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## SOCIAL CHANGE AND A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH IN THE NONPROFIT COMMUNITY

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### INTRODUCTION

WHEN I SAW THE CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THIS SPECIAL EDITION “YOUNG PEOPLE and the Future of Philanthropy,” I jumped at the opportunity to contribute to this important dialogue. As a worker, employer, and volunteer in the nonprofit sector, I am acutely aware that young people have many choices about how to direct their energies, not only as paid workers, but also as caring citizens that donate ideas, time and money to social causes.

I don't qualify as a member of the youth population. But as the 44-year-old co-founder, co-leader and director of communications for Canadian charitable organization LiveWorkPlay, I'm not at all displeased to say that I am the oldest of our staff team of 12 (average age 32). For our volunteer team of 130, the age range is wider (including volunteers over 70), but the average is once again 30-35 years of age. Looking at recent social media analytics, the most likely age for one of our Facebook fans is 34.<sup>1</sup>

When Julie Kingstone and I founded the organization back in 1995, we were only in our mid-20s ourselves, so it's not surprising that our initial organizational culture was attractive to young people. However, as the agency has grown in scope, revenues, and accountability (and I've acquired grey hair), building on that original youthful orientation has required careful consideration, a great deal of reflection, and perhaps most importantly, remembering that the organization was created to contribute to changing our community and the world, not to arrive at a place of rest.

I wish to emphasize that it is not out of some special affinity for young people that we are able to attract them to our agency. I believe it is because of our focus on creating social change, which demands the type of processes and focus that many younger people find attractive.

#### **Social change: a matter of context**

LiveWorkPlay operates in Ottawa (Ontario, Canada) and, at first glance, it would seem we are just one of about 20 charities that provide supports and services to people with intellectual disabilities. How we differ from most of those agencies (and why our existence is not redundant) is that our goal is not to provide disability services but rather to work with others to reduce and ultimately eradicate the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

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The supports, services, and other activities we provide and facilitate are a means to that end goal of an inclusive society; we do not exist merely to provide social services. I use this distinction frequently in evaluating whether or not a particular organization is *means-focused* or *ends-focused*. I tend to use the labels “traditional social services” and “social change agency” to distinguish the two.

What being a social change agency means to me is that the end game is not about operations. Instead, our operations are focused on achieving particular changes in the community, and we measure our progress by change-related outcomes. We understand that funder, legislative, and other external factors can interfere with a social change process. Working with and around those barriers is an accepted part of the struggle. I call this making the transition from *program thinking* to *social change thinking*.<sup>3</sup>

My purpose here is not to represent myself as an expert on what some have dubbed “next generation organizations.” For that, I’ll refer readers to the very practical publication *Next Generation Organizations: 9 Key Traits* (2011). There I believe you’ll find alignment with the tips I am about to share about my own grassroots experience about how nonprofit organizations can welcome, value, and benefit from the contributions of young people.

One last caveat before I proceed: the forthcoming “do and don’t” list is not age-specific by any means. There are people of all ages who are attracted to organizations with next generation characteristics, just as there are young people who would prefer a more traditional experience. That being said, if you are interested in developing a youth-friendly nonprofit organization, I believe you will find these suggestions both effective and practical.

### **A learning opportunity**

Let me start by saying that the best way to find out what young people do and do not like about your organization is to *ask them*. When we do this (and we do it continuously at LiveWorkPlay), we not only gather important information about our own organization, but we also often receive unsolicited feedback about practices at other organizations that young people find discouraging. That feedback, collected formally and informally over the past two decades, shapes my comments below.

### **Social media**

If you want young people to quickly dismiss your organization as a choice for working, volunteering, or donating, make sure your online presence is nothing more than a static website and that you are not actively utilizing any social media channels.

I have been told by countless respondents (mostly in the 15-30 age range) that authentic use of social media is of fundamental importance to them. It is now a matter of routine for people of all ages to search out prospective employers, volunteer opportunities, or donation options online, but beyond a mere presence, young people are looking for indications that social media is an organic aspect of your organization’s internal and external communications and culture.<sup>4</sup>

Concerned that nonprofit organizations were moving slowly to embrace social media, I accepted a number of invites throughout 2010-2011 to offer keynotes and workshops

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on this topic. While most attendees were fully preoccupied with technical issues and questions, I learned a very uncomfortable truth: the real barriers had little to do with technology and more to do with unbending organizational cultures and highly insular approaches to communication.

A traditional organization can establish a Twitter account, Facebook page, and YouTube channel in a matter of minutes, but young people (sometimes known as “native digitals”) can diagnose in a matter of seconds whether or not an organization’s social media communications are at the core of real mission-oriented efforts. A classic social media failure occurs when a prospective volunteer, donor, or employee poses a question that vanishes into the internet ether of an agency’s multiple unmonitored accounts, sitting on a Facebook page or Twitter feed like a digital museum piece.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, social media can also appear active without being genuine. There is nothing “social” about taking a static communications model (like issuing press releases) and continuing that through social media channels. It is common to see charity social media accounts that are used exclusively to send out links to traditional marketing and communications materials. If you have this problem and you want to fix it, start reading Beth Kanter’s blog ([bethkanter.org](http://bethkanter.org)) or her book with co-author Allison Fine, *The Networked Nonprofit* (2010).

