

Leadership in Intergenerational Practice: In Search of the Elusive “P” Factor — Passion

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Abstract

Intergenerational programs and practices refer to a wide range of initiatives which aim to bring people of different generations together to interact, educate, support, and provide care for one another. Insofar as there is such rapid growth in intergenerational program activity taking place at the national and international levels, it is pertinent to wonder how we can cultivate innovative, effective leaders in a variety of professional roles and settings. This article explores various conceptions about how to prepare and inspire intergenerational professionals. Beyond focusing on the set of skills and knowledge that practitioners need to function effectively, we argue that there are certain personal dispositions that are integral to leadership in this field. To illustrate how passion, what the authors call the *p-factor*, contributes to exemplary intergenerational practice, several examples are provided of intergenerational professionals who emanate this quality. Implications for preparing future intergenerational leaders are considered.

Introduction

Overview of Intergenerational Program Practice

The International Consortium of Intergenerational Programs defines intergenerational programs as “social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (Kaplan, Henkin, & Kusano, 2002, xi). Intergenerational programs bring together people of different generations in mutually beneficial, planned activities that are designed to achieve specified program objectives including, for example, enhanced literacy skills, arts and recreation interests, and desired states of health and welfare. Through intergenerational programs people of all ages share their talents and resources, supporting each other in relationships that benefit both individuals and the community.

In many countries the growing interest in intergenerational programs and practices is evolving beyond the implementation of innovative, but disconnected demonstration projects. We see government agencies establishing policies that call for intergenerational approaches for structuring and delivering services for children, youth, older adults, families, and communities. In the United States, for example, a recent addition to the Older Americans Act (in 2007) is a provision that authorizes demonstration grants to non-profit organizations to carry out multigenerational and civic engagement activities such as those that connect older and younger people in child care, youth day care, after-school programs, and library and education assistance programs. The Act also authorizes funding for innovative programs that engage older volunteers providing support to families whose children have special needs, and supports to grandparents and other older relatives and the children in their care. To qualify for funding an organization must have a multigenerational coordinator.

In the United Kingdom intergenerational practice is being framed in the context of government policies and practices tied to several areas including youth volunteerism, community organizing and advocacy, environmental preservation, school-community partnerships, community development, and efforts to promote community cohesion (Hatton-Yeo, 2007). In their report *Our Shared Future* (2007), the Commission on Integration and Cohesion makes specific reference to the importance of programs for building intergenerational understanding and respect in developing social cohesion and inclusiveness in communities. Recent policies in Japan by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology such as the Period of Integrated Study introduced in 2002 have created new opportunities for older adults to contribute to school-based curriculum and take part in afterschool activities (Kuraoka, 2007).

The underlying reason for this impressive growth in intergenerational programming is that the strategy is seen as meeting a need in many communities through inclusive activities that promote satisfying interpersonal relationships across age groups. However, it can still be challenging to do intergenerational work. For the most part, social services, education systems, and community planning mechanisms are still structured to operate in an age-segregated manner. As Henkin and Butts (2002) note, there are many barriers to the systematic growth and development of intergenerational programs, including public and private funding streams that target only one age group, lack of systematic collaboration among funding sources at the local, state, and national levels, lack of integration of programs into existing service systems, and limited mechanisms for identifying and sharing best practices.

In a world where young people and older people are provided educational, recreational, and social services in a segregated manner, we need targeted policies and specialized programs to connect the generations. It takes vision and leadership to surmount the barriers to collaboration and bring different age groups together for their mutual benefit. Who are the leaders in this effort and what enables them to be successful? In this article, we will explore what we consider to be an essential, albeit elusive, component of leadership in the field of intergenerational practice: passion.

Questions of Training and Leadership in the Intergenerational Field

Anyone in an organization could be a leader. Espinosa (1997) defines leadership as “the ability to influence, inspire, motivate, or affect the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others” (p. 97). He notes that “leaders are those who provoke or nudge or elevate others into thinking, feeling, or behaving in ways they would not otherwise have demonstrated. Leadership is sustained influence over others, shaping the course of events and bending the will of others by word or personal example” (p. 97).

