

Magic In Our Generations

As you know and probably will hear many times during our convention, P.E.O. is now 150 years old. How is it that an organization founded in 1869, by seven young women at a small college in Iowa, can function and thrive for 150 years.

Maybe the larger question is, “What can we all do to ensure that we continue for another 150 years?”

Remember, we are a sisterhood, not a club. This is one of our strongest attributes, but possibly an even more important attribute is that we are and always have been a multigenerational organization.

Today I would like to discuss several of the important issues about being in and maintaining a multigenerational organization.

If we truly believe the multigenerational aspect of our Sisterhood is valuable and needs to be preserved, we need to start developing and planning a strategy to address what we can do to bridge the generation gaps that exist among our members. It is my hope that today we can earnestly start that conversation.

Over the years there have been many negative comments about our younger generations.

Let's see if you recognize either of these quotes.

“The children now love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority, show disrespect for elders . . . They no longer rise when elders enter. They contradict their parents, and tyrannize their teachers.”

Here is another:

“I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today. . . all youth are reckless beyond words . . . When I was young we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and without restraint.”

OK, I'll be honest. I've heard those types of comments for years about my generation. What I find interesting is the first quote was from Socrates in 399 BC and the second one is from Hesiod from the 8th Century. It appears to me that there has always been criticism of a younger generation. Can you imagine what was being said during the rebellious 60s and 70s about the younger generation? I'm not going to quote anyone from those decades!

Now, let me describe someone to you. She has a strong desire to share her unique gifts with others and to have a positive impact on others. Very collaborative and values everyone's point of view. Willing to be mentored by a leader. Open to new ideas. Extreme value on efficiency -- values others' time. A hunger for learning. Ambitious. Confident. Conscientious. Educated. Motivated. Idealistic. Open-minded. Passionate. Polite. Problem solver. Trailblazer. Loves to have fun.

Who does this person sound like to you? It sounds like a P.E.O. to me; it could be any of you. I think they could even be describing our seven Founders. But guess what? . . .

It is a description of our youngest generation. These characteristics were provided by their employers when asked in surveys what their most positive characteristics were.

Let's look at each of our generations and see what we can do to reconcile our differences and help our Sisterhood thrive.

There are four different generations currently eligible for P.E.O. membership: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials.

If you were born between 1922 and 1945, please stand, raise your hand and look around. You are Traditionalists. If my mother were here today, she would be raising her hand. Thank you, you may be seated.

If you were born between 1946 and 1965, please stand, raise your hand and look around. Obviously this is my group. We are Baby Boomers. Thank you, you may be seated.

If you were born between 1966 and 1980, please stand, raise your hand and look around. You are Generation Xers. This is the only group I don't have a genetic link to. Thank you, you may be seated.

Lastly, and this is my daughter's group, if you were born between 1981 and 2010, please stand, raise your hand and look around. You are Millennials. Thank you, you may be seated.

As a general rule, each generation shares values and world viewpoints based on a shared common history and culture from their formative and early adult years. When a new generation comes along, those values and viewpoints change because history and culture change. Common history and culture shape each generation's vision of what the Sisterhood is and what it should be.

History indicates that chapters with three or more of these generations attending meetings thrive and are more likely not to disband. In other words, all chapters need to be welcoming, embracing and accommodating to the younger generations. Even chapters with large membership numbers are at risk when their membership is not multigenerational.

As we work toward finding solutions to help harmonize the needs of each generation within our Sisterhood, let's briefly discuss the differences that exist among the four generations.

For the purpose of today's discussion, I have attached a name to each generation. We have P.E.O. sisters Trudy Traditional, Betty Boomer, Genny Xer and Molly Millennial.

Trudy Traditional's exposure to unimaginable poverty during the Great Depression and her participation in the group war effort during

World War II gave her a sense of duty and camaraderie. She trusts rules, tradition, discipline, work, conformity, stability and formality. She will sacrifice her personal needs for the group. Trudy is civic minded. She trusts organizational structures, leadership based on hierarchy and values authority.

Betty Boomer was born after the war. Free from financial fears during her upbringing, she had the freedom to consider her personal dreams rather than her survival needs. Due to exposure to widespread economic prosperity, she is idealistic, believes in equality, has a driven work ethic, is team orientated, highly values personal and social expression, personal fulfillment, personal gratification and emotional and physical health. Betty values leadership based on consensus, not hierarchy. She is both tolerant of and distrustful of organizational government and authority.

Genny Xer grew up in a consumer culture and watched her parents work long hours to pay off a house and provide for the family. She often was a latchkey kid and is self-reliant. The economy changed as she entered adulthood and the world did not present her with what she initially expected, so she is skeptical in her outlook. Genny strives for a balanced work/family life and she loves working outside the home, values free agency, diversity and has a global mindset. Genny is cynical of organizational structure because companies stopped being loyal to employees. This is the first generation that did not get a private pension or a career with only one major lifetime employer. She prefers leadership based on competence and is unimpressed with authority. Genny has no problem tackling challenging and difficult tasks where innovation and

creativity are required because she is at ease with questioning and challenging the status quo and authority. Genny takes risks and engages in things that are relevant.