While broadcasting via social media channels may have some value to an organization and may give the appearance of activity, it offers little to a young person who is looking to have a conversation about or get engaged in issues of concern. Instead, it’s an indication that an organization has a one-way perspective on communication: it is about sending, not receiving.

At LiveWorkPlay, engagement with social media is from top to bottom, and we cherish interactions from those who reach out to us. Social media is not a “task” assigned to a summer student; it is at the heart of our organizational culture. I am committed to leading by example, with 4700 Facebook friends and 5000 Twitter followers, and my individual profile is in the top 1% of views for all of LinkedIn.<sup>6</sup>

The numbers themselves prove nothing of course, but I share them to help frame the perspective that my own social media presence is a conduit (two directions) that benefits our organization in terms of both reputation and influence, particularly with younger people. They do take notice.

How many nonprofit organization leaders would be comfortable explaining, “It is part of my job to be on Facebook.” Well, that phrase applies to everyone on our staff team, much to the shock and amazement of some of their peers in the field who tell stories about how “the boss *banned* Facebook at our office!”

### **Waiting to launch: Volunteer recruitment**

If a prospective volunteer knocks on your door, makes a call, sends an email, or makes a social media inquiry, how long does it take for a human being to respond? When will the volunteer receive an invitation to orientation and training? How long after that will it be before the volunteer is making a contribution?

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Our volunteer coordinator receives frequent feedback from volunteers who were excited to contribute time and ideas to a particular cause but who come away feeling rejected – even in cases where they were responding to an agency calling out for volunteers. Volunteers report feeling as if they were distracting staff from other work or, in some cases, they never heard back at all. Other complaints include training and orientation that is offered infrequently, and/or once training is completed, limited opportunities and no room for creativity.

At LiveWorkPlay a volunteer inquiry typically receives a same-day response, and rarely will more than 48 hours pass. After a telephone or email exchange, moving to the next step of a face-to-face meeting with our coordinator is usually a matter of days, and the first opportunity for a formal orientation and training takes no longer than a month. While these necessary processes are underway, our coordinator is already working with the candidate to come up with a plan, and collaborating with other staff and volunteers about the possibilities. This may all seem very obvious, but we have amassed substantial feedback that indicates it is far from common practice.

When the process works well, it's no surprise that the digital generation appreciates this type of transparent pacing, and that they share their positive experiences with others. The best form of volunteer recruitment is also the oldest: person-to-person recommendations. Today's networked youth have the ability to amplify their recommendations to friends, family, and co-workers in a matter of minutes.

Every volunteer coordinator knows that the chances for success are strongest when a new candidate arrives as result of a referral from a peer. And, of course, when volunteers have a bad experience (which includes being ignored) they are quick to share that as well.

#### **Stuffing envelopes: The volunteer experience**

The other frequent complaint from young volunteers in particular is that the opportunities are far too prescriptive. Comments like this are common: "I have particular skills and experience that I thought would be an asset to any nonprofit organization, but the response was very rigid – they wanted volunteers for purpose x, and did not want to consider volunteers for purpose y."

I've experienced this frustration in my own volunteer endeavours: "You only want me to stuff envelopes, but I'm offering to build you a website and teach you how to maintain it." This is not to say that overworked volunteer coordinators across the country have the time to entertain every creative proposal from prospective volunteers. But a rigidly prescriptive attitude is highly discouraging.

I used to think of LiveWorkPlay volunteers this way myself. It was my own past experience and seemed to be "the way things are done" at other agencies where I'd worked and volunteered. Traditional agencies identify a need for volunteers (or sometimes create a need for volunteers out of concern for appearances) and then recruit the round pegs they need to fill the round holes.

This differs dramatically from identifying to volunteers that there are various mission-oriented challenges and different ways of helping the organization respond to them.

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“Ask and ye shall receive” goes back to Biblical times, and yet it is surprising to see how many voluntary organizations approach volunteers with a very limiting set of opportunities. An excellent summary of these issues is available from Volunteer Canada in their report *Bridging the Gap* (2010), which not only identifies problems but also offers advice and suggestions.

### **Road to nowhere: The staff experience**

Bright young university graduates set out to make their mark in the world. Attracted by the possibility of using what they’ve learned to help make their community a better place, they investigate the nonprofit sector. They are overwhelmed with the possibilities, but they do their research. Their exploration is narrowed by their attraction to a particular cause, and then they look for organizations engaged with that issue and pursue employment to being their career journey. They understand they have much to learn, but almost 33% of respondents from a survey of more than 5,000 young workers indicated an interest in one day acquiring a top leadership position (Cornelius, 2008).

