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What Makes Them Tick? Understanding Our Differences Can Enhance Intergenerational Volunteer Collaboration

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Abstract

Volunteer resource managers understand the need to collaborate with others. In difficult economic times, collaboration becomes critical as volunteer organizations are asked to do more with less. People today are living longer, happier lives. It is not unusual for today's volunteers to find themselves working side-by-side with members of three or four generational cohorts. Research tells us that in order to work together effectively we need to understand and trust one another; we need to be about the business of building social capital. The article explores the research and provides tips on how to build a trusting, intergenerational work environment.

Key Words: social capital, generations, collaboration, volunteers

Introduction

Collaboration is not a new concept for volunteer resource managers (VRMs), but it can be a confusing term. The words coordination, cooperation, and collaboration are often used interchangeably, but each can mean very different things. When placed on an easy to difficult continuum, collaboration would be deemed the most arduous. Ray (2002) conclued that coordination is the "least intense" of the three. Organizations coordinate when they share information with each other in an effort to improve services. Examples of coordination might include co-sponsorship of a community event or listing information about an agency/organization in a community resource directory.

Cooperation raises the intensity up a level. Things can get a little more complicated. Cooperating agencies spend more time communicating and planning together. More information is shared relative to budgets and sources of funds. Trust levels increase along with risk as organizational identities become more intertwined. An example of cooperation could be two organizations' decision to collocate to save resources for their client's benefit. However, sharing a location does not guarantee collaboration between organizations.

When organizations collaborate they ". . . agree to influence – and be influenced by – each other" (Ray, 2002, p.17). They

may share staff, conduct joint training sessions, or pool financial resources. Whether called coordination, cooperation, or collaboration, what is most important is that groups and individuals trust and respect each other.

Trust and relationship building are central to effective collaborative partnerships. Without trust, an organization is likely to encounter exchanges like these overheard recently by a community member, while working as a volunteer on an intergenerational community service project: "I had no idea that when we entered into this project that working with these Baby Boomer types would be so complicated" or "these young kids just don't get it. Can't they put aside texting each other for just a little while so we can get this done?"

Collaborative endeavors are not easy; this is especially true when they involve individuals from different generational cohorts. Collaboration can be more time consuming than working on projects independently. It can test one's patience and challenge one's people skills. Understanding each generation and the concept of social capital can make intergenerational collaboration easier.

Working as a multigenerational team can be rewarding on two fronts. First, collaborative activities can help stretch already tight budgets, an important benefit in these times of economic uncertainty. Second, collaboration can help build social capital by fostering trust and reciprocity, both of which are important elements of an intergenerational work environment. The central theme of social capital is that connections between people add value to society. It refers to the collective significance of all social networks as well as trust that is infused between people in the networks (Putnam, 2000).

Generational Differences

Putnam (2000) illustrated how community engagement, after showing significant up-trends in the first half of the twentieth century, experienced a marked decrease across all civic endeavors beginning shortly after the end of World War II. Although many factors may have contributed to this decline (e.g., the proliferation of television, urban flight, higher divorce rates, households with two working parents, the Internet, the pressures of time and money, etc.), Putnam placed much of the blame on the transition that is taking place as older, more civically involved generations are replaced by younger, less active, generational cohorts. Table 1 uses several measures of community involvement to approximate the extent of civic disengagement that has taken place as each successive generational cohort reaches adulthood (Putnam, 2000; Twenge, 2006).

Table 1
Measures of Generational Civic Engagement (Putnam, 2000; Twenge, 2006)

Generation and Era Born	Attend Church Regularly	Involved Civically	Feel that Most People Can Be Trusted
Greatest Generation	55%	40%	50%
Silents	42%	30%	48%
Baby Boomers	30%	20%	35%
GenerationX	23%	10%	18%
Millennials	18%	60%	36%

The numbers in Table 1 illustrate what many have sensed but could not quantify about our communities. According to Putnam (2000), across the United States, individuals are becoming less active spiritually (church attendance is down by roughly one-third since the 1960's), less engaged politically (although this seems to be changing), and less connected socially (inviting friends to the house is down by 45% in the last 25 years). These inclinations seem to be generational, although the Millennials look to be reversing the civic involvement trend. In fact, the Millennial Generation has been given much credit for the resurgence in voter turnout during the Presidential election of 2008 when 62% of eligible voters went to the polls (McDonald, 2008). The underlying question is what values and beliefs are inherent in these cohorts to warrant these changes? In order to address this, VRMs must first define who these populations are.

