

Fresh Voices: Recruiting the Next Generation of Board Leaders



Make room for younger board members and reap the benefits for your chorus

BY DAVID STYERS

The only demographic imperative that doesn't change is that every year, everyone gets one year older. This is why choruses are always looking for the next generation of singers to replace retiring or departing singers and to add fresh, new voices. But how many choruses think in the same way about their governance boards?

A critical challenge confronting the nonprofit sector is future leadership at the staff and especially at the board level. As renowned business management expert Jim Collins explains, it's about getting "the right people on the bus."

In any given year, there is a need for nearly 26 million board members to serve in approximately 1.6 million nonprofit organizations. According to BoardSource's *Nonprofit Governance Index 2007*, the average board size is 16 (for choruses, the average board size is 12). With 39 percent of board members between the ages of 30–49 and only 2 percent under age 30, that leaves nearly 60 percent 50 years or older.

Now that nearly 77 million Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) are nearing retirement age, we are entering a period of transition and opportunity both for Baby Boomers and the 100-plus million Generation Xers and Yers (born in 1965 or after) that follow. Leaders in the nonprofit sector recognize the significance of this

transition, but are challenged in addressing the impact and opportunities at the board level.

More and more, organizations are realizing that to be successful and recruit and retain the best leaders, they must value the unique talents and voices of their young professionals. The same is true of boards.

Benefits to Boards

All board members need both wisdom and good judgment to be successful, and civically-minded young professionals can be vital partners in building effective boards and fostering new conversations around the boardroom table. What they can offer:

Passion for the mission—youthful enthusiasm and energy can be great motivators for becoming highly engaged board members and can serve as an inspiration to other board members

New thinking—diverse viewpoints and distinct perspectives on the needs and opportunities related to your mission can lead to increased innovation

Access to new audiences and donors—social networking and technological know-how on new ways to define and carry out your mission can help connect your organization to new and more diverse friends and funders

Even with these benefits, you may face resistance in reaching out to younger board members for your chorus. Concerns about a lack of fundraising experience and contacts, skepticism about their capacity to contribute skills or knowledge that the board does not already have, absence of national examples of why it matters, and uncertainty of where to find new recruits outside of the board's current network of contacts—all pose challenges.

What's In It for Young People?

Young people are demonstrating greater interest in serving on chorus boards for several reasons:

- It is their future: Their ability to sing and hear live choral performances is at stake
- They want to make a difference
- It is rewarding, fun, and inspiring

Board service is a powerful way young people can give of their time, treasure, and talent to causes they are passionate about—such as offering audiences superb choral performances. They are volunteering, giving and raising money, leading organizations, and serving on the boards of nonprofit organizations to great personal satisfaction. With its responsibilities of teamwork, commitment, and attention, board service offers its own set of benefits and rewards.

Everyone has his or her own personal reasons for getting involved with choruses, not all of which have to be selfless and altruistic. Many people born since 1964 have very specific ►

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reasons why they want to join a nonprofit board—reasons that may differ from those given by older board members. It is perfectly acceptable, for example, for Gen Xers and Yers to seek out experiences that will benefit themselves as well as the choruses they serve. Boards that understand and can accept these different motivations will be more effective in recruiting young people. The key is to have clear expectations and a willingness to be flexible and adaptable as needed.

Attracting and cultivating younger members requires new approaches and

messages about the value of board service and the personal and professional growth that is possible from a commitment such as this. When exploring options for meaningful board service, members of Gen X and Y are looking for connection to community, professional development, and the social networking that results from board and committee work.

The Three Cs of Community:

Connection, Change, and Commitment:

First and foremost, a connection to the local community allows each one of us to feel part of our environment and to build

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relationships with the diversity of people who live there. Board service also allows young people to have an impact at a new, more strategic level. Many members of Gen X and Y have grown up knowing the value of community service from their participation in service projects sponsored, and sometimes required, by their schools and churches. Many of them view board service as a way to drive change and improve their communities, an attitude that is characteristic of Baby Boomers.

The kinds of decisions that are made in boardrooms give Gen Xers and Yers the opportunity to see the forest through the trees. It's one thing to sing in a chorus with all its musical rewards, but to participate in formulating the group's mission and building the plan that will bring the mission to life is what offers an exciting new set of challenges and rewards. Being part of the leadership team that makes the bigger strategy and policy decisions opens the door to a new level of commitment and benefit.

