

## **Multi-Generational Governance: Is There Such a Thing?**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the potential effects of a generational transition in leadership positions on the governance of nonprofit organizations. We view this generational transition as one among many contingencies that can affect governance; as such, we ask the question whether a generational shift in leadership is a fundamentally different kind of contingency and if so, what challenges and opportunities for governance functions and systems does it present?

From a brief literature review, we are left with more questions than answers. Research on the effects of an individual's age on governance suggests that age per se may not be as strong a factor as other variables that may be associated with age, including socio-economic status, organizational seniority and professionalization (although, professionalization may have more important generational correlates than age). To the extent that age or age-related factors are important to governance, they seem to influence the board-CEO relationship more than board activity, but there is little research in this latter area from which to draw conclusions. Research on generational differences of relevance to organizational life is also scant but suggests that one should be cautious in attributing wide scale significance to generational differences in the work place. More promising may be work that focuses on how different generations have experienced the technological revolution. This "event" may rise to the level suggested by Mannheim as critical in shaping generational consciousness. As such, these differences in experience with technology and technological change may impact organizational life.

To explore these issues, we interviewed five matched pairs of board chairs and executives from different generations. In general we found few differences among respondents concerning governance roles and responsibilities and underlying values. However, attitudes toward technology and how technology affected the work of the board, working styles of both board chairs and executives, and interpersonal relationships emerged as important generational differences.

These very tentative and exploratory findings suggest the following implications for board governance:

- More operationally-focused issues concerning board communications;
- More fundamental differences regarding boundary-spanning functions and how external relationships are formed, developed, and sustained; and,
- Possible differences over organizational strategy driven by the influence of technology and different “ways of knowing.”