



Working Across Generations: Author Q & A

Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership was released in November 2008. Here, authors Frances Kunreuther, Helen Kim, and Robby Rodriguez share their thoughts on the election, what's at stake, and the ways we can address multi-generational leadership in nonprofit organizations. For more information about the book and how to order your copy, visit www.workingacrossgenerations.org.

Why did you decide to write this book?

Frances: In 2002 we completed our first study on generational change in leadership in the nonprofit sector, and that led us on a path of really looking at the differences between how generations look at leading nonprofits and also what they require to do the job well and to communicate with each other. So, we had done this work for five years when we decided we wanted to put down on paper what we had learned, because there's really nothing in the nonprofit sector that looked at leadership in this way. So we're hoping it's a book that people can use and understand as we go through this big shift from the Baby Boom generation to younger generations that are going to be taking over our organizations.

Robby: I decided to write this book because of the experience that I had taking over from two Baby Boom generation leaders, and the challenge that I faced in trying to do that. There were a lot of things that I learned along the way that I felt were important to share with others who may be going through the same experience but not be able to pinpoint what exactly is going on. A couple of things that I learned from my experience in an organization that was in transition totally were that, for one, generational change happens; it's also an opportunity for organizational renewal. It's not just that it's a change in leadership of different generations, or that it's a change in leadership, but it's also very likely that a lot of other things are changing in the organization as well.

The other thing is just how important building trust is when there's a leadership transition in an organization and, in particular, a generational shift that's happening as part of that transition. I had a Board that was mostly put together by the founders of the organization and who had worked with her and him for a very long time. I couldn't sit across the table and say to the, "Remember when we did this?" as a way of relating to them [the] future plans of the organization, and signaling to them that, "We have done work together, so we can do this together." I didn't have that with them. So we needed to spend time building trust together. The other thing that was incredibly important was being on the same page in terms of what's the vision for the organization, what is possible for us to accomplish, what's our opportunity, and really taking stake of all the factors that are involved in a group that's seeing how it can make change and fulfill its mission. We hadn't evaluated those things in quite

some time, so sitting around the table we had very different conceptions of what the organization's role in making change should be.

Lastly, there were people who were really key towards building bridges between and among different generations within the organization, that without their help in communication, I don't think a successful and less painful transition could have happened. These things are incredibly emotional and taxing on individuals, and it's very important to find folks who are willing and able to play a role in bridging the different generations.

What's different about this book than other things we've seen?

Robby: As Frances mentioned, we felt that there were very few comprehensive works in the field that really tell us the full story about what's happening – both in organizations as well as what's happening sector-wide, in terms of generational change. And, really, how you look at the problem is how you come up with the answer. So we wanted to provide a resource to people in the field that looks at the problem from many different ways. So that folks could have a fuller understanding of what's happening both at the micro- and the macro-level in the sector, and be able to come up with lot's of different types of solutions to address the challenges that they're facing.

Frances: A lot of the solutions that we were hearing were things like, "We have to recruit more people into the nonprofit sector – that's the problem." Then somebody else would say, "Well, we have to get older leaders to stay longer – that's the problem," or, "We have to get people to communicate across generations – that's the problem. The book is really an attempt to say there are several different things that you might think of as the problem, and each one of them is true to some degree. Taken together, and addressed together, we can really make a successful generational shift in the nonprofit sector that includes everyone – older leaders and younger leaders coming into the sector.

Robby: One of the reasons why I really like this book so much is that it's very comprehensive. It looks at the problem from lots of different facets, it provides historical context, it includes tools and lessons, and real stories from people in the field. Then it has some recommendations that I think folks will find useful in trying to come up with approaches to address the challenge that we're facing.

What's at stake if we don't address generational change in the nonprofit sector?

Helen: We're now in the middle of a huge generational shift in our country and also in the nonprofit sector, and what's different about this generational shift as opposed to other generational shifts in this country is that for the nonprofit sector, this is really the first major shift in *leadership* change. How we are prepared to deal with it could have a huge impact on how we continue to have a vibrant and healthy sector, or go through a period of confusion and potentially stifling the growth of this sector.

In my work as a consultant, I work with many organizations who are thinking about it, or who are going through it, or who are coming out of leadership changes and, as Robby's talked about, there's a lot of emotions attached to leadership change, generational change in our organizations. How we understand it, and how we are able to address it, talk about [these] difficult issues, can have an impact of creating trust and creating new energy, and also possibilities for expanding leadership in the organization that really serves both our leaders individually and our communities.