From a familial standpoint, a generation can be considered to come about approximately every 20 years. While the specific "born between" dates illustrated on Table 2 can be debated, the timeframes they represent are generally accepted as accurate for discussion purposes.

Today, it is not at all uncommon to have representatives of three or four generational cohorts working side-by-side on a given volunteer project. This can present management challenges for the VRM; therefore, it is important that VRMs know as much as they can about these generational groups, so that they can work effectively with them.

An individual's beliefs and value systems are influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the era in which he or she is born. Bennis and Thomas (2002) suggested that the social, cultural, and/or political events that take place in an individual's life can often help mold and transform him or her.

Table 2

Common Generational Titles, Era Born, and Approximate Size (Pew Research Center, 2009)

Generation	Era Born	Approximate Size (Millions)
Greatest Generation	Before 1926	25
Silents	1927-1944	40
Baby Boomers	1945-1964	76
Generation X	1965-1980	64
Millennials	1981-2000	46

This transformation happens when the individual takes time to reflect on his or her experiences, which in turn can confirm or alter the beliefs and values that he or she holds to be true.

As generational cohorts mature from childhood into adulthood, many have common life experiences. For example, because of the broad scope of human involvement during World War II, a male born in the United Sates in 1920 would most likely have military service as a common life experience with other males born that year. This would not be as common if one was to consider the life of a typical male born in the United States in 1960.

In order to develop a basic understanding of generational differences, one must be willing to view each generation through a fairly broad lens. For example, the generational cohort that Brokaw (1998) referred to as the Greatest Generation was born at the beginning of the last century. This generation entered adulthood during the turbulent economic times of the Great

Depression and devastating global impact of World War II. During this era commodities of every kind were scarce, whether because of economic downturn or wartime rationing. During the years of the Great Depression, fathers were lucky to find enough work to put food on the table, while mothers stayed home to raise the children. Family and church were major influences in their lives. After Pearl Harbor, fathers went to war and mothers went to work. Loyalty, dedication, and sacrifice are values held dear by this generational cohort.

Sandwiched between the mammoth (in terms of their sheer size in numbers) Baby Boomers and the Greatest Generation are the *Silents*. Having been children during the Great Depression, and generally speaking too young to have served in the military during World War II, this generation has often felt underappreciated and overlooked. Heavily influenced by their Greatest Generation parents, members of the Silent Generation have many of the same beliefs and values. With few exceptions, members of this generation tend to be conformers who view work as an obligation of adulthood, rather than a source of fulfillment (Codrington & Grant-Marshall, 2005).

Baby Boomers grew from childhood to adulthood under the threat of Nuclear War. It was during this era of backyard air raid shelters and duck and cover drills in school that societal norms began to change. The advent of the birth control pill provided women with a new found freedom. Many decided to put off having children until later in life. Women in great numbers began entering the workforce and/or continuing their academic careers. In part, because of these common generational cohort experiences, Boomers tend to hold values different from those of the earlier two generations. Work is important to this generation as well, but for different reasons. Because of their numbers (approximately 76 million), Baby Boomers have always been competitive. Whether they are in the classroom or the workplace, Boomers are driven less by the values of loyalty, dedication, and sacrifice than by their competitive instinct (Codrington & Grant-Marshall, 2005).

The Baby Boomer generation values quality in all things: personal growth and satisfaction, health, wellness, and independence. Coming of age during the turbulent 60's (a time of political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement), Boomers tend to question, not conform, to authority. After World War II as divorce rates began to climb and social values changed, family remained important but church was replaced by education as the second of the two major influences in Boomer's lives. This was caused partly by increased federal funding for the expansion of post-secondary education across the country during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Sometimes referred to as the echo that followed the Baby Boom, Generation X is much smaller in terms of numbers (64 million). Part of this decrease in numbers can be attributed to the "sexual revolution" that began in the early 60's, on the heels of the then newly developed birth control pill. Although young at the time, the social "fallout" from Watergate and the Vietnam War left its mark on Generation X. With more mothers working or continuing their education, many children came home after school to an empty house. As "Latch Key Kids", X'ers were often forced to become self-reliant at a young age. Parents were preoccupied with other matters, so many X'ers began to rely on friends for support. They became skilled at building relationships with their peers.

