

Manage Generational Diversity

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A housing co-op, like any group of people who work together toward a common goal, should expect to experience conflict from time to time. Conflict is natural, and it is a part of the growth and development of any group or system. Some in the housing cooperative community, however, have begun to notice a particular pattern of conflict—one where the disputing parties seem to regularly represent different age cohorts. Those who are close to retirement (Baby Boomers) often end up in conflict with those who are in the prime of their career (Generation X), or even those who are just starting out (Millennials).

Housing co-ops are not the only ones facing such conflicts, of course, but in this article, the focus will be on these generational differences in a cooperative setting. Three of the four distinct generations operating in society today are mentioned above (Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials). Add to this mix the oldest generation in today's workforce (the Silent Generation), and for the first time in U.S. history we have four generations are working together as adults. Each generation brings with it a different set of values and expectations—hence the conflict.

But just because a few fifty-something members are having a conflict with their

thirty-something neighbors, does that mean that it is a generational conflict? Not necessarily. This issue, while important and real, has been grossly overhyped and too often oversimplified in the media. To be truly effective in managing intergenerational conflict, two things are needed: (1) deeper understanding, and (2) better conversations.

Who Are the Generations?

The first step is a better understanding of generational differences. Many sources provide only a superficial look at the stereotypes:

the Silent Generation can't handle change;
Baby Boomers are self-centered workaholics;
Generation X are cynical slackers;
Millennials are impatient and expect things to be done for them.

These generalizations do reflect some important differences among the generations, but they paint a very incomplete picture, and, like all stereotypes, they can be dangerously misleading. The power of generational differences can only be harnessed if time is taken to understand in more depth where these differences come from and how they play out in today's society.

The basic theory of generations is quite simple, and it revolves around values. Everyone has core values, and these values evolve and change over throughout life. However, there is one particular period of our life—when people are coming of age—that stands out as more important in terms of values. It is during that time (typically in the teens and twenties) when core values are initially set, even though the young people are not necessarily aware of the process at the time.

Values aren't set in a vacuum, however. People are normally reacting to what is going on in their environment. As such, the social, political, and economic forces of the day will have a large impact on people's values. This means that all the people who happened to come of age during the period of social revolution we call "the sixties" in this country (the Baby Boomers) should be expected to have a set of core values that would differ from the people who came of age during, say, the Great Depression and World War Two (the Silent Generation).

And they do, as do those who grew up in the late 1970s and 1980s (Generation X)

and those who grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s (the Millennials). What happens around a person when they come of age gives him or her a particular worldview, and even as the times change, and that person grows older and takes on new roles and responsibilities, parts of that worldview stay consistent, impacting that perspective, behavior, and choices. Consider how history has shaped the four generations who are all now adults in our society.

Silent Generation

Born between the mid 1920s and the early 1940s (now aged in their sixties or older), this generation suffered through hardship and sacrifice in the Great Depression and World War II. It was the command-and-control culture of both the military in the war and industry in the economic recovery that restored order to society, so this generation is known for its loyalty, respect for authority, and reticence when disagreeing. This generation tends to define what we mean by a good “work ethic,” and they expect rewards or gratification to be delayed. They typically support a “cause” rather than an individual. They are known to be resistant to change, which could be connected to the painful instability of their youth, but could, frankly, also be connected to their life stage—the elderly in all generations tend to be more focused on continuity.

Baby Boomers

Born between the early 1940s and the early 1960s (now aged forties to sixties), this generation is defined by the revolution known as “the sixties” (which includes the early 1970s). Like all youth rebellions, they moved against the values of their elders: spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, and self over community. Known as idealists, the Boomers are also hard workers and are credited with the invention of the sixty-hour work week. There are some paradoxes in this generation, however. Although they are known for being self-focused, they also have a strong commitment to team and harmony.

Generation X

Born between the early 1960s and early 1980s, Generation X had a much more subdued youth than the Boomers. They grew up during the oil crisis, the Iran hostage crisis, the first wave of economic downsizing in this country, and rising divorce rates. They were children when women began to re-enter the workforce in large numbers, thus Generation X were the first generation of “latch-key kids” who came home after school and took care of themselves. These factors led to a

more independent and questioning (often dubbed cynical) generation. Xers tend to confer respect based on people's visible behavior, not their title, position, or promises. Xers are predicted to have five *careers* in their lifetime (that is five careers, not five jobs), so they are less tolerant of being told to "pay their dues" before they can have an impact. Xers have led the charge in the fight for "work-life balance," not being willing to sacrifice family life for advancement at work.

Millennials

Born between the early 1980s and the turn of the Millennium, only the oldest members of this generation are in the workforce today. This is important because it means that lasting conclusions really should not be drawn about this generation right now. It is simply too early. But some important factors have been identified that have influenced them, most notably the Internet. While Generation X is known for being technologically savvy, the Millennials have been completely immersed. They have always known the Internet. Information has always been at their fingertips, instantly. If they don't know an answer, they can find it, or they can find someone who knows through their online social networks. They are also driving the more participatory nature of "Web 2.0"—waiting for the expert to design something for them is not as satisfying as collaborating instantly with a group of dispersed people to make it themselves. With so many avenues for participation, they are known to be adept at multitasking.

