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The Young and the Restless

Veteran managers don't always share views of youthful workers

By [Sam Kean](#) and [Suzanne Perry](#)

Concern about a leadership void at nonprofit organizations has been mounting in recent years — especially as the baby boomers who run many charities approach traditional retirement age.

A new report released this week underscored just how challenging it will be to recruit people to run nonprofit groups in coming decades: One in three young nonprofit workers aspires to become an executive director and barely more than half definitely want to continue at a charity.

The deterrents to working at a charity are well known. Many current charity leaders work long hours for low pay. Some rarely see their families and most receive little recognition, even as they are forced to handle a wide range of duties all at once: raising money, balancing the books, serving as a liaison with their board, and handling other management issues.

Many of the 6,000 potential nonprofit leaders interviewed for the new study — conducted by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, in San Francisco; the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Baltimore; Idealist.org, a Web site for nonprofit job seekers and employers; and the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, in Washington — look at older leaders working 60-to-80-hour weeks and think, "I don't want that." Up-and-coming managers insist they can be committed without overcommitting themselves, and strive to maintain more balance between work and their social lives.

A Tug of War

But lurking behind those concerns is a deeper tug of war about how nonprofit groups should operate and how they should be managed.

Frances Kunreuther, 55, director of the Building Movement Project, a policy group in New York, and author of the forthcoming book *Working Across Generations*, says people trying to solve the leadership gap have failed in part because they are relying on a faulty "replacement theory" — the idea that groups can plug new leaders into old slots, even though the same skills might not apply.

"Younger people talk much less about a crisis in people retiring," she says. "Younger leaders think the crisis is that existing organizations are getting stale." She adds, "The nonprofit sector has been incredibly neglectful about innovating for leadership."

But some experts say the differences between young employees and older managers are much the same as those between any other generations. Says Jan Masaoka, 56, former executive director of CompassPoint, a training and consulting firm that helped produce the new study of up-and-coming nonprofit workers: "I believe Socrates and his pals were saying, This new generation of philosophers isn't cutting it."

Fiscal Frustrations

To be sure, one of the biggest stresses on nonprofit leaders has not changed from generation to generation: the pressure to raise money.

John Mark Eberhardt, 32, is executive director of the Steward's Staff, in Louisville, Ky., a group that provides mentors to young adults. He says money — and the difficulty of finding enough to support his organization — is the harshest reality of running a charity.

His group, founded last May, has an advertising budget of zero. To draw donors to a fund-raising event in January, it relied solely on e-mail "blasts" and personal connections. The event drew more than 400 people and netted \$8,000 for scholarships, Mr. Eberhardt says, but the day-to-day struggle hasn't gotten easier.

He bemoans the lack of personal income, too. Before founding the group, he ran his own insurance agency. "I was making over six figures," he says. "Now I'm not making anything. You've really got to have a heart for this stuff."

But Mr. Eberhardt and other younger people often take a different view over questions of how much responsibility young people should be given.

Years ago, as a 23-year-old law student, Nancy B. Lublin founded Dressed for Success, in New York, which provides professional attire for poor women. Now 36, her official title is "chief executive officer and chief old person" at Do Something, a youth-run group that pushes other youngsters to get involved in charities.

With more than a decade of perspective on leadership, Ms. Lublin sees a lack of encouragement as the biggest obstacle to retaining talented workers. Because the Internet allows them to broadcast their views worldwide, she says, "Young people today are really empowered, some people would say entitled," and expect some recognition. They will endure "crazy hours" for causes they believe in, but feeling undervalued or ignored kills their passion.

Ms. Kunreuther sees a similar tension between young and old. "Older people think you can give people responsibility without authority" to make decisions, which chafes younger people and hinders their performance.

Younger people also have a different idea of how to lead, says Ms. Kunreuther. Older leaders, she says, feel more comfortable with hierarchy and use management teams primarily to prevent power struggles. Younger people, she says, are "seeking out different models of running things" and actually prefer teams because teams are more efficient and save time.

