



July 31, 2008

The Old Guard and the Young Lions must learn to work together

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Columnist

Question: There is a battle raging in our organization between two groups we have labeled the Old Guard and the Young Lions. The issue at the heart of the conflict is change. The Old Guard wants to hold to our historic mission. The Young Lions want to broaden our mission by partnering with other organizations. The reality is that the Old Guard funds the organization, and the Young Lions are the primary participants and contributors to the work of our organization. As the executive director, I am caught in the middle, seeing both positions as valid. How do we resolve this conflict that threatens the future of our organization?

Answer: What both generations need to understand is that they need each other. One cannot lead the organization without the other. Your challenge as the executive director is to help them find common ground.

It may help for you to understand the difference between these two generations. In many organizations, the Old Guard views its role as protectors of the historic mission of the organization. Apart from funding the mission, those in the Old Guard act as gatekeepers to thwart unwanted change. They see the institution as sacrosanct. They have a personal identification with it such that change becomes personal and not simply an organizational process.

The organizational values of the Young Lions are very different. They do not have such a close association with the institution. They are more oriented toward the relationships that form the social environment of the organization. The social environment is where the activities of your mission are carried out. As a result, change is a natural process of getting to know people and finding better ways to fulfill the opportunities that come from your organization's mission.

Finding common ground between the two generations is a challenge, but it is not impossible to achieve. The key is in understanding the values inherent in your mission. Your mission identifies what you do and hope to achieve as an organization. The values embedded in that mission link the two generations together.

What you must do is help the Young Lions demonstrate to the Old Guard that their approach protects the values that they have sought to guard. The Old Guard needs to see that a younger generation shares its commitment to the mission that the Old Guard values. If you can bring both generations to a deeper appreciation of the values of your mission, then you can help them find a way to adapt to the organizational changes that are necessary to fulfill your mission.

Common values unify and guide your relationships as an organizational leader. Values, however, are not icons of past meaning fit for a frame on a wall. Values, instead, are the fuel that empowers the social and institutional environment for the shared commitment to fulfill your organization's mission.
