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Make Room: Addressing the Pressing Need for Intergenerational Leadership in Canada's Nonprofit Sector

By Tom Abel, Tara Mazurk and Christa Romaldi

This article is the first in a series about intergenerational leadership. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and Connect the Sector (CTS).

Fresh off of his decisive election victory in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave himself a side-job: Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth. It was a slight rebrand of a middling portfolio, but carried symbolic weight for his party: by adding "youth" to the name, the Liberal Party branded itself as the party destined to re-introduce younger generations to the political process. The fact that Trudeau assigned himself to the task further proved that he fancies Canadians remembering his government as the one that laid out the welcome mat for younger generations.

The move was part of a strategy that recognized the growing influence of youth in electoral politics, in terms ranging from voter turnout to general interest in current affairs (Colletto, 2016). By creating the semblance of space for youth in the political realm, the Liberals not only recovered from a devastating previous electoral defeat, but also leveraged their influence with an emerging demographic into a strong foundation of supporters going forward.

The non-profit sector finds itself at an equally critical juncture, and must consider whether it has created space for young and emerging leaders to flourish. In a time of funding pressures, broad public mistrust, and regulatory challenges, the non-profit sector faces another dilemma: its leaders are getting old. A recent survey of 810 Ontario non-profit executives indicated that 76% were older than 45, and 41% were older than 55 (McIsaac and Moody, 2014). As we prepare for the current generation of sector leaders to be replaced by the next, we must ask ourselves: what is different about their values? What are their unique needs? What new competencies do they bring to the table?

Connect the Sector (CTS) is delighted to partner with *The Philanthropist* to release a series of articles that begin to answer these questions. CTS is a network of emerging non-profit professionals that seeks to promote intergenerational leadership in the sector by creating spaces for idea sharing, community

building, and public policy engagement. Formed in 2012 as an incubated project of the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), CTS has in recent years coordinated annual fellowships that allow emerging non-profit leaders to engage with pressing issues in the sector. In partnering with *The Philanthropist*, the current program invites fellows – ranging in age and experience, but on the “younger” side – to pair with more established colleagues in examining opportunities for, and challenges to, intergenerational leadership in the sector.

Focusing on the values, needs, and competencies of emerging leaders is crucial to the future of Canada’s non-profit sector. However, we’re not taking inevitable leadership transition very seriously: according to ONN’s *Shaping the Future* report, two-thirds of Ontario non-profits do not have a succession plan (McIsaac, Park, and Toupin, 2013). Although the report does not focus explicitly on young and emerging leaders, it makes clear that non-profit organizations face a myriad of barriers to retaining talent, ranging from low pay to lack of advancement opportunities. With this in mind, focusing on the unique values, needs, and competencies of emerging leaders would seem a crucial human resources strategy in the face of broader leadership challenges.

What do we already know about emerging leadership in the non-profit sector? Surprisingly very little, meaning that we are forced to rely on studies about young professionals in the for-profit sector, and non-profit leadership competencies research focused on older leaders. Recent research, largely concentrated in business management literature, addresses the lack of preparation in the private sector to support and manage emerging leaders. Much of this research argues that millennials – people born between 1980 and 1996, and who will comprise about 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Higginbottom, 2016) – differ significantly from preceding generations in many workplace values and habits. Millennials, for instance, stay at a company on average two years, while baby boomers and members of Generation X remain for seven and five years, respectively (Fromm, 2015). Millennials, the research suggests, place little value on brand or company loyalty, and their outsized focus on social responsibility means they will move on quickly if their values do not align with a company’s mission or purpose (Shurman, 2015).

It is important not to overstate the generational divide: in *Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values*, White (2011) argues that despite some clear differences in motivation and values, millennials have similar expectations to boomers when it pertains to expectations of their leaders, and the need to feel successful in their roles. However, perceived differences between generations have continued to create barriers for emerging leaders to find space in the workplace for learning and leadership opportunities. Oftentimes, staff of different ages make assumptions about each other: Millennials may be seen as “entitled” and don’t work hard, while older professionals are viewed as inept with technology. These perceived differences lead to assumptions that one generation is not equipped to complete certain tasks or step into roles, which they may, in fact, be suited for. For young professionals, this means they don’t access the leadership development resources they crave: a recent study suggests only 7% of organizations offer Millennials such training (Higginbottom, 2016).

Yet we should take research on intergenerational differences with a grain of salt. Accounts of conflict between millennials and baby boomers, for instance, can be emotionally-charged and easily overgeneralized. However, research from the private sector indicates that challenges of leadership succession are very real. While research on intergenerational leadership in the non-profit sector is less prevalent, the more wide-ranging literature provides clues as to the challenges we face (Toupin and Plewes, 2007).