Jerome Scott, 62, founded Project South, an organization in Atlanta that provides leadership training to social-justice groups, in 1986. Two years ago, he decided it was time to hand over the reins.

"The organization has really matured," he says. "I began to think, what do I want to do with the rest of my life?" Mr. Scott consulted with the group's four other staff members — three program directors and the development director, all in their late 20s or 30s.

They bounced around various possibilities for replacing Mr. Scott — such as hiring someone new or promoting someone on the staff. In the end, they decided that the four younger directors would make up a new "executive leadership team" and run the organization as a collective.

"They thought being presented as co-equals, acting together as co-equals, would lay the basis for strong leadership," says Mr. Scott. He endorses the decision, but says it's an idea that would not have crossed his mind when he was their age. "At age 30, I wouldn't have even thought about having a collective. That wasn't a word that was in our vocabulary."

Up-and-coming managers need to develop their own leadership styles and not necessarily look to baby boomers for wisdom, which might be outdated, says Ron McKinley, 59, program director at Fieldstone Alliance, in St. Paul, a publishing and consulting nonprofit group. "It's not a matter of my figuring out how to prepare them to be better leaders," he says. "It's how do I recognize the stuff that I had that isn't necessarily valuable anymore on a day-to-day basis, and move that out of the way so they can take their natural position."

While many baby boomers created their own organizations, young people today rarely found charities, so they're more attached to broad causes, like saving the environment or ending poverty, than to specific groups, says Steven Bauer, a program director at American Humanics, in Kansas City, Mo., a group that recruits and trains college students for nonprofit management careers.

As a result, young people change jobs often. Says Mr. Bauer, "The career path for someone in the nonprofit sector doesn't go A-B-C. It goes A-F-Z-P." This is especially true because some groups, he says, including many small groups where nonprofit workers start, lack middle-management steps to help them advance.

Indeed, comingled with younger leaders' idealism is a focus on career building.

They attend and organize leadership workshops and conferences that didn't exist for the older generation. But the lack of a pathway for advancement in most organizations still upsets them, says Trish Tchume, a director of training at Idealist.org, in New York, and a national board member for the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, an organization started in 1997 that now has 10,000 members in two dozen cities around the country. "They don't know what the next step is for them," she says. "The frustration is in the lack of a system."

That frustration sometimes comes off as impatience. Many budding leaders earned nonprofit-management degrees or ran groups at their colleges with dozens, even hundreds, of members. They expect they can do heavy lifting from their first day, even if they lack professional work experience.

The belief that they are prepared is what makes many young people skeptical that there will be a leadership gap at nonprofit groups in coming decades. Stephanie Larsen, 29, acting policy director for the Washington lobbying arm of Community Food Security Coalition, a charity in Venice, Calif., remembers reading about older leaders' fears and growing immediately upset.

The solution, she says, "seems so *obvious* to me. People my age are dying for opportunities to take leadership, yet we're not entrusted with responsibility, and we almost have to wrestle it away."

Age Discrimination

Plenty of young leaders say they have faced other types of discouragement, often being told they are "too young" to have responsibility. Ms. Lublin says one grant maker baldly told her she would get more money if she chopped off her girlish ponytail. Other young leaders tell stories of being ignored at meetings, stared at, or asked repeatedly about their ages while they interviewed people for jobs.

Ms. Larsen says not being taken seriously because of her age galls her — especially because a lack of respect for youths is less common in other arenas.

"I wasn't prepared for the way that young people are discounted," she says. "I'm on Capitol Hill a lot, and I don't see it there."

Tired of waiting for her bosses' permission to do things that interested her — and to make sure she doesn't perpetuate the practice of discounting younger people — Ms. Larsen started an internship program that she runs on top of her regular duties. She now serves as a mentor to colleagues just years younger than she is.

