

Feature

How Will Gen-Xers Lead?

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Now that Generation Xers are taking on management roles at associations, they're building different relationships with their boomer and millennial peers.

How much damage can a single movie title do to the collective reputation of 50 million people? When Richard Linklater gave the title *Slacker* to his 1991 movie about twentysomethings in Austin, Texas, there was no way to tell that an entire [generation](#) of Americans would wind up saddled with the stereotype that they were disinterested, disengaged, and, well, slack. To a certain extent, the term did indeed apply to members of generation X: According to the Pew Research Center, gen-Xers have traditionally been less politically engaged than boomers in a variety of categories, from voting to joining political parties. (The only political activity Xers enjoyed participating in more than boomers? Boycotting.)

But as Linklater put it, "withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy." And a relative lack of political involvement isn't the same thing as disinterest in a career or disengagement in the workplace. As members of generation X—those born between 1966 and 1980—have taken on leadership roles at associations, they've started to sort out what kind of leaders they want to be, especially in relation to the much larger boomer (76 million) and millennial (90 million) populations. The traditional structures and cultures of associations pose a challenge to Xers as they climb the leadership ladder—or struggle to—but associations may wind up transforming in the process.

That is, if they want the job. "Associations are going to change," says Robert W. Wendover, managing director of the [Center for Generational Studies](#), which studies cross-generational workforce issues. "As the millennials arrive—the oldest of the millennials are in their late 20s at this point—there's potential that the millennials will get more involved than the Xers will, and the Xers need to pay attention to that. They have to decide what they want to do."

Balance and Progress

If gen-Xers are more hesitant to jump in than millennials, Wendover says, it's for a simple reason—gen-Xers got their hearts broken. They were raised on a boomer belief that it was possible, even preferable, to stay with one employer for an entire career. Xers watched that notion collapse in real time, but millennials have no delusions about the ever-shifting workplace they're in.

"Millennials have grown up with the expectation that a job is very much a contract," Wendover says, "whereas Xers had to go through, in a way, almost a grief process, because they were taught one thing and found that it was completely different."

Sandra Giarde, CAE, executive director of the California Association for the Education of Young Children and a senior executive at Association Resource Center, worked as a Congressional staffer and at the California State Assembly before her disillusionment with politics prompted a move into associations. "Those of us who work at associations might find this statement laughable—sometimes I even do when it comes out of my own mouth—but compared to politics, at least with associations you usually have measurable outcomes," says Giarde, 39. "You're able to actually see progress, whereas in the legislature you may work on a particular initiative or issue area, and a year later you turn back around and you realize you've gotten a whole bunch of nowhere."

Giarde and others interviewed for this story noted some of the superficial differences, like meeting attire, that can create surprisingly heated conflicts between boomers and gen-Xers. But the bigger generational divide was over processes—the ways that associations were organized and operated. "Most [associations] run on some old-school models," Giarde says. "Innovation is only adopted once it's been talked to death, and by then it may not be innovative at all."

"I think most of our volunteer boards and committee structures are still in that boomer mentality where they search for consensus," says Shelly Alcorn, CAE, 42, a Sacramento, California-based consultant at Alcorn Associates and former vice president of education and development at the California Society of Association Executives. "[Gen-Xers] are looking to win. They are looking to change. They are looking to move. We're the ones wandering around going, 'Oh my God, someone make a decision. Even if it's wrong.'"

Paralysis by analysis isn't the only creaky beam in the association structure for gen-Xers, Alcorn says. For instance, she says she believes nonmember pricing sets off the generational suspicion that somebody in authority is trying to manipulate you. "Nonmember pricing, for generation X ... we look at that as extortion," she says. "There should be no distinguishing between member or nonmember. If I like you and I like what you're providing, I probably will become a member."

Gen-Xers have been no less likely than boomers to join associations; as ASAE & The Center's study [*The Decision to Join*](#) points out, association membership is more a function of career level than generational status. Still, the social aspects of associations are a tougher sell for gen-Xers. While boomers grew up in a culture of civic engagement and millennials were raised getting to know each other online, Xers didn't enter the workforce with the same connected mentality. "Twenty-five years ago, because of the manual processes back then, there were a lot more reasons for people to get together and lick envelopes and stuff mailers," says Wendover. "While it was a nuisance at times, you also sat around the table with people—you had to, to get things done."