Leaders are also forces for organizational change (Fullan 1993). In an intergenerational program leaders influence others to embrace a vision for beneficial relationships between older and younger people. Fullan outlines four core capacities of the change agent – personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery, and collaboration. Leaders who are able to sustain the change effort are guided by their focus on making a difference, by persistent questioning about their purpose, by always searching for deeper understanding, and by collaborating with others to accomplish their goals. They are passionate about improving society for others and finding solutions to the challenges that arise in bringing different generations together.

In the world of intergenerational practice, there is no specific formal credential that recognizes a person as a qualified leader. In part, this reality is a result of the interdisciplinary nature of the work which creates a broad, undefined realm of possibilities. Leaders tend to be self-made advocates who are passionate about achieving positive outcomes for both younger and older people. For them, as Bolman and Deal (1995) suggest, “The heart of leadership is in the hearts of leaders. You have to lead from something deep in your heart” (p. 21). Their energy is focused on a vision of satisfying interdependencies that unite, rather than divide, people across ages. They not only want program participants to be safe and comfortable, but they also want them to be excited, engaged, and emotionally satisfied. These are the kinds of experiences that touch the participants’ hearts and simultaneously fuel a leader’s commitment.

Passionate leaders, regardless of the formal role they play in an organization, are able to initiate innovative programs and to inspire others to join them. These are leaders who build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will as characterized by Collins (2001) as Level V executive leaders. Typically, in the intergenerational field these characteristics come not from rigorous academic preparation in leadership, but from the person’s inherent abilities and personal beliefs. Because intergenerational practice is such a rapidly growing yet still new area in the world of work, it is pertinent to wonder how we can cultivate innovative, passionate leaders in a variety of roles ranging from direct service staff to administrators and policy makers.

Progress has been made in establishing standards and guidelines for effective practice with the articulation of required knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by intergenerational practitioners to perform their professional responsibilities effectively (Larkin & Rosebrook, 2002; Rosebrook & Larkin, 2003; Newman & Olson, 1996). “Dispositions” is another elusive dimension of professional practice that invites closer examination because qualities such as attitudes and beliefs are hard to measure.

Here are some consistently noted competencies for intergenerational practitioners that would be essential for leaders in the field:

- The ability to work with individuals at many points along the age spectrum.
- The ability to plan age-integrated activities that are developmentally and functionally appropriate for the participants.
- The ability to coordinate programs with other community agencies.
- The ability to articulate clear, achievable intergenerational program goals.
- The ability to facilitate interpersonal relationships between younger and older participants.

Most of these skills focus on the facilitation of relationships among various stakeholders. Partnerships are common in intergenerational work, often combining resources and participants from agencies that serve young people and older people separately. In collaborative ventures leadership is spread across institutional boundaries and the vision must be a shared one (Mays, 2007). Thus, in a partnership, relationships have to be negotiated and leadership will entail sustained influence over others, shaping the course of events (Espinosa, 1997).

Standards are goals for effective professional practice; they provide the basis for evaluating quality according to specific indicators. Rosebrook and Larkin (2003) outline six standards that have been influential, at least in United States, in framing the discussion about what is considered exemplary performance. They note that effective intergenerational specialists:

- Draw upon knowledge of human development across the life span to plan and implement effective programs that bring young people and older adults together for mutual benefits.
- Recognize the need for and employ effective communication to support the development of IG relationships.
- Understand and demonstrate a commitment to collaboration and partnership.
- Integrate knowledge from a variety of relevant fields including psychology, sociology, history, literature, and the arts to develop programs.
- Employ appropriate evaluation techniques adapted from the fields of education and social sciences to inform program development for diverse age groups and settings.
- Conduct themselves as reflective, caring professionals who aim to bring young people and older adults together for their mutual benefit.

To read more about these standards, and sample indicators for each, go to:

<http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/Docs/IGStandards2.pdf>.

