

The Four Gene



By Peter C. Brinckerhoff

Generation change, intergenerational conflict, whatever you call it, our society is confronted with different generations that often have a failure to communicate. For PTAs, an older generation may be leading a PTA while a younger generation constitutes the majority of the parents, or newly minted teachers may be dealing with older parents, particularly in middle school and high school. In this article, we'll look at the four main generations that are involved with PTA, discuss what does and doesn't motivate each group, and explore how to use this information in your PTA's long-term strategy for growth and improvement.

Our oldest generation is the **Silent Generation**, born between 1925 and 1945. The 30 million members of this generation are motivated not only by tradition, but also by issues that touch them personally. Thus, if their close friends or family members—particularly grandchildren—have been or are being personally affected by public education, you are more likely to be able to interest them. To discover if they have a connection to education and PTA's mission might require a bit more probing on your part, but it can really pay off. The youngest Silent Generation members have just turned 65, and a high percentage of them volunteer.

Baby Boomers are next, born between 1946 and 1962. I'm a Boomer, along with my 80 million generational peers, and we all remember that we "saved the world" in the 1960s and 1970s and want to do it again. That may sound silly, but not to Boomers, who are leaving private industry, government, and the military in unprecedented numbers to begin second careers in both public education and nonprofits. Why? Because, in the words of hundreds

of Boomers I've talked with about this transition, "I want to save the world...again." Use those words if you want Boomers to help you with your mission. And, trust me, you do: this is still the largest generation in American history. We are on the cusp of...retirement? No, of our second (or third or fourth) career.

We turn next to **GenX**—45 million adults who were born between 1963 and 1980. These individuals are hard-working, independent, and, by the way, more than ready for the Boomers to move aside. GenXers are very concerned with work-life balance, which is often at the heart of most intergenerational conflicts; many GenXers work too closely with work-is-life Boomers to get that balance.

Finally, we come to the generation that has never known a nondigital world. They are often called GenY or Millennials, but I call them **Gen@**. Nearly as large in number (75 million) as the Baby Boomers who are their parents, Gen@ers were born between 1981 and 2002 and are probably texting as you read this. The oldest are well out of college and in the work force, including working as teachers in your school. Many also are parents, and certainly show up in your PTA's membership.

This generation is fully networked in ways that older generations simply cannot comprehend. Remember, unlike all the previous generations, these young people do not remember not being connected computers. I've heard Gen@ers describe themselves not just as individuals but as "nodes on a network." In other words, when you get Gen@ers, you also get their network. They date, play, work, decide, volunteer, and donate in groups, though they want their individual opinions heard.

rations of PTA



Meet members where they are culturally

So, what do generational differences mean for your PTA? Each generation is truly a different culture, and you must appeal to them in different ways if you want your PTA to be a success.

For example, let's say you are a Boomer PTA president and you have a pair of 28-year-old (Gen@) parents in your school you want to join your unit. You get their phone number from a sign-in sheet they filled out at your back-to-school event, call, and leave a message and your home number. No luck, no return call. You repeat the process twice and still no answer. Finally, you come across the mom in the hall at school and introduce yourself. With a bit of frustration in your voice, you note that you had left repeated messages and didn't get a reply. She looks at you and says, a little resentfully, "I texted you back, but it didn't go through." Your home phone, a landline, can't accept text messages. And now you're both a bit put off. Not a good way to start.

Another example is of a 25-year-old father who comes to his first PTA meeting and is very vocal with his ideas on how to improve the school. He asks many questions and raises his hand many times to contribute. Afterward, he comes up and asks you to e-mail him the PTA budget, a set of minutes from past meetings, and contact information for all the members. He complains that this information is not on the PTA website, which he actually can't find. Your (hopefully unvoiced) opinion is that he should sit down, listen for a few months, and not be so demanding for information.

Sound familiar? Let's look at the second example first. Why is it that 25 year olds are so impatient? Why do they need to be part of every group? Why do they want to text everyone every 3.5 minutes? It's because of the way Boomers taught them.

If you are a Boomer, you were told to "cover your paper" whenever you took a test in school. If you or your kids went to school after 1980, large parts of learning offered by Boomer teachers, including tests, projects, and papers, happened in collaborative groups. Students were told to speak up, learned the value of differentiated skills within the group, and made group decisions. Gen@ers and GenXers were told the world worked in groups, and that all information was available all the time. Sharing was good, and technology such as Facebook, Twitter, and texting allows them to be with their groups 24/7/365.

If a 30-year-old parent tells a peer-age couple that he or she just attended a great PTA meeting and that they ought to check PTA out, where will they go? That's right, online—ALWAYS. If the information they need—all of it—is not on the PTA website, will they call or look for a brochure? No—NEVER. In fact, calling is the third most used communication feature of most smart phones after texting and Facebook. So, if you want younger members, you have to go where they are technologically.

On the other hand, if the person is a Boomer or a Silent Generation member, they'll probably call the school or a PTA officer first; in that case, whoever answers the phone had better have all the information at their fingertips.

How to respond in generation-specific ways

There are several actions you should take to meet the generational challenges:

Get to know the generational make-up of your PTA and your school community and the differences in each generation's perspectives. While most of your parent representatives are certainly Gen@ and GenX, you may well have Boomer and Silent Generation grandparents in your school community. Devise culturally appropriate ways to find out: for example, an online Zoomerang survey for Gen@ers, GenXers, and younger Boomers and phone or mail surveys for older Boomers and Silent Generation members.

Make sure you are communicating in the way(s) that meet the wants and needs of different generations. Your newsletter may need to be going out on paper and electronically. Meeting reminders should be texted, e-mailed, sent through Twitter, posted on Facebook and the PTA website—remember Gen@ers or GenXers want information on demand on multiple platforms—and sent to older members through snail mail. General and committee meetings could happen in person, via conference calls, through video conferencing platforms like Skype (skype.com/intl/en-us/home), GoToMeeting.com, Live Meeting (<http://tinyurl.com/23azzsw>), or FaceTime (facetime.com).

Understand that generational differences present great opportunities. Remember, Gen@ers are a package deal: they come with their friends, not just by themselves. You can swell your membership by appealing to their network. Boomers bring not only their wisdom from experience, but also a passion to make a difference. The mainly retired Silent Generation members have both the time and inclination to volunteer, and GenXers include parents, teachers, and school administrators among their numbers.

The generational differences pose challenges and present opportunities. Your job is to use all the resources at your command to make your school more successful. When you understand and meet the needs and wants of each generation in your PTA, you will find that all of your members will be engaged in accomplishing your mission. **OC**

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