

## The Challenges of Generational Change

This much we know. The majority of leaders in our not for profit organisations and in our health providers are aged over 50 years - not all, the majority. We know that over the next 5 - 10 years many of the current group of leaders will retire and be replaced by those currently in their 30's and we know that their current roles will be taken up by those now in their 20's. This is generational change on a grand scale. The so-called Baby Boomer group make up 25% of the population, they are already moving into retirement.

Generational change has occurred in the past and it will occur again in the future. There is differences between the present and the past. The previous generation change took place in a more stable environment, during a time of greater predictability and by a group of people satisfied with gradual handover.

We also know that various media have attempted to make a meal of the next round of generational change and have succeeded in portraying the process in a negative light. It need not be so.

It is necessary to recognise this change is taking place and that the pace of change is faster than in the past. It is necessary to recognise that the incoming group of leaders will bring differing viewpoints and perspectives. At the same time it necessary for those seeking a move into a leadership role to understand that simply saying 'stand aside, we can do better' will not endure them to the current leadership.

It is also important to remember that generational change is not a competition between Baby Boomers and Gen X and Y. There are people who overlap from one group to another; who share characteristics of both groups regardless of birth date. Many of these people are in their first management roles at present. Likewise it would be folly to have an expectation that those Baby Boomers still in management, aged 50 - 60 are incapable of transitional change. Many of them are looking around and asking themselves how do I need to adapt so that I remain valuable to the organisation.

The key to bringing together the four generations currently in the workplace so as to ensure they work together in a collaborative manner is to focus on building productive relationships. This should be a defining characteristic of anyone applying for a leadership role. They should be able to demonstrate how they would build relationships across the generations, how they would bring together the best people, regardless of age, so as to achieve the desired outcome.

Being open-minded and able to grasp the implications of the emerging environment is critical. Regardless of age our future leaders must be able to demonstrate their understanding of the emerging environment and the steps they would take to ensure the flow of information between the environment and those in the organisation.

At recent workshops I have posed the question and asked how many people have access to update the organisational intranet, how many contribute to corporate blogs, how many have a Facebook page where they talk about their work, or Twitter about their work or even bother to access information on what is happening out in the big world that might impact on their industry sector? In each instance I was met with stares of disbelief.

This is an example of how we ignore what is taking place at our own peril. These are the. communication channels of choice for an increasing range of people,. More people are seeking their information from outside of traditional channels. Organisational leaders unprepared to look at how these might be used in an organisational sense will end up limiting collaboration. This ostrich-like behaviour will contribute to poor decision making.

It is natural for Baby Boomers to resist the ideas of the upcoming generations, yet in doing so they are condemning society to mediocrity. This is not to suggest that all that the Baby Boomers have achieved in the past 25 years has been pointless, far from it. The Baby Boomer generation has contributed significantly to shifts in attitudes and social behaviours as well as being the generation responsible for the introduction of the base technology other generations are building their presence upon. Mediocrity is bought about by a lack of change, by remaining fixed in one place, by accepting that what has been achieved in the past is sufficient for the future. For the Baby Boomer generation to be seen as truly progressive they need to remain open to the ideas of the younger generation, they need to be able to accept and they need to be able to combine the best of their contributions with the best of the contributions yet to be made by their sons and daughters. Nowhere does this philosophy apply more than in the workplace.

In one sense all the hoopla about generation change serves only to disguise the point that change takes place at the individual level. Society, and its organisations, are

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made up of one or more individuals. The word 'individual' suggests people are able to think and take responsibility for their own actions. Generation change in our workplace, while inevitable from a retirement perspective, will take place primarily because individuals make a decision to blend the old with the new and to create something better. How effective the transition from one generation to the next is depends upon each of us, as individuals, and the way we choose to behave.

To add to the complexity of the situation is the gap between the number of required workers and those available to fill the gap. In short, there will be less people entering the workplace over the next twenty years than there are places available. If working through change is not enough, our organisations also need to consider how they will attract the brightest and the best to work within them?

The younger generation have choices, lots of choices, leave aside your perspective on what drives their decisions, you will likely be wrong. Consider instead the emerging environment. When those that currently lead our organisations entered the workplace some 30-plus years ago, they did not have a lot of options. In comparison the next generation(s) have almost unlimited choice. Not only can they choose where to work and who to work with; they can choose when to work, how to work and what type of work they want to do. If they don't like the options available to them they simply create their own work. The challenge for the current leadership is to create a workplace environment that attracts people that want to contribute, at the same time enabling them to satisfy their individual needs.

Non-profit organisations face a particular challenge to attract high quality people. People on a mission are just as capable of commencing their own start-up, non-profit, as they are working within an existing organisation. A shortage of labour will drive up the cost of labour and non-government, not-for-profits, in particular, will be challenged to meet the remuneration expectations of younger employees. For the not-for-profit organisation their mission becomes critical in the battle to attract the best people. They will never be able to compete on remuneration; instead they need to compete on how they will create a better society.

The paradox for many not-for-profits may be that adherence to the past may be to their disadvantage. That is not to suggest non-profit organisations should abandon their missions. It does suggest they should examine their mission, their values and their service delivery methods in light of the emerging environment and in light of the needs of those they wish to attract as employees. Remember the next generation will also be

end user of your services as well as employees, board members and general stakeholders. The mission and values of not-for-profits will have to be meaningful and resonate with those in their 20's and 30's.

Hours worked have always been a measure of achievement for the Baby Boomer group, though less so as they approach their 50's and begin to realise that no matter how many hours they work they will only be recognised for what they have achieved in that time. This is something the younger generation have known for ever. They want to be judged on their outcomes rather than the time or resources they put into achieving the outcome. While the difference in attitude could lead to some tension between older and younger workers, more importantly there are implications for how we design work and the workplace.

The full impact of technology, especially the bringing together of telephony and the internet, have not yet been felt. What is for certain is that what we are experiencing to date is only the tip of the iceberg. Increasing our need to maintain a low cost base will force non-profits to actively utilise this technology to aid service delivery. There will always be a physical office somewhere; there may not always be people working there all the time. Asking people to continue to undertake boring, time-consuming and repetitive tasks is not the way to attract high performers.

Generational change is not something to be feared, not because it is inevitable, rather because the next generation will take responsibility for designing a better life in retirement for the Baby Boomer population, and ultimately, for themselves. The next generation will develop lifestyle products still unheard of at this moment in time and these products will benefit everyone. No one expects parents to appreciate the fashion sense of their children. It is not even necessary to do so. The next generation will develop new destinations to travel and holiday at, they will develop new ways to enjoy leisure time and they will develop new ways of working which will benefit those Baby Boomers still in the workplace.

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