So What?

Go back to the housing co-op, some of the Generation X members may tend to complain about how long it takes to make decisions, while the Boomers disagree, stressing the importance of reaching agreement and taking as much time as it takes to get it right. The conflict comes up again and again, but it is never resolved. Each side ends up proposing specific policies that would support their preferred solution, which are consistently met with fierce opposition from the other side.

When looking at this conflict, the dynamics seem to fit with the generalizations provided above. The Xers, with their emphasis on work-life balance, don't have as much time to devote to this work. The Boomers, on the other hand, emphasize the harmony of the group and are known for working extra hours. When

differences like these surface, an important question must be asked about the generational disparities.

So what?

While the generalizations are both accurate and important, they don't give cooperative members everything needed to resolve intergenerational conflict. The U.S. is a very answer-focused society, so they *want* the book about Generations to provide answers, but in this case, answers will only be generated by a more effective conversation. So the trick here is in using the knowledge of generational differences to enhance the conversation, rather than stifle it.

When two parties get locked into opposing positions, they often simply repeat their positions over and over again ("You need to make these decisions faster... Oh yeah? You need to show more commitment to the co-op... Oh Yeah? You need to make these decisions faster..."). To break the cycle, a conversation needs to be facilitated so each side has a chance to explore *why* they hold their positions (both their own positions and the other party's). Xers need to understand why the Boomers feel it is important to spend so much time on the decisions, and the Boomers need to understand why the Xers are frustrated with what they perceive to be lack of progress. There lies the opportunity for generating creative solutions.

The easiest way to get there is to ask more questions and be open to hearing the answers. It helps, of course, to ask the questions in the right way. If the Xers in the co-op ask, "Why are we wasting so much time on this issue? Can't we move on?" they are unlikely to get a positive response. Try being curious rather than judgmental: "We've been on this topic for thirty minutes, and I am not sure why we need to spend more time. I can see you still want to talk about it, though, so tell me more about what else you think we need to discuss?" Answers to these questions will likely lead to more "why" questions, but that is precisely how you solve problems like these.

It is true that some of the answers to these "why" questions can be rooted in generational differences. If these ideas can be introduced, in an open and exploratory way, it might take the edge off of conflicts. When generational differences are linked with people's behavior, it is less likely that the "other" side

will be portrayed as being irrational. Generational differences highlight that there is not always an absolutely “right” way to do things, and this can create space for more creative negotiation. Remember, in negotiations it is easier to reach an agreement if you work to meet the interests of both parties, and addressing generational issues can sometimes help. If your Gen X neighbor is frustrated with a long process, you might be able to meet her interests by scheduling a special board meeting in 2 weeks just for that issue (but not tonight). Likewise, a Silent might accept a change if it is described as honoring the co-op's founders or consistent with co-op principles. By understanding and honoring the generational differences it can help you generate solutions that everyone supports.

Generational knowledge, however, is a double-edged sword. If generational issues are introduced as the sole source of a solution, or as a simplistic explanation of either side's position, the response is likely to be even more defensive. Too often, that's how generational knowledge is applied. “Oh, you're a Boomer so you like...” “Well, of course you react that way—you're from Generation X!” Statements like these only fan the flames of the conflict because they shut down conversations, and they make people feel stereotyped.

Now What?

Moving forward on this issue will require some homework in several areas. The first is members' knowledge of generations. It is important to understand the differences at levels that go beyond the stereotypes. It is equally important to actively question what is heard from the experts (including what's in this article). This is not an exact science, and particularly when discussing the younger generations, be aware that the conventional wisdom may change with time.

Efforts should be made also to develop the ability to have more productive conversations across generational lines. Make sure members don't start applying the generalizations to the individuals in the co-op. They are specific individuals who may—or may not—behave in ways consistent with their generation. Only through more effective conversations will members discover what neighbors from differing generations' actual values are, or how best to work with them.

Finally, be ready for change. When a new generation enters adulthood (as the

Millennials are doing now), a new set of values gets infused into the broad mix of how organizations are run, communities led; and values and meaning in the world are created. While those things are always evolving, the generational spikes are often noticeable. So prepare for some challenges to the way “we have always done things.”

Most importantly, as you face the realities of generational shift (and you surely will), you must address the issues head on. The conversations might appear contentious at first, but do not fall into the trap of avoiding or postponing the discussions. Use the opportunity to expand your learning, question your assumptions, and listen to people who are different than you, because it is through these conversations that we will solve the most difficult multi-generational problems. The more known about generational shift and the greater capacity to maneuver through difficult conversations will better enable co-ops to shape the future.