

Understanding the Different Cultures of Different Generations

By Peter Brinckerhoff

Conflict between generations is as old as parents and teenagers. All of us remember fussing at our parents with the common angst filled complaint “You just don’t underSTAND!” Today, more than ever before, a lack of intergenerational understanding has spilled into the workplace throughout society, in for-profits, nonprofits, government, and the military. It shows up in a variety of ways, and at some very important, and sometimes unexpected moments.

In nonprofits, we come at such problems with fewer resources than our for-profit or governmental peers. Why is intergenerational conflict so intense now? What’s causing it?

Let’s cut to the chase: the four generations in today’s workplace are so different that they meet the definition of being *different cultures*. Their outlooks, worldview, upbringing, traditions, and perspectives (the things that make up a culture) are fundamentally different and, until we reach across that cultural divide to try to understand them, we’ll wind up confused and in conflict, rather than using each generation’s capabilities to help move our nonprofit’s mission forward.

To understand the wide difference in perspectives, we first need to define the four generations we’re discussing.

Silent Generation (born 1925 to 1945, approximately 30 million): Born in the shadow of the Greatest Generation (born 1901 to 1924), members of the Silent Generation still are very active in nonprofit management, funding, and volunteering.

Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1962, 80 million strong): Boomers are the largest generation in US history, both in absolute numbers and in percentage of the population. They now comprise 70 percent of all nonprofit senior management staff and 65 percent of nonprofit board membership.

Generation X (born 1963 to 1980, 45 million): GenX is caught (and often conflicted) between boomers and Gen@. Members of this generation make up a large part of the US nonprofit workforce.

Gen@ also called Millennials (born 1981 to 2002): Millennials are the 70-million children of the boomers, and they are members of the first generation to be born digital. They can’t remember a life without constant connectedness.

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A caution: In grouping any collection of people, one has to stereotype to some degree. That's implicit in these kinds of discussions, but I want to acknowledge here that while all of us are individuals and there are always some outliers, the bell curve does work when it comes to large numbers of people. And in the center of the bell curve live those stereotypes.

Now for a few examples of cultural differences.

Work-life balance. Work-life balance is the 800-pound gorilla in the room when it comes to intergenerational discord. Boomers rally to the cry "Live to Work!", while GenX (particularly younger GenX) and Gen@ members feel that "Work to Live!" is a better motto. Thus, many a Boomer or Silent Generation boss is upset when a younger staff member doesn't want to work 80 hours a week, and many a GenX or Gen@ employee doesn't understand why the older supervisor can't "get a life." This is a recipe for conflict, for sure.

But think deeper about the different generational lexicons and the conflict they can cause. When a Boomer fusses at a Gen@ employee for "not being at work," the employee may retort, "Wait, I WAS at work, what are you talking about?" and both people are mad. The reason is that Boomers think of "work" as a *location*. You have to go to work to be at work. It doesn't matter that many Boomers all have laptops or tablets and take them home to do work in the evening. The default definition of work for us is that it's a *place*. *If you're not there, you're not at work.* GenX and Gen@ define "work" as an *activity*, one that can be done anywhere, any time. So, I can be at work at home, or at a coffee shop, or in a library, or out in my backyard. See the problem?

Education. Think back to your 6th grade science project or 8th grade final literature exam. If you're a Boomer or Silent Generation member, you did these alone. If you're from the younger generations, you almost certainly did them in groups. Group learning has been the norm for the past 25 years, evolving nicely along with the technology that allows constant connectedness. To be successful in groups, we have to accommodate and value a variety of skills in our fellow group members, we have to learn to speak up, and we are comfortable sharing.

This is why the new 28-year-old employee shows up and asks for the minutes of the management team and board meetings, a copy of the bylaws, and budget and, in doing so, often horrifies his or her older supervisors. From the younger person's perspective, all information should be available and free. From the older person's perspective, s/he needs to earn the right to access such "privileged" information. In elementary school, our teacher's (for those of us born before 1980) told us to "Cover your work!"—we've never forgotten that.

Technology. A key accelerator of nearly all types of intergenerational differences is what I think of as the new digital divide: Those born before 1980 and those born after. Those born before "see" technology, accept it, use it, love it, and hate it (often simultaneously). Those born after 1980 really don't "see" technology at all. It's like oxygen: It's everywhere and just as vital.

For some time, one of my admonitions to nonprofits has been that they need to "embrace technology for mission." Not just accept tech, utilize tech, or put up with tech, but really embrace it. If nonprofits don't, they lose two entire generations. Two generations of volunteers, of donors, of employees, of people to serve. It's that important, and those born before 1980 (or 1960 in my case) are often hard pressed to viscerally understand that, often to the detriment of our ability to best serve our mission in an increasingly tech-focused world.

If your nonprofit is like most, you've worked hard to become more diverse on both board and staff, and to become culturally competent in the cultures your organization serves. In doing so, you've thought about gender and ethnicity, but have you considered diversity by generation of birth? Probably not, and that's the place to start.

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