Recent years have seen a growing scholarship on leadership competencies in the non-profit sector. In a recent review of this research, Arundel and Clutterbuck (2017) conclude that leadership competencies are largely viewed as “task oriented” and “people oriented,” and are carried out both within individual organizations and throughout the broader sector. Among other characteristics, they identify openness to technological innovation, comfort with unorthodox organizational forms where leadership is not fixed at the executive level, and ability to articulate value propositions as key capabilities of 21st century non-profit leaders. Younger professionals should be uniquely suited to embody these competencies; however, larger sector trends of limited resources and short, project-based contracts mean many younger professionals find they lack the opportunities to parlay their strengths into leadership roles (Cordeaux, 2017). Volunteer work is expected, but often undervalued in the non-profit workplace. Premiums are placed on applicable skills and work experience, meaning those who have committed time to volunteering and developing transferable skills, many of which are valuable in leadership roles, have a challenging time accessing opportunities for promotion and new roles (Cordeaux, 2017).

While non-profits often lack resources to invest in the development of such competencies in staff, the sector is neglecting a key avenue for leadership development and better generational integration on staff teams: intergenerational leadership and learning. To date, little research exists that explores how we can work to create the type of intergenerational engagement to fill leadership gaps in the sector. Although research on emerging for-profit professionals and non-profit leadership competencies both provide starting points – providing clues on how to foster intergenerational leadership in non-profits – we need robust commentary linking these lines of inquiry.

The articles in this series will attempt to bridge this gap by examining emerging non-profit leadership through a variety of lenses, including decent work, diversity, organizational structure, workplace culture, and labour force strategy. The articles vary from mostly descriptive to boldly prescriptive, but all centre around an examination of the priorities, needs, and potential of emerging non-profit leadership. Alyssa Lai kicks off the series by highlighting the recognition and nurturing of leadership skills as a key factor in the attraction and retention of talented young people in the non-profit sector. Lai is joined by Emily Cordeaux, who provided valuable insights from her extensive research experience, most recently with Imagine Canada through her report *Young People and Non-profit Work*.

In her examination of the “martyr myth” phenomenon of poor compensation and benefits in the non-profit sector, Heather Keachie will highlight another issue affecting the attraction and retention of younger workers. She frames the martyr myth, though, as an even deeper problem of the non-profit sector failing to be a leader-by-example in promoting fair employment standards in the broader community. In partnership with Sara Lyons of Community Foundations of Canada, Heather will contribute to the growing conversation of decent work in the sector kickstarted by the ONN and Mowat NFP’s 2015 *Change Work* report.

Tka Pinnock continues the critical examination of non-profit norms with a discussion of the experiences

of ethnic communities. By taking a “step back” and addressing the topic of intergenerational leadership from the perspective of different ethnic communities, Pinnock will assess the impact that the dominant cultural narrative has on how the sector views the advancement of young professionals. In doing so, Pinnock – along with co-author Mona ElSayeh of ACCESS Community Capital Fund – will challenge entrenched norms in a sector that remains shockingly homogeneous at senior levels (McIsaac and Moody, 2014).

Daniel Moore and Sujin Chang shift the discussion to the day-to-day manifestations (or lack thereof) of emerging leadership in non-profit workplaces. Focusing on small, medium, and large organizations based in Hamilton, Moore will profile the experiences of younger professionals who are seeking leadership positions, but encounter barriers to effecting social change within their organizations and communities. Bill Young of Social Capital Partners joins Moore in this discussion. Young has extensive experience designing innovative solutions to help marginalized workers overcome employment barriers. Like Moore, Chang is concerned with the ability of emerging leaders to influence organizational life; however, she trains her focus on experiences of young people on non-profit boards. She partners with Myna Kota, who has worked to break new organizational ground as Senior Manager of Advocacy at Girl Guides of Canada, in exploring the role younger professionals can play in governance.

Miranda Hassell brings the series full circle by examining, like Lai, the challenges of employee attraction and retention in the sector. However, she will emphasize the development of competencies needed for the non-profit sector to leverage young talent into community impact. Hassell will partner with Allyson Hewitt of MaRS in this ambitious project; Hewitt brings a diverse range of experience in social innovation, public education, and policy that promises to help Hassell answer the “big questions.”

Despite being at early stages in their careers, the CTS fellows promise to draw on rich professional and personal experiences to contribute to existing bodies of knowledge on emerging leadership and non-profit competencies. Just as exciting as the subject matter, however, is the format of the discussion; by pairing with established non-profit leaders, the CTS fellows are already beginning the work of creating intergenerational connections. It is our hope that their work helps the non-profit sector prepare to welcome its future leaders.

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