But some veteran nonprofit leaders say their younger colleagues should resist blaming their difficulties entirely on intergenerational conflict. In some cases, they need to look in the mirror, says Ms. Masaoka, editor of *Blue Avocado*, a forthcoming online magazine for nonprofit employees.

She says a young woman who was having trouble getting promoted at a foundation once asked her for advice.

"You act like a flighty young girl," Ms. Masaoka told her, adding that her skirts were too short for a foundation environment. She said the woman appreciated her bluntness, saying, "This is the kind of thing my supervisor would never tell me."

Uncertain Futures

One obstacle in creating leadership positions for young people is that some veteran leaders hesitate to step down because they are not sure what they would do next — or worry they can't afford to leave. (See article above.)

Just as many younger employees lack a clear career map, so do many of the baby-boomer leaders they hope to replace.

"Too many of us have gotten to the point where we haven't explored in our minds even what the next option is for us — how do I live the next 25 years?" says Mr. McKinley, of Fieldstone Alliance, who says he plans to retire from his current post four years from now, but intends to remain active. "It won't be the retirement my mother had," he says.

In a study conducted in 2006 by CompassPoint and the Meyer foundation, "Daring to Lead," 75 percent of executive directors surveyed said they planned to leave their jobs within the next five years — but most said they intended to seek another job related to nonprofit work. That leads Ms. Masaoka, who was executive director of CompassPoint at that time, to declare there is no nonprofit "leadership crisis."

"[Executive directors] are leaving jobs, but they're going to stay in the sector and there's all these streams of new people coming into the sector," says Ms. Masaoka, who wrote a report on departing executive directors last fall for Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. She urges nonprofit groups to consider letting former nonprofit heads play new roles, citing a former United Way president who headed a capital campaign for another organization at age 78.

Mr. Scott, the leader who turned over the reins of Project South to his four colleagues, knew it would be hard to give up his "baby," so he started planning two years in advance. "Starting early was the best thing we could have done," he says. "It gives the founder the chance to really think through what's happening and to really get comfortable with it."

Experience and Advice

Despite obstacles, many young leaders navigate to the tops of their organizations, and they have advice for how others can emulate their success.

Unlike many young leaders, Sara P. Jaffe, 32, gradually accrued responsibility in her position as director of development at Signature Theatre, in Arlington, Va. She already was in charge of raising money when the theater's managing director retired in October. But after her six years at the theater, its board felt comfortable putting her in charge of patron services and the box office as well.

Ms. Jaffe says her age is an advantage since she manages very young workers right out of college, and argues that a younger manager like herself is best equipped to handle them. For example, she loosened the daily office

schedule and freed staff members from working 9-to-5 — but laid down the law about professionalism when meeting with patrons.

Nevertheless, despite success stories, many young people still feel discounted because of their age. And while they may not appreciate it, many realize it's only natural.

"A lot of young people *are* very green," says Regina Dull, 28, executive director of International Student Conferences, in Washington, which operates cultural-exchange programs. "The natural thing to do is assume they're inexperienced. It's the same way you might stereotype anyone."

In fact, Ms. Dull, also a board member at the Washinton branch of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, doubted even herself when she applied for her current job three years ago.

"I looked at the job posting, and I checked off each of the requirements," she says, including fund raising and personnel management. "But then I looked back at the top and said, 'Executive director! Wait a minute. Am I ready?'"

She even called the human-resources department and admitted, "I've got to tell you the truth. I'm under 30. Are you going to give me a shot?"

They did, with a catch. Though she runs the organization, Ms. Dull still has a boss, an older leader who works part-time as president.

From her experience and conversations with young nonprofit leaders, Ms. Dull says that the older and younger generation must work together to bridge any leadership gap — or defuse any looming leadership crisis.

"I have confidence that the next generation is going to do an excellent job," she says. "The difficult part is going to be gaining trust. And we need to do it in a way that recognizes all the work that's been done before us."