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The Leader's Age as a Factor Influencing Mission Effectiveness in the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The enduring organization whose mission spans multiple generations requires effective generational transition of leadership. This effectiveness may be measured by the degree to which natural generational cleavage between the incoming and current cultures and values are addressed and modified so as to honor the overall mission of the organization's community. This modification requires active intergenerational contact that allows ongoing dialog relative to the values and mission of the organization as it influences the leadership process. Such contact is revealed in the degree of assimilation of the next generation into active decision-making leadership by the dominant generation of leaders.

> A generation's *Zeitgeist* or shared historical consciousness develops through the "fresh contact" that occurs as each succeeding generation assimilates and redefines the accumulated cultural heritage. This "fresh contact" results in both intergenerational similarities due to the inescapable interdependence between generations and intergenerational differences. (Layne and Balswick 1977:258)

The sharing of these assumptions is often indirect and is best learned in an active context where real-time observation of the leadership behavior provides a highly effective learning environment. This social learning reality is addressed by Zacher and Gielnik:

> Schein (1990) defined organisational culture as a pattern of assumptions and beliefs that are developed and held by members of a group in order to construct and interpret reality, and to adapt to internal and external challenges. The group members pass on these assumptions to new members as the appropriate way to think and feel. This transfer of assumptions happens indirectly through social interactions, as the assumptions per se are often implicit, unconscious, taken-for-granted, and therefore, not easily observed by outsiders. (2014:329)

This would suggest that the current dominant leader generation must allow for contact between itself and the next generation if values and beliefs related to mission are to be transferred to the next generation of leaders. Such contact must allow for close, sustained relational development that results in social and cultural transformation.

In a 2005 speech at the St. Louis, Missouri Seventh-day Adventist world church session, then president, Jan Paulsen, spoke on the topic of encouraging youth to participate in the leadership of the church (Kellner and Surridge 2005). Following his speech a delegate approached a microphone on the floor of the auditorium and asked, "How many young people do you have on your staff?" Elder Paulsen paused and humbly answered, "We have work to do in that area." This commitment was followed by publication of a document entitled, *Youth First: Involving Our Youth* (GCYouth 2005) but the visible evidence of a significant inclusion of youth or younger adults at the General Conference office remains lacking. Younger employees there primarily serve in the communication and information systems areas but are not represented at the decision-making levels. We still "have much to do in that area."

Current North American Division Age Profile

Data reported from six of the nine North American Division (NAD) unions regarding the ages of five positional leaders at union and conference levels—president, executive secretary, treasurer, ministerial secretary, and youth director—revealed an overall median age of 55.5 years. The Youth Directors of NAD conferences and unions revealed a median age of 48.3 years with only one such leader under the age of 30 years. These simple statistics suggest that the assimilation of post-boomer generations into the leadership community of the organized Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is absent except for the youth directors' position. Given that the Boomer generation was born between 1946 and 1964 (Editor 2010) the 55.5 year old average age of an SDA organizational leader is positioned precisely in the middle of the Boomer generation. These nine years of cushion between the Boomers and the unavoidable leadership dominance of those born between 1964 and 1982 (Generation X) could result in significant boomer leader influence for most of the next decade. Social contact between Boomer and Generation X organizational leaders, which would allow for a transfer of cultural assumptions, may not happen for several years without an intentional effort to recruit organizational leaders from the Generation X of ministry professionals.

Research published in 1977 reported the "dominant" age range of leaders at that time to be 45-59 years with a median age of 52 (Layne and

Balswick 1977:260) suggesting an upward shift in the dominant leader range of 3.5 years as revealed by the limited data collected throughout the NAD. Layne and Balswick's research identified the emerging leader group as the "Initiation" generation which assumes that this group was the object of an initiation process in preparation for becoming the dominant generation. The absence of current leaders drawn from the older individuals of Generation X raises questions that beg for an answer. Where or when will the initiation process for the assimilation of Generation X into the organizational leadership community occur in the North American Division?
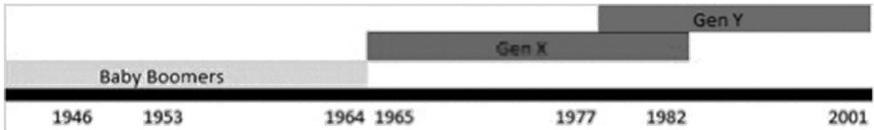

Figure 1. Timeline of three generations.

