YOUNGER GENERATIONS AS MEMBERS

The prevailing assumption about Generation Xers is that they are not “joiners,” which is obviously upsetting to the Baby Boomers who are leading associations. But this assumption is incomplete and misses important facts. For example, we must remember that Generation X was the “baby bust” after the baby boom. There were significantly fewer people born between 1964 and 1981 available to join anything, so a drop in membership numbers or conference attendance does not necessarily mean the entire generation is ideologically opposed to being a part of something larger than themselves.

That being said, Generation X and the still younger generation that is just now entering the workforce, the Millennials, do indeed stand at the doorstep of your association with a different set of experiences and values. These potential members are comfortable using the very different means of connecting, building relationships and accessing knowledge at their disposal. So will you as an association leader meet them with the same programs and structures that you developed for the Baby Boom generation? In what fundamental ways are you prepared to change your association to make it more interesting and engaging to these two younger generations of potential members?

For example, is your association willing to use social media tools, such as blogs and podcasts, to engage younger members in a different conversation about not only the industry or profession and their roles within it, but also about their own life priorities and goals? Remember, social media are not merely “cool” new technologies. These media are useful because they allow your members to participate more easily, more fully and in richer ways in conversations of their own choosing. They support a blending of work and life issues, and they allow all members of the association to create both content and communities that are important to them. “Networking” simply means something different to younger generations, and successful generational renewal strategies are based on the emerging values of new generations, not on repackaged versions of what we’ve always done.

2. DEVELOPING LEADERS

Your association's renewal strategy does not stop, however, once the younger generations sign on as members. True renewal implies change throughout the organization. Just as the new values of younger generations will change the way they engage in associations, they will also be the source of some new definitions of leadership and leadership development.

Our friend and colleague, David Gammel of High Context Consulting LLC, suggests that the average length of time for a member to rise to a position of meaningful contribution to an association today might be ten years. Looking ahead, he asks a very important question: What will it take for associations to reduce the time frame in which a member can make a meaningful contribution to ten minutes?

The culture and values of younger generations will continue to challenge traditional notions of leadership, which place the function of leadership squarely on the very top of the pyramid in the hands of those with the right title and requisite authority. But the world in which our associations operate is much "flatter" than it was even five years ago, and younger generations tend to view leadership as a responsibility for everyone, all the time. That is at least part of the reason why these younger members expect to make meaningful contributions almost immediately.

Consider how the Urban Land Institute (ULI) thinks about this issue, according to an article written by Ann Oliveri, ULI senior vice president, in the October 2005 issue of *Associations Now*:

At ULI, there are no 'leadership ladders' or bureaucratic measures of a member's leadership potential. Every member is a leader. Don't wait for boomers to exit before letting Gen X take charge. Just set up more tables and chairs, and get out of their way.

How is your association responding? What kind of resistance would a mindset such as ULI's encounter from the established leaders who have already "paid their dues" to reach their positions? Don't forget—generational renewal strategy is about engaging *all* generations in ways that are important to them rather than you. To create this kind of shared understanding and create lasting solutions, you must invest in ongoing and authentic intergenerational dialogue

3. BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITY

Intergenerational dialogues, however, don't happen by themselves. The success of your association's generational renewal strategy rests squarely on your organization's internal capacity to develop and implement that strategy. Unfortunately, building this particular type of organizational capacity has not been a priority for the field of association management. Engaging and developing multiple generations simply demands that you do things differently, including developing your organization's ability to engage in the disciplines of both innovation and conversation.

The discipline of innovation is critical because it creates a more open and inviting atmosphere that can attract the active participation of different generations. Both staff and members of all generations, and especially Gen Xers and Millennials, bring great ideas to table, but they may be reluctant to share those ideas because they have no reasonable expectation that anything will ever come of them. Nothing is more frustrating than seeing your idea bogged down in the perpetual bureaucracy of association structures. Through an explicit and tangible commitment to innovation, you can avoid this challenge.

The work of innovation touches every aspect of an association, making it necessary to engage a wide variety of contributors to the effort, which reinforces its importance to generational renewal. As ideas are generated, some contributors will work on turning them into actual business concepts, some will examine the potential marketplace for the ideas, while some will identify possible sources of funding. Everyone has a role to play in innovation, and the opportunity to define his or her own role should be quite compelling to the younger volunteer. It is certainly a huge step in the direction of enduring generational renewal.

A complementary step is developing your association's ability for more powerful and effective conversations. Both innovation and the intergenerational dialogue discussed in this article require a more powerful and effective brand of communication organizationally. Staff and volunteers alike must be able to cut through complexity more quickly, maneuver through multiple meanings and different generational definitions, and engage in conversations more frequently and flexibly if your generational renewal strategy is to succeed. What is your association doing to develop its capacity to engage in more powerful and effective conversations? Do you even know how effective they are right now?

FROM REACTION TO RENEWAL

Gone are the days when associations had the luxury of taking several years to identify and react to demographic shifts. Today information is generated and disseminated so quickly that identification of the shift has become easier; yet too often associations fail to rise above their old ways of doing things when it comes to the reaction. By developing a generational renewal strategy (and committing to the internal and external changes that come with it), associations can position themselves to succeed in what will eventually become a continually shifting demographic landscape. Through generational renewal, your association can drive change instead of being driven by it.

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