As a group, X'ers remember being stressed out in their youth due to their parent's insistence that they take part in many extracurricular activities. This generation came of age in an era of economic recession and corporate downsizing. Many watched their parents get laid off from jobs which caused them to become skeptical of institutional involvement. Most members of Gen X do not buy into the idea of company loyalty. Moving up the career ladder means job hopping to gain experience and pay increases. Due to increased globalization during their formative years, this group exhibits a greater appreciation for social diversity than previous generational cohorts (Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

As their parents moved from rural to urban areas in the 1960's and 70's, Xer's lost their connection to extended family. They and their friends fended for themselves, often in front of the now ubiquitous television set, until their parents arrived home for the evening. All of this helped to make friends and media the major influences in Xer's lives.

At 46 million, Millennials are the third largest generational cohort, and some studies suggest they will surpass Boomers in terms of population size if current immigration trends continue (Eisner, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009). This is the first generation to use computers from an early age. The Internet, e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging, My Space®, Facebook®, and countless other technological innovations have always been a part of Millennials' lives, and thus have served as major influences. Along with technological advances, interactive television and a greater acceptance of individual differences and cultural diversity have helped define who this generation is and who it will become. Millennials are an active, optimistic group with great multitasking abilities. They are ambitious with an entrepreneurial spirit. All this group lacks to be successful is the requisite life experience. They respect and admire those older than them and work well in teams, especially if other team members are from the Greatest or Silent generations (Twenge, 2006). Although Millennials are sometimes accused of being self-centered, they possess a strong sense of civic responsibility (see Table 1). Much of this stems from their involvement with service learning projects in high school (Safrit, Gliem, & Gliem, 2004). They understand the many problems of the world, such as Global Warming, HIV/AIDS, and international terrorism, and feel it will fall upon their generation to do something about them.

Volunteer Collaboration

Each generation brings different values, beliefs, and attitudes to organizations seeking volunteers. VRMs must acknowledge, welcome, and incorporate these attributes into the process of strengthening the organizations and communities they serve. This could be done by encouraging collaboration between generations by recruiting all four generational cohorts as volunteers within an organization. In doing this, the VRM will encourage local community engagement, intergenerational communication, and trust building, thereby strengthening the organizations and communities served.

Volunteer resource managers are continually asked to do more with less; at the same time they know the importance of involving all groups in organizational efforts. Therefore, how can the VRM use knowledge about generational differences to recruit and retain volunteers?

Volunteer resource managers can collaborate with those of the Greatest and Silent Generations by understanding that the core values held in high esteem by members

of these generations include loyalty, patriotism, hard work, dedication, sacrifice, conformity, respect for authority, patience, delayed reward, and duty before pleasure. VRMs can encourage involvement of this population segment by changing the image of aging (Generations United, 2010) and should refer to members of these generational cohorts as "post-career" rather than "older", "senior", or "retired". VRMs should provide work that is enjoyable, meaningful, challenging and that can make a definable difference in the community by focusing on skills, experience, legacy, and creating occasions for mentorship and leadership (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, & Morrow-Howell, 2005).

Volunteer resource managers should provide post-career volunteers with opportunities to network *for* the organization beyond its walls, i.e., getting out into the community and "telling the story" to others. Post-career individuals do not want to just sit around; get them active on the organization's behalf (Hall, Schmidt, & Vettern, 2009). Consider the fact that this generation did not grow up with the technology society finds so ubiquitous today. Many are uncomfortable with technology and feel electronic forms of communication are cold and impersonal. The best way to communicate with those of the Greatest or Silent generations is one-on-one, either in person, by phone, or through a hand written note (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). A message that will resonate with this group is "your life experiences are valuable to us and we wish to hear your thoughts as to what has worked in the past."