If we shy away from the different conversations and solutions that is needed we could really stifle the leadership of both younger and older generation leaders. We could also have stagnant leadership structures that don't attract the kind of people they we need to continue to attract to this sector. Ultimately, the mission of the organization, the mission of the work, and the vision of the sector could suffer as well. There are a lot of things at stake, both at an individual level, organizational level, and at the sector level in terms of how we frame the issue, how we understand it, how we make plans to move proactively through this generational change, rather than being inactive as things unfold in front of us.

Given the turnout among young voters in this election, what does this say for their commitment to issues and possibly the nonprofit sector?

Robby: We are witnessing the greatest involvement of young people in the political process in a generation. This year's presidential election is an example of the commitment to the future of this country that young people are expressing as well as a deep understanding of the issues that are at stake. The decisions that we make in November are going to deeply impact the course our country takes in addressing these challenges, and I think that young people are standing up and saying that, "We have ideas and solutions too and we want to be involved in addressing the problems that we're facing," and that's true in our organizations as well. By and large, we haven't done a good job of incorporating people from younger generations, in a meaningful way, into the decisions that our organizations and the sector is taking to move us forward. I think that we can really gain some inspiration from what we're seeing in the political process.

How is this issue currently being addressed and what should we be doing differently?

Frances: I think there's three different ways we should look at what we can do. One is what can we do as individuals? How can we trust each other, as Helen pointed out, across generations and what do we need to think about when we're thinking about our relationships from one generation to the next? Let me give you an example: how do people who enter the nonprofit sector - in different ways and at different times - understand how those differences affect how they'll run things or look at their jobs in different ways?

We also need to look at this at the organizational level. What we found is that younger leaders will be really enthusiastic about coming into the nonprofit sector, and then they get there and feel like the organizations didn't want them, didn't

respect them, didn't really need them. So we have to think about how organizations welcome younger leaders and younger staffers so that we have them ready to take over the organizations when change occurs.

The last thing I'll say is that we have to really look at this sector-wide, and that one of the biggest issues in nonprofits is the executive director position. What I mean by that is that the executive director position is often seen by younger generations as a thankless, stressful, and underpaid job, rather than an exciting, creative, and innovative job. So we have to think about how that happened and how, sector-wide we can re-tool these jobs for a new generation to run these organizations.

What's the one thing that people should be taking away from this?

Helen: I think it's important to remember that change comes from both understanding what has happened and also by challenging ourselves, both individually and organizationally to go to a place that's maybe not as comfortable because you're not used to it. There is a readiness to embrace something that is not something that you've done in the past, but readiness to explore and really listen across generations and really mentor across generations. And it's not just older generations mentoring younger generations, but the change comes from the openness, the willingness to listen, the willingness to embrace things that might be a little bit different than what we've done before, but out of that comes change and the real possibilities for different kind of leadership that we really need in our sector.

Frances: We have to think about these structural changes as well. What is it about the way organizations are structured, run, funded, that makes it hard for younger leaders to come into them and to do well in them? And, it's made it hard for older leaders as well, so this is a great time to think: How can we do a better job in structuring our work and our culture, and the way groups operate so that it welcomes everybody and has room for everybody, both their ideas and their contributions?

Robby: People need to understand that change is happening and the time to address that change is now.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Frances Kunreuther (New York, NY) is the Director and Founder of the Building Movement Project—housed at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard University— which works to strengthen the role of US nonprofit organizations and focuses in part on generational change in leadership. Currently a senior fellow at the Research Center for Leadership and Action at NYU and formerly a senior fellow at the Hauser Center, she has 30 years of experience in the nonprofit sector. Kunreuther is the recipient of various awards and honors, including the Ms. Foundation’s Gloria Award, and has authored numerous articles, reports, and a recent book on social change.

Helen S. Kim (Oakland, CA) is a consultant with 18 years of experience in community organizing, fundraising, and organizational development who specializes in strategic planning, board development, executive coaching and leadership transition.

Robby Rodriguez (Albuquerque, NM) is the Executive Director of the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP), a statewide multi-racial, multi-issue, community based membership organization established in 1980. At 29, Robby was the youngest and first Gen Xer to become the Executive Director of SWOP and helped lead the organization through a significant generational leadership transition.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership offers a comprehensive look at the leadership and generational shifts in the nonprofit sector. The book presents ideas and gives practical advice on how to approach generational changes in leadership so that the contributions of long-time leaders are valued, new and younger leaders' talent is recognized, and groups are better prepared to work across generational divides.

The book includes:

- Fresh perspectives and practical advice on how to work across generational divides;
- Research findings, real-life stories, useful charts and exercises;
- Stories and case examples from across the country; and
- Recommendations on how individuals, organizations and the nonprofit sector can all play an important part in paving the way for more vibrant and expansive leadership in the nonprofit sector.

Visit www.workingacrossgenerations.org to find out more.