The disappearance of that environment made gen-Xers less interested in mingling than their older peers and more interested in work-life balance. For the past six years, Alyssa A. Pfennig, CAE, 30, has been director of membership for the National Dart Association, the past three through the AMC Raybourn Group International. She says she eventually

wants to take an executive role at an association, but she's pursuing that path carefully. "[A leadership role] is something that I am comfortable with," she says. "But at the same time, I hesitate from time to time to take on too much because I do want that balance in my life. ... It's not because I don't want to do it [or] I'm lazy. I just want to keep that balance and make sure I don't lose my personal life over my work life."

Learning to Manage

Here's the trick, though: How do you preserve that balance, pursue your ambitions, and still convince boomers in charge that you are, in fact, ambitious? Early in his career, Sean R. Walters, CAE, executive director of the Investment Management Consultants Association, took pains to assert not just his skill set but his interest in using it. "[The impression was] 'Well, you don't know more than me because I'm a boomer and I've been doing this for a while, and you're some kid who came in this role,'" he says. "I did, a lot of times, have to power my way through that." That was particularly critical when Walters, 41, was in his 20s and serving as director of member services at the International Association for Financial Planning, where he managed older staffers. Gaining credentials helped, he says; so did studying up on the various forms of power. Lacking inherent authority, he had to lean on "referent power"—"I follow you because I want to and I like you," as Walters puts it. "When you're a younger leader in associations, even if you're a technical expert, referent power is really the one that you have to lean on."

Of course, the gen-X manager at an association isn't just managing boomers, and juggling the different work styles of older and younger generations can make for a stuck-in-the-middle feeling. Bill Schankel, 37, director of member marketing, planning, and publications for the Society of Cable Telecommunications Engineers, understands the bind. When it comes to conversations about social media, he says, "You don't want to be the one that's anti-change, but you also don't want to be the one who's overly aggressive and just shooting from the hip, saying, 'Let's push every new technology that comes out.'"

Gen-Xers may pride themselves on their independence, but they've learned plenty from their boomer peers. In her six years at the National Dart Association, Pfennig says, she's taken a few tips from her older managers on how to work with volunteers and staff. Her instinct is to be flexible, she says, "but I've also found myself learning that I need to adjust my management style—there's only so much flexibility you can give. ... So I've watched my boss and other boomers ... make certain decisions and understand why and incorporate some of that into my management responsibilities as well."

Most interviewed agreed that gen-Xers need to be more assertive in their roles as leaders. According to Wendover, that's because boomers are staying longer in their own jobs and gen-Xers now need more stability in their jobs as they raise families. For Schankel, that's partly because they need to keep up with the generation rising up: "I think there is that fear always that somebody's going to come in and send a resume that's completely virtual and just dazzles somebody," he says. For Alcorn, it's because

Xers are compelled to justify their defiant stances and to become change agents in their associations.

Regardless of the shape those changes take, though, there's agreement that the next few years should settle, once and for all, whether Generation Xers are qualified for—and interested in—leadership. After all, this was the latchkey-kid generation that learned how to be independent early, defined the do-it-yourself cultural ethos, and turned entrepreneurial when they entered the job market in a down economy in the early 90s. As Tamara Erickson discusses in her book *What's Next, Gen X?*, Xers were raised with real-world experience, comfort with a digital world, awareness of global issues, pragmatism, and sense of entrepreneurship. "I'm convinced that Gen Xers will be the leaders we need," Erickson writes.

Even that famed skepticism about organizations has turned out to be an asset for organizations, says Alcorn. "I think generation X's sensibility has been driving openness and transparency," she says. "It think it's been driving the move to put [IRS Form] 990s online."

Blurring the Gap

Of course, talk about generations risks devolving into generalizations, which is why interviewees were also eager to point out that talking about distinctions between boomers, gen-Xers, and millennials has its limits. "I think with any group, whether it's volunteers or staff, you want to have different opinions and perspectives," says Walters. "When we're putting together work groups of volunteers, the goal is to get diversity of thought. And sometimes that involves a diversity of age, a diversity of background, coming from different parts of the country."

Even gen-Xers who feel squeezed in will need to learn the skills to communicate leadership to various generations. "We're sort of that sandwich generation, so we just have to network with the people in generations all around us," says Schankel. "And stay out in front on both the association side and for-profit side. We have to be open to whatever might happen."

Or, as Giarde puts it: "At some point the generational debate stops, and it goes back to knowing how to work with people, period."

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