As a side note, consider this. Due to the fact that this generation is so work/family balanced and skeptical of organizational structure they are not joiners en masse of ANY organization . . . yet.

Molly Millennial grew up in an era of relative prosperity, so she is optimistic, but her outlook is changing because of the housing market and the burden of student loans. She has energy and a global mindset. Molly values diversity, achievement and fun. She is self-confident. She and her peers are the most civic-minded generation since the Traditionalists. Did you hear what I said? Molly and her peers are the most civic-minded generation since the Traditionalists. She will join an organization if it values diversity and is doing the right things. She is already surrounded by and lives diversity in her personal life, so she doesn't look for it, BUT, she sees it when it is not there. Molly values achievement in leaders and is respectful of authority.

In a thriving multi generation organization, treating others as we wish to be treated doesn't always work. This is because each generation may wish to be treated differently. Being understanding and tolerant of these differing needs is crucial to being a good sister and the future of our Sisterhood.

Let's look at how members of each generation demonstrate core value needs in their preferred choice of P.E.O. Socials and Fundraising.

Trudy Traditional's social involves china, silver, dressing for the occasion and a level of formality. The formality and attention to detail are an unspoken sign of respect to those present and the significance of the group purpose. Love is in the symbolic details for Trudy and her generation.

Traditionalists, our most senior members, truly are interested in passing on their traditions and protocol to the younger generations. They hope that the younger generation will carry them on. Unfortunately, sometimes when this does not happen they conclude they are not valued.

So, how does the current Traditional generation participate in fundraising? They prefer to write a check or maybe raise the chapter's dues to cover the money given to our projects.

Betty Boomer's social is less formal in its focus on dress and the need for it to be an indoor sit-down meal. Less formality, flexibility of locations and greater ease are Boomer signs of respect and honor to those present.

The Baby Boomer fundraisers take a lot of work. I feel comfortable saying this about Boomer fundraising because I'm a part of this group. Think about the annual auction so many of our chapters have. We run all over town getting baskets and crafting supplies. We work together and make items to sell or we bake that special item. For us to buy from each other! Then, after the fundraiser we are exhausted and the items many times are sold for less than it cost to make.

Genny Xer's social says let the restaurant do the work! Informality gives them a chance to relax after their time balancing kids and work. Spirits in moderation are not a bad thing. Sometimes, it helps with equipoise and symmetry of character. Other types of socials they prefer include the family.

Generation X's fundraisers usually include their BILs because they are part of the family and very important in their social gatherings.

Molly Millennial prefers socials that are fun and informal and they like to organize them on their devices. The lack of formality and informal dress is a sign of respect. It honors the value of efficiency and respects time. It also costs less and money can be an issue right now for this generation.

Millennials' value on efficiency can be seen in the way in which they prefer to fundraise. They prefer fundraising that involves ease, doesn't use the Earth's dwindling resources and doesn't require a lot of paperwork. Information is shared on their devices. What better way to fundraise than to have a restaurant give you a percent of their proceeds when a customer brings in an advertisement?

I've talked about how each of these generations looks at socials and fundraising. Are you seeing how, if all of the generations in a chapter will work together, P.E.O. life could be very interesting and fruitful?

Have a High Tea, using a member's china.

Invite BILs and go tour a local historic attraction or local brewery.

Have a family picnic.

Meet your sisters at the local coffee shop just to reconnect and stay in touch.

Today I've addressed differences in our generations. Let's talk about our similarities. All of our generations support the philanthropic aspect of P.E.O. Our millennials truly believe that service to others is a good thing. Who taught them these values? The Traditionalists, the Baby Boomers, the Gen Xers.

I have a few statements that our sisters made when asked, "What do you think is important about being part of a multigenerational chapter?"

Whitney, a millennial, stated that what she enjoys about being in a multigenerational chapter is the life experiences she is sharing with women of other generations. She loves learning from each other and doing life together.

Barbara, a Gen Xer, enjoys the fact that her sisters understand that right now in her life she can't be as active as she was when the kids were smaller. She is accepted and welcomed when she can make it to a meeting.

Katherine, a Baby Boomer, was thrilled the younger generation helps her with technology! Yoli, also a Boomer, and a new initiate, said you see different ideas. The generations can be so different: different beliefs, different ways of doing things. Being able to mix all the ideas together is beneficial to a healthy chapter. It makes the group inclusive.

And Jane, a Traditionalist, said that being in a chapter with several generations helps her feel young and vibrant. I'm encouraged that P.E.O. will continue.

Then we have Becky, who is a Baby Boomer, and I quote "P.E.O. is multigenerational? I thought we were all just women brought together for a common goal. Our focus is a positive perspective for personal development and attaining knowledge. We are often challenged to think independently. We are growing in understanding and tolerance. We are ageless."

When all of the generations in a chapter work together, with whatever talents they possess, they will have a stronger chapter. It is important for us as we work to bridge the generation gap in P.E.O. that we value each generation and what they have given or are giving to our Sisterhood. It is important for our chapters to continually check themselves to make sure they are fostering an attitude of acceptance and tolerance to the ideas and beliefs of all generations.

We don't have all the answers to challenges in our chapters, but we do know that the answer has to start with the values that each generation shares and agrees with: Our star and a loving concern for each sister..