Contributing Factors of Resistance to Assimilate Generation Xers

A review of literature related to intergenerational stress reveals several possible reasons why the Boomer generation has been reluctant to open this generational door of leadership. The differences between generations have always been a source of fear for the older generation as values and beliefs are challenged by the upcoming generation. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has, however, added structures that accentuate those fears by segregating members from the birthing room to the deathbed in our church structure. Our Sabbath Schools are organized by segregating age groups for programming through late adolescence. In addition some churches provide a separate church worship service for children, thus age-segregating the entire Sabbath worship and learning experience. This practice goes beyond the SDA context as noted here:

> We live in a society defined by age segregation, in which adults and children have minimal contact or common activities. On a daily basis, children and young people experience very few settings that are truly intergenerational; this is also true for older adults in our society. (Roberto 2012:109)

This segregation may condition us to avoid intergenerational contact, which is simply lived out in a mono-generational leadership context at the organizational level of our church.

The generational differences are real and possess the potential to en-courage segregation of the generations by means of avoiding the assimi-lating initiative necessary to developing a planned succession of leaders from Generation X. "Age-based fragmentation is a cultural reality result-ing from a shift from a modernistic to a hyper-modernistic or postmodern philosophical perspective" (Glassford and Barger-Elliot 2011:365). The differences can be summed up by the terms that describe Postmodern-ism—relativism regarding truth; disregard for formal authority struc-tures; tolerance toward alternative lifestyles such as gay marriage and ho-mosexuality in general; ambivalence toward public institutions including organized religion and its institutional ministries; along with the social institution of marriage. All of these descriptors challenge the values and beliefs of Adventist orthodoxy and may contribute to the absence of this generation at the leadership table.

Another influencing factor is the identity conditioning of Boomers by progressive generations of electronic media aimed at the Boomer genera-tion—a message that has perennially pronounced Boomers to be "young." Burns reports that "the Baby Boom has a clearer sense of generational identity than any other generation has had" and adds the thought that "the Baby Boom generation refuses to let go of childhood and youth" and both of these elements are encouraged by "the mass media, especially in the marketing and advertising functions" (1996:129). The upward creep in the median age of organizational leaders in the North American Division may be influenced by this media-induced attitude that denies the aging process and consequently allows no sense of urgency to incorporate Gen-eration X into the decision-making level of the church organization.

This Boomer/youth identity may have been reflected in the desire of both the incumbent president of the North American Division and the General Conference president respectively at the 2010 general session in Atlanta. Both of these respected leaders were beyond normal retirement age yet both were open to an additional 5-year term. There is no evidence that the issue of leader age and the need to invite the next generation to the leadership table was discussed in spite of the knowledge that the lead-er age in NAD was and remains far advanced beyond the median age of the general population.

Organizational Age Culture

What we do not currently know but should explore is the attitudes and biases relative to age and leadership in the North American Division. The median age reported by six of the nine union conferences that make up this Division would suggest that something is impacting our willingness

to integrate younger leaders into the organizational leadership community. Zacker and Gielnik indicate that research in the public and corporate sector is also lacking in regard to cultural bias regarding age:

> One important aspect of ageing workforce management is the prevention and elimination of unfavourable age stereotypes which may result in discriminatory behaviours and unfair human resource practices. However, so far research has focused only on the age stereotypes held by individuals, and has neglected shared assumptions about younger and older employees which may exist at the organisational level. In addition, the predictors of such 'organisational age cultures' are unknown as yet. This is unfortunate because the implicit and shared assumptions that form organizational cultures can have considerable influence on individual attitudes and behaviours as well as organisational effectiveness. (2014:328)