Note that the sixth standard addresses the disposition of being “a reflective, caring professional.” Anyone working in the intergenerational field, whether in a leadership role or not, is responsible for the well-being of others, and this responsibility demands both integrity and kindness. The intergenerational field has yet to develop a code of ethics or guidelines for reflective practice which might include, for example, principles such as the capacity for “compassionate confrontation” (Covey, 1991) in the face of problems, a willingness to be open and to engage in self-assessment, a tendency to be accepting and to respect the autonomy of others, and a commitment to cultural awareness. Leaders who possess such qualities are able to influence and inspire as well as motivate others (Espinosa, 1997).

Sáez (2007) argues that the professionalization of the intergenerational field will depend less on identifying a new and separate knowledge base for

intergenerational practitioners, but more on helping them access existing knowledge across various disciplines in the social professions including in the fields of education, psychology, social work, economics, demography, gerontology, and political science.

In this article, we go one step further in suggesting that there is more to attaining excellence in intergenerational practice than gaining mastery over any set body of knowledge, no matter how extensive or inclusive the content area. Our main argument is that it is important to pay attention to more than what intergenerational practitioners need to “know” and “be able to do.” We maintain that dispositions (values, attitudes, and beliefs that influence behaviors) must also be considered essential in the intergenerational enterprise.

Program development is a creative process requiring imagination, the capacity to care about participants of all ages, and the ability to inspire all who play a part in converting the program vision into a reality. Passion also plays a big role in the efforts of intergenerational professionals who exude excellence and take innovative approaches to their practice. To illustrate how passion, what we call the *p-factor*, contributes to exemplary intergenerational practice, we provide several vignettes describing the exploits of intergenerational professionals whom we feel reflect this quality. Each of the three examples is based on interactions with people whom we have recognized as innovative leaders. Their stories serve as models that can inspire new initiatives in intergenerational practice and provide some specific examples of how the element of passion plays a part in success. After presenting these examples, we proceed to examine the question of whether such an orientation can be taught or at least nurtured, and then introduce some concluding observations. The discussion in the next section aims to provide more clarity about the elusive *p-factor* and its role in intergenerational practice.

The Need to Pay Attention to Matters of the Heart

There are many conceptions about how best to prepare intergenerational practitioners. “What we need is the ‘McDonaldization’ of intergenerational work” exemplifies this notion. This statement was made by Johannes Meier, member of the board of directors for Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German foundation that funds programs that support families, during a question and answer period following his presentation on intergenerational solidarity at the Generations-Summit North Rhine-Westphalia conference in Dusseldorf, Germany, December 14, 2007. Dr. Meier was alluding to how McDonalds has staff training manuals on policies and everything else local workers need to know. His point was that intergenerational practitioners too would benefit from a routinized training scheme.

If all of the elements of intergenerational practice can be broken down into a distinct set of tasks, all that would be necessary would be to teach people the skills they need to do their tasks. However, there is more involved than just the acquisition of technical skills. There is a dispositional element, perhaps even an *intuitive* component, such as being sensitive to and caring about those with whom intergenerational practitioners work. There is also an element of passion, of commitment that transforms the knowledgeable person into an inspirational leader, facilitator, and team member. The passionate practitioner is one who is quick to seize upon opportunities to create synergy and cultivate interpersonal connections.

Intergenerational Practitioners who Exhibit the “P-Factor”

The examples of intergenerational practice noted in this section have several things in common. First, all of the noted practitioners are knowledgeable and skilled in intergenerational work as well as being quite passionate about their intergenerational mission. Second, they are all highly self-motivated. None of the intergenerational efforts described below were done in the context of fulfilling formal job requirements; in fact, none of this work was done for pay. In all cases, the individuals do what they do for the sheer joy of facilitating meaningful intergenerational engagement within the context of program participants’ lives.