Professional Development: Young people want opportunities for skill-building and career enhancement. Many members of Gen X and Y work in offices where most of the senior team members are Baby Boomers. This means that they serve as very capable and competent staff members who often do not have decisionmaking authority. Boards operate on the one-person, one-vote principle. So, young people see boardrooms as a venue for greater involvement in decisionmaking processes. Board service helps round out their resumes and can provide a higher level of meaning to extracurricular activities.

Choral organizations have much to give back to those who get involved with them, and especially to young people who want to serve on a board and deepen their special relationship to the music. Board service helps round out a young professional's resume. Extracurricular activities take on a whole new meaning.

Social Networking: Board service allows young people to widen their social network, ►

READING AND RESOURCES ABOUT NEXT GENERATION ISSUES

- **Youth on Board** envisions a world where young people are fully respected and treated as valued and active members of their families, communities, and society. The organization provides support and information for young people who are interested in serving on nonprofit boards, including legal issues, participation in effective decisionmaking, and communication with older generations. www.youthonboard.org
- **Youth Grantmakers** is an exemplary program that got young people organized and involved in grantmaking in Michigan communities. Youth Advisory Committees affiliated with community foundations teach young people responsible grantmaking and empower them to address local youth issues. www.youthgrantmakers.org/
- **"Ready to Lead? Next Generation Leaders Speak Out,"** Maria Cornelius, Patrick Corvington, et al (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2008). This research outlines the aspirations of the next generation to take the helm at leading nonprofit organizations but it also identifies the barriers that dampen this generation's enthusiasm.
- **"The Changing of the Guard: What Generational Differences Tell Us About Social Change Organizations,"** Francis Kunreuther (*Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, September, 2003)
- **"Generation Y: The Millennials: Ready or Not, Here They Come"** (National Arts Strategies, 2006). www.nasrecruitment.com/talentslips/NASinsights/GenerationY.pdf
- **"The New Boss: Younger than the Old Boss,"** Mark Hogan (www.BusinessWeek.com, December 18, 2006)
- ***Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership,*** Rick Moyers, Timothy Wolfred, et al. (San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2001)
- **"A New Generation Reinvents Philanthropy,"** Rachel Emma Silverman (*The Wall Street Journal*. August 21, 2007)
- **"The Next Generation: Today's Professionals, Tomorrow's Leaders"** (New York: *Catalyst*, 2001)
- **"14 Points: Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making"** (Somerville: Youth on Board, 2005)
- **"Crunch Predicted in the Nonprofit Sector,"** Phillip Rucker (Washington, DC: *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2008)
- **"Fresh Faces on Board,"** Eman Quotah (*Chronicle on Philanthropy*, June 12, 2008)
- **"Workforce Issues in the Nonprofit Sector: Generational Leadership Change and Diversity,"** Patrick Halpern (Kansas City, MO: *American Humanics*, 2006)

Board service allows young people to widen their social network, build relationships with people outside their profession, and meet community leaders.

build relationships with people outside their profession, and meet community leaders. They can mix up their circles of acquaintances with more variety in age, perspective, and profession. Networking used to be all about business dinners, golf outings, and belonging to clubs (from the country club to the Rotary). Even though Rolodexes are giving way to social networking via the Internet, there is still networking potential in and around the boardroom. However, young people often wonder if they have the right connections to be invited to serve on a board and fear that, once there, they won't be taken seriously.

Making a Difference

There has never been a better time to engage a new generation in the vital work that choruses are doing in communities across the country. Today's young people are looking for a variety of ways to step up and become involved with this work. When members of Gen X and Y serve on nonprofit boards, everyone—the organization, the young board members, and the community—benefits. When chorus boards seek and are open to innovative forms of engagement and new ways of doing business, all generations find personal fulfillment.

Ultimately, young people need to feel that they can make a difference to a chorus and the community it serves. Engaging them as board members with their energy, new ideas, and fresh perspectives may be just what your board needs to revitalize your chorus, advancing the cause of choral musicmaking nationwide. ■

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