It is interesting to note that the World War II generation seems to have practiced assimilation of the following generation much more robustly than has the Boomer generation. In the late 1960s through the early 1970s organizational leaders were elected and appointed to positional roles while still in their early 30s. Those who returned from combat service in the Pacific and European theaters brought with them the experience of being led by officers whose ages were as low as 22 years. It is likely that such an experience impressed this generation with confidence in young leaders that might not have been present had they not been exposed to these young leaders in a high stakes context. Though this observation is currently anecdotal it should be explored to determine what impact experiences such as war and times of uncertainty have on attitudes about leadership competency and trustworthiness of the next generation.

The potential impact of organizational age culture is great. There are not currently enough Generation X and older Generation Y (born 1977-2001) workers to fill all of the posts that will be vacated by Boomers who will retire from their organizational posts over the next 10 years. The Ken Blanchard research office makes the following observations in the secular context:

> Organizations are concerned about the looming Baby Boomer retirement surge and the resulting urgent need to fill critical leadership positions. The pool of 25- to 65-year-olds is shrinking rapidly. The unemployment rate is just 5 percent, and we can only expect it to go lower. According to the Conference Board, 64 million skilled workers will be able to retire by the end of this decade. That equates to two employees leaving for every new hire entering. The Hudson Institute predicts the supply of skilled labor in the United States will not catch up to the

demand until 2050. Simply put, there are not enough workers from younger generations to take their places. The Gen X population is a little more than half the population of Baby Boomers, leaving a gap in upper management positions when Boomers begin to retire in the next few years. Gen Yers are considered too young and inexperienced to fill these gaps. (Guthrie 2009:14)

The church is facing similar challenges since we are embedded in the same societal context. Even before the mass retirement of Boomers has begun, the North American Division is facing shortages of pastors for churches and districts which need a pastor that understands and reflects their particular culture. The impact on the pool of potential leader candidates adds to the challenge of leader succession for this division. In short we are facing a leadership crisis in the North American Division.

Contextual Comparison of Church Leader Age and the General Population

It should also be recognized that the average age (51 years in 2008) of the North American Division membership is reflected in the median age statistic of 55.5 years reported for NAD leaders. Such a parallel of leaders alongside average membership may suggest that the age of NAD leaders represents a natural consistency with the age of those they serve. In comparing the average age of leaders and members in the NAD church to the 36 year age average of the general population (Beckworth and Kidder 2010) we are reminded of the alarming discrepancy between the age of the church and those we are called to evangelize, which leads us to the discussion of mission effectiveness and the possibility that the age of leaders may be playing a part in the low NAD membership growth rates. Though research needs to be done which would allow a comparison of NAD age and mission effectiveness profiles with those of other world divisions, the anecdotal evidence would suggest a much younger leadership age profile in Inter-American and South American divisions which are experiencing much more robust growth.

Age and Mission Effectiveness

Mission effectiveness cannot be achieved without a clear process of mentoring/discipling the next generation. Mentoring and discipleship cannot happen in the absence of an intergenerational leadership workforce. This intergenerational approach cannot be satisfied by relegating younger employees into the communications and technology offices. Younger and more mature leaders must work side by side in a relationship of mutual

learning at the decision-making level of the church organization. We currently have less than 10 years to implement this crucial arrangement. We currently have no evidence apart from the association of Youth Directors with conference officers and ministerial leaders that this mentoring/discipleship process is happening at all.

The Levitical Model

The age guidelines outlined for the Levites in ancient Israel initially began their service at age 30 years (Num 4:3, 23, 30, and 35). This age of initiation to their work was later adjusted downward to 25 years (Num 8:24) and again adjusted downward to the age of 20 years during the time of King David (1 Chron 23:24-27). They were retired at age 50 years with the instruction, "They may minister with their brethren in the tabernacle of meeting, to attend to needs, but they themselves shall do no work" (Num 8:26). It is not clear what is meant by "to attend to needs" which we will now explore.