The first example describes the evolution of a young professional in Germany who, through her proactive approach to constructing graduate studies experiences, internships, and work opportunities, was able to convert her passionate interest in intergenerational work into a successful career as a leader in Germany’s intergenerational movement. The second example highlights how an instructor of a college program for older adults in Japan inspired graduates to organize volunteer activities with local children and youth. The third example describes the plight of a social worker who saved a portion of a prestigious travel and study grant she received to help start an organization for supporting grandparents raising grandchildren when she returned home.

Example 1

Intergenerational specialist Tabea Schlimbach became interested in the field in 2000 in her home country of Germany. Her entrée into the field was rather coincidental at first. As a student in the educational sciences department at the University of Halle, she was asked by a professor to moderate a seminar session on intergenerational programs called “dialogue of generations.” She credits that seminar as being the seminal point in her career decision. The seminar, which included facilitated discussions among the multi-generational audience, gave her a chance to experience first hand the power of intergenerational exchange and at the

same time to become aware not only of how sensitive and vulnerable to misunderstandings the newly built intergenerational connections were, but also how challenging it can be to structure such exchange opportunities. She proceeded to explore intergenerational practice in Germany and learned that although there was a large amount of intergenerational work taking place, such practices were disconnected and often short term. Thus, she decided to stay active in the field, deepen her understanding of intergenerational relations, and try to make a contribution to the professionalization and sustainability of the intergenerational field as it was unfolding in her country. With no tried-and-true career path for people who wish to get involved in this new area of practice, she set out to create her own path. After graduation with a thesis on intergenerational programming, she negotiated a position as a trainee and volunteer at the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) where she co-edited a magazine on the “dialogue of generations.”

To further deepen her understanding and involvement with the intergenerational field, Tabea reached out to the Beth Johnson Foundation in the United Kingdom and negotiated a tailor-made research associate role that would simultaneously contribute to the work of the foundation while adding to her knowledge, skills, and potential to contribute to the intergenerational field in Germany. After returning to Germany, Tabea proceeded to expand her engagement with key organizations that are helping to build infrastructure for the intergenerational field in Germany including the national service agency “Dialogue of Generations,” the research group “Generations” which is an arm of the parliamentary group of the green party, and research centers at several universities. She was instrumental in helping these organizations to craft research, policy documents, training systems for practitioners, and new intergenerational program strategies.

In contrast to other young professionals who prefer the security of steady employment in traditional fields, Tabea shaped the course of her own career path. She bravely faced the unknown, often having to raise her own funds and either create or define the positions she took in various organizational settings.

Example 2

Yoshie Kato is a Social Welfare Lecturer at the Setagaya College for Senior Citizens (“Setagaya Rojin Daigaku”) which is administered by the Setagaya Ward Welfare for the Senior Citizens Department of Tokyo, Japan. As of 1995, when Professor Kato was interviewed for a book on intergenerational programs in Japan (Kaplan et al., 1998), there were 300 students 60 years of age and older who attended classes once a week at the College. The primary mission of the College, which is consistent with various other lifelong learning schemes in Japan that target older adults (Wilson, 2001), is to provide older adults with “lifelong learning” opportunities.

Professor Kato was not satisfied with merely offering an educational program for older adults. Beyond providing a set curriculum of instruction, she actively encouraged her students to have direct contact with local children and youth and to share their skills and knowledge wherever and whenever possible. She provided encouragement and support for a group of senior adult graduates who eventually formed a volunteer program. They introduced school children to traditional games such as “otedama” (juggling), “ohajiki” (playing with marbles) and “ayatori” (a string game also known in the West as “cat’s cradle”), ate lunch with them, and exchanged letters about topics of mutual interest.

Professor Kato continued to meet with graduates from her college and helped them to recognize that their enhanced interpersonal communication skills and awareness of community needs were not endpoints in their lives, but rather the beginning of new chapters in their lives. Her efforts to help older adult college graduates to find or create intergenerational volunteering opportunities went far beyond the requirements of her position at the senior college. She was determined to make a difference in the lives of her students and the children they mentored. She inspired others to volunteer and become role models for a younger generation.