Volunteer resource managers can collaborate with Baby Boomers with newly packaged opportunities that focus on the work to be done and the skills needed, rather than on status (Hall, Schmidt, & Vettern, 2009). Boomers are competitors who believe that success is obtained through hard work, which to them is a source of personal identity and fulfillment. Boomers who volunteer respond to job descriptions, training opportunities, proper supervision, and "soft" benefits such as free parking. Consider the individual's skills and interests. Show them the personal and community impact they can have by being a part of the organization. Remember that education has played a major part in Boomers' lives, so VRMs should combine adult learning opportunities with their part-time volunteer responsibilities. To keep these volunteer Boomers engaged, organizations should share the progress that has been achieved on a regular basis (Hall, Schmidt, & Vettern, 2009). A message that will resonate with this group is "you can be important to our success and we can really use your contribution to this effort."

Volunteer resource managers can collaborate with Gen X'ers by providing flexible roles and work schedules (remember: many Gen X'ers are still raising children), embracing casual attire, and by offering a comfortable working environment. Informality is important to Gen X'ers. They initiated casual Fridays in the work place. This generational cohort is tuned into terminology, so offer technology centered tasks that they might be able to complete at home, as well as one-on-one interaction with others. Consciously engaging the use of language when describing gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnic groups, and political orientation is critical, even the use of the term "Gen X" itself is often deemed offensive. Gen X'ers are more likely to volunteer when an organization describes how its volunteer efforts will strengthen the larger community (Vettern, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009). A message that will resonate with this group is "you can do things your way here" and "our work environment is very relaxed and

flexible."

Volunteer resource managers must also be conscious of language when speaking with Millennials about age. Terms such as "kids" or "children" should be replaced with "young people," youth" or, "young adults." Volunteer resource managers can collaborate with Millennials by developing meaningful positions with real responsibility that offer leadership development and peer interaction. Millennials should be teamed with members of other generations, especially those from the Greatest and Silent Generations (Generations United, 2008; Vettern, Hall, and Schmidt, 2009). A message that will resonate with this group is "you will be working in a fun, relaxed environment with experienced team members that will mentor you."

To foster intergenerational collaboration and increase social capital, VRM's could consider an Intergenerational Conference (Generations United, 2010). The purpose of the conference would be to bring different age groups together to confront the myths and stereotypes generations have about each other. For example, teenagers will learn not to stereotype everyone over 65 as a slow driver who has hearing problems and post-employment individuals won't categorize all teens as reckless drivers who play loud music. One way that a conference of this sort can be developed at little cost to the volunteer organization is to collaborate with the local school system. Schools are always looking for ways that they can develop mutually beneficial links with the communities they serve (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Schools can offer the VRM many free or low cost resources including the facility to host the conference, teachers and staff to assist with manpower, event promotion, and, most importantly, the youth component of the Intergenerational Conference. The major benefit to the schools is developing relationships with the VRM and the newly identified adult volunteers. Most school district superintendents and principals would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with volunteer organizations that could help bring the community and schools closer together.

Vettern, Hall, and Schmidt (2009) found that there were more similarities than differences in what volunteers from different generation's desire from their volunteer experience. The volunteers in the study shared that when working to motivate and retain volunteers, the following things should be kept in mind:

1) Volunteer resource managers should let current volunteers know the work they do is vital and recognize volunteers who have made a difference in the community.
2) Agencies that use volunteers must focus on demonstrating a need for volunteers. Volunteer resource managers should be vocal about the volunteer positions that are vacant and have position descriptions available.
3) For younger volunteers, offering opportunities to build skills that will enhance or advance their careers is essential.
4) Volunteer resource managers should focus on making volunteering for their agency a social affair. Volunteers are interested in making connections with other individuals in the community. Agencies that use volunteers have the potential to be the communities networking hub and can offer a great location for friends and family to come together for a worthy cause.
5) Examining the climate in an agency's office to ensure it is welcoming to volunteers is crucial. Making sure that staff treat volunteers respectfully and eliminating interoffice gossip are a must.
6) Providing flexible volunteer opportunities also assists in volunteer

recruitment. Offering numerous times or way a person can volunteer for an organization alleviates issues such as work and family conflicts that may arise.
7) Finally, carefully evaluating volunteer opportunities and assuring they contain a level of fun and enjoyment is crucial. Celebrating the work accomplished helps assure continued participation.

With an understanding of the different generations and their skills and abilities, VRMs can form effective cross-generational teams to build social capital and help communities achieve their goals through volunteerism. Working with these teams and assisting them in understanding the strengths of each generation can help VRMs bridge the generation gap and lead volunteer organizations in the 21st century.

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