The tasks assigned the Levites were distributed to specific families with detailed instructions regarding the scope of their responsibilities. Many of these responsibilities involved the heavy labor of lifting and carrying the parts of the tabernacle and its articles and furnishings in addition to assisting with heavy animal carcasses during the actual sacrifice and offering services, which may explain or give a physical reason for the retirement age of 50 years. Benson (1839; see also Num 8:25) sees this retirement age as indicative of God's compassion while others see it not so much as a retirement but as a reduction in load by being excused from the heavy work (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown 1961; Num 8:25). Gill suggests that the Jews did not feel obligated to the age limits imposed in Numbers 4 and 8 (Gill 1989) subsequent to the building of the temple. There is no Scripture statement that specifically lifts these age limits but Gill states that the age limits were not imposed on cultic practice after the building of the Temple by Solomon. Dockery (1991) states that the retired Levites served as guards of the temple/tabernacle. In short, the most common explanation of the age 50 limit on Levitical service is connected to the suspension of heavy tasks and assignment to lighter tasks relating to the doing aspect of their service.

Mentoring in Relationship Model

Guthrie and Motyer (1970; Num 8:5-26) provide a unique alternative—service to their brethren. They do not elaborate in the description of this service as to which form it took but they open the door of consideration that the retirees may have moved into a ministry of wisdom that involved

serving the development needs of the next generation of Levitical priests. We know that there was a school dedicated to training the Levites in the later years of the Babylonian captivity as evidenced by Ezra's instruction to Iddo at Casiphia to "bring us servants for the house of God" (Ezra 8:17) who were to travel from the staging encampment at the river Ahava to Jerusalem for the purpose of initiating the temple services. This seems to indicate that Iddo had charge over a body of Levites led by an unnamed person known to Ezra as "a man of understanding" (8:18). These indicators would suggest that there was intentional training in the tradition of the Levites during the captivity.

It would be inappropriate to state with certainty that the retired Levites provided an ongoing presence that allowed for the mentoring of the next generation of Levites. It is not, however, an irrational stretch to presume that the relational impact of experienced workers remaining in regular service contact with younger members would allow such leader development to take place. The lightening of the load on the experienced men allowed them time to invest in the wisdom ministry of leader development among their younger Levite brethren. As such, this prescribed arrangement made possible the equivalent of the 2 x 2 model employed by Jesus during the development of the disciples and which marked their ministry structure both at the initiation stage (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1) and later during the founding and ministry to the New Testament churches (Acts 3:1; 11:26; 15:27, 32, 39-41; 18:5; 19:22).

Conclusion

Age is impacting the mission of the North American Division but not due to lack of competence or commitment on the part of existing leaders. The impact is being felt or will be felt in the following areas:

1. The current cadre of organizational leaders, due to lack of professional contact, does not have the availability of outlook and generational culture of Generation X. As a result it is likely that a gap between mission strategy and the needs of the target population are off-mark simply because the mission is being perceived through Boomer eyes without the inclusion of Generation X leaders in the process.

2. There needs to be intentional placement of young leaders in the roles of developing methodologies for reaching their generation with the Gospel rather than filtering methodology through the Boomer generation.

3. The Adventist Church should explore the possibility of adopting a Levitical model that would encourage the experienced ministry professional to move from the quantitative "doing" aspect of ministry to a wisdom focused model of mentoring and development of the next generation of leaders.

4. The mentoring of Generation X leaders that is necessary to overcome cultural bias in both generations, thus assuring the discovery of common values and organizational culture necessary for the preservation of core values, is not happening to any noticeable degree.

5. A failure to move to an intergenerational model of organizational leadership now will assure an impending leadership crisis within the next 10 years due to inadequate relational transfer of leadership skills, knowledge, and history necessary to prepare Generation X for competent spiritual leadership of our mission and institutions.

6. The recruiting of young people from the Generation Y demographic into a gospel ministry model that includes intentional relational mentoring by experienced leaders is critically important to the long range leadership needs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America and beyond.

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