Example 3

For the past seven years Jean Stogdon has been chair of Grandparents Plus, a United Kingdom charity which promotes the vital role of grandparents and the extended family in children’s lives, particularly where parents are no longer able to care for their children. Grandparents Plus works with various organizations and partnerships to educate the public about the issues that families with grandparents raising grandchildren face.

Jean was originally trained as a social worker. For years she has worked in various social services management positions for Camden Social Services before focusing on her interest in grandparents. In 1999 she applied for and received a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship that enabled her to study the role of grandparents within kinship care in the United States.

Because she stayed with relatives or colleagues, she was able to save some of her grant funds which she was allowed to keep and give to Grandparents Plus, a charity that she co-founded with the late Lord Young of Dartington. Under her stewardship, Grandparents Plus has evolved into a significant resource for supporting families with grandparents and other relatives raising children. The organization conducts evidence-based projects, offers training programs to support practitioners, and produces newsletters to give grandparents, extended families and grandchildren a stronger voice in public policy. In her role, she has

been able to sustain her influence and collaborate successfully because she cares deeply about this cause.

Implications for Preparing Intergenerational Leaders

Whereas the existing literature on preparing intergenerational practitioners helps to define roles, responsibilities, and a baseline of skills required for effective intergenerational practice, we contend that the preparation of intergenerational practitioners needs to be broadened to include “matters of the heart” as well as of the intellect. The whole question of “dispositions” needs to be fleshed out more thoroughly so that anyone engaged in intergenerational work will have some benchmarks for measuring their suitability for leadership. Vision and passion are not things that can be readily taught, but at least knowing that certain attitudes or values can be identified as guidelines for exemplary professional practice allows evaluators to note their presence or absence.

It is hard to imagine a cadre of intergenerational professionals who embrace their roles without connecting emotionally with the people for whom they are seeking to make a difference. Another even more elusive characteristic than “caring” is the extent to which the practitioners exhibit “passion” in the way they go about facilitating intergenerational engagement. Nevertheless, we can identify some attitudes and behaviors that we consider to be important for exemplary professional practice. For example, the following characteristics which were selected from various lists of leadership traits (Collins, 2001; Espinosa, 1997; Fullan, 1993) are descriptors of transformative leaders: innovative, influential, collaborative, compassionate, consistent, inquiring, flexible, reflective, democratic, and optimistic. These characteristics are “dispositions” rather than skills and are demonstrated through behaviors as well as through facial expressions and tone of voice - that is, they are not just *what* intergenerational practitioners do, but *how* they do it. Practical skills are also necessary, such as the ability to solve problems, to be articulate, and to manage organizational details which are the focus of most formal leadership preparation programs. In addition to these skills, intergenerational leaders need to demonstrate how they value others, that they will listen and be open to change, and that they continue to search for deeper understandings. Such dispositions do not lend themselves to quantitative documentation strategies, and so hiring standards and evaluation efforts would need to use descriptive measures (qualitative).

Discussion

The intergenerational practitioners highlighted here exhibit leadership with great energy, commitment, and passion. Their stories help to illustrate a dimension of practice that goes beyond knowledge acquisition and skill development.

Certainly, skills are needed, and yes, there is a knowledge base that leaders need to have if we are to speak about “professionalizing” the intergenerational field. However, we need to look beyond developing well-informed and technically competent professionals who can function efficiently, but do so without inspiring others. Otherwise, we will be left with a call for the mechanical standardization of practice, akin to what Meier is calls the McDonaldization of intergenerational work.

This conclusion is consistent with what was revealed in a Beth Johnson Foundation study of intergenerational programs across the United Kingdom in which over 60 projects was identified and analyzed (Granville, 2002). One of the key principles that were identified as underpinning successful intergenerational projects was capturing the commitment of champions. The most successful and sustainable programs had a passionate champion behind them. We must consider how we can prepare intergenerational practitioners in a manner that elicits in them a sense of passion for making a difference in the lives of others. As change agents, leaders of intergenerational initiatives need both moral purpose and unwavering commitment to make a difference. These case studies serve as models for the kinds of leadership qualities that are needed in the intergenerational field.

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