Motivated to join the sector through their affinity to the cause, young workers discover that the entry positions available to them don’t offer much in the way of meaningful engagement in delivering mission-oriented outcomes. Young staff end up with roles that could be found in any sector, and they are cut off from contributing to higher-level processes. It quickly becomes apparent that any aspirations about leadership roles are going to remain nothing but dreams for a very long time.

It’s important to note that only about half of nonprofit organizations have any paid staff at all, and within that half, a startling 72% have nine employees or fewer (Scott, 2006). If the staff roles are structured with a hierarchy that excludes most positions from top-level mission-oriented activities, young people with leadership aspirations are in what is literally a hopeless situation. It’s a road to nowhere. But it doesn’t have to be.

### **Shared leadership: A win-win situation?**

There are alternatives to applying these types of hierarchies, whether an agency is big or small. At LiveWorkPlay we certainly have differing levels of responsibility and accountability among our small staff team, but we also invest in shared leadership, and provide training and opportunities for staff development.

In many nonprofit organizations the entry opportunities for young people often involve direct support to people in the community. This is critically important work that can be fulfilling and rewarding, but it can also be lonely, and feeling like a contributing member of the team is certainly not assured. To reduce isolation and burnout, those who provide direct service delivery should also be understood as providers of critical insight into the organization’s strategic development.

When young people pursue a nonprofit career and choose a particular organization as their road for making a difference, disconnecting them from overarching mission-oriented outcomes is understandably disheartening for the individual, but also a loss to the organization and the community it seeks to serve.

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Next generation organizations understand that they are more nimble and more effective when everyone in the organization shares responsibility for ensuring that their programs meet their community impact goals. ... Power is diffused throughout and leaders who have positional authority readily share their power and engage others across organizational staff lines in questions of large and small consequence – from issues of strategy, direction, and purpose to questions of staffing, benefits, and operations (Cornelius, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Nonprofit organizations of any size can derive tremendous benefit (and ultimately, serve their funders, donors, and communities better) by considering all of their staff, volunteers, and partners as mission-oriented assets.

Young people are following their passions in choosing to work or volunteer in the nonprofit sector, and stifling this energy with practices that are known to discourage youth engagement is a recipe for disaster. If young workers and volunteers are not welcomed to use their strengths and make a meaningful contribution, they can and will go elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Far too frequently in discussing this issue with other nonprofit leaders, I get the response that they should not be required to “cater to young people.” To be sure, there must always be a balance, and there must always be respect and fairness to workers of all ages. But do we have to limit the contributions of the young to properly recognize those with more experience? I believe that much of this resistance has more to do with a fear of change, or, more precisely, a fear that change will result in diminished status for current authority.

In researching for their best seller *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath (2010) started asking “[w]hat do you think about change?” The top two answers by a wide margin: “Change is hard” and “People hate change.”

Those who have worked hard for decades to become established in leadership positions with nonprofit organizations cannot be condemned for having trepidations about abandoning traditional structures and being more welcoming to youth. I have not arrived at my current perspective without confronting my own fears, and frankly, being pushed to do so by respected peers and mentors.<sup>8</sup> I have learned to embrace the perspective that leadership experience has a value that is not diminished by the perspectives of the young.

As Joseph Raelin (2003) wrote in his preface to *Creating Leaderful Organizations*, “[t]he turbulent world that characterizes our organizations today, staffed by increasingly diverse and skillful people, can no longer be pulled together by bureaucratic authority nor by charismatic personality.”

Opening the door to horizontal leadership is a risk-reward exercise, and there are times when it will push boundaries in uncomfortable ways. But if the nonprofit sector is in the business of changing the world, we are compelled to make changes in our own organizations in order to get the most out of the people who are passionate for our cause.

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## NOTES

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1. Taken from the “Insights” tab <http://facebook.com/liveworkplayfans> [February 22, 2013].
2. See the website Service Coordination at <http://www.scsottawa.on.ca/index.php/resources/links/> for a complete listing of agencies providing supports and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the Ottawa area.
3. I elaborate on the distinction between “program thinking” and “social change thinking” in *Non-Profit Quarterly*, <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/management/20732-embracing-risk-in-the-shift-from-program-thinking-to-social-change-thinking.html>
4. See my discussion of the relationship between volunteer recruitment and social media in the *Canadian Journal of Volunteer Resources Management*, <http://www.cjvrm.org/past/CJVRMIssue19.3.pdf>
5. The terms “digital native” and “native digital” are frequently credited to Marc Prensky (2001).
6. I received notice of this 1% status on 8 February 2013 from Deep Nishar, a LinkedIn senior vice-president. LinkedIn is a popular social media platform for job seekers. Given that I am leading an agency with just 12 employees, I don’t yet understand all the reasons why so many users are visiting my profile. I plan on finding out.
7. 55% of respondents from a survey of more than 5,000 young nonprofit workers indicated they would need to leave their current organization to advance their career (Cornelius, 2008).
8. The majority of the credit goes to my career partner and life partner Julie Kingstone.

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