



# Next-Generation Riff: Schism Raised by Consciousness

by Phil Anthrop

**Editors' note:** *If you were born sometime around 1980, you will know what this is about. As a member of the Millennial Generation, you seek meaning and engagement, and if you don't find it where you work, you are soon ready to move on. And if you're an aging boomer, maybe it's time to hang it up and pass the torch to a new generation.*

**T**utor for America (TFA) was poised for major growth. The 18-year-old nonprofit had been through three venture philanthropy placements—and had extraordinary press, a charismatic young founder and CEO in Vanessa Rothman, and what could best be described as either intensely creative or extremely difficult internal dynamics. TFA was innovative and courageous, and initially the organization accepted episodic discord as a natural growth stage or, alternatively, the need to work out the bugs (and the buggers). “Getting the right people off the bus,” they sometimes joked.

But when dysfunction and mass turnover came around for the fourth time, TFA and its advisers realized that something else, something more troublesome, was at work. Underneath the disharmony were an inability to discern root causes and a failure to communicate that were based not simply on age differences but also on distinct age groupings that see the world differently.

A perceptive board member who watched the daytime talk show *Dr. Phil* realized what was going on: four gener-

ational groups that were all members of the same organization had completely different mental frames of reference. Ellen Farkus (the wife of investment banker Peter Farkus) convinced the rest

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of the board. “After we had a chance to talk, the executive committee agreed that until TFA came to terms with that underlying generational disconnect, its leadership team would never attain the alignment and self-awareness needed to take the TFA model to scale,” Farkus said.

TFA already had the reputation of a daring organization willing to confront the truth, digging deep into race and class differences, regardless of the consequences—so the organization knew it could deal with the issue head-on.

Farkus agreed to find the best possible consultant who would take the board and management through a three-day retreat to explore root causes. The rural

setting would provide a safe place with enough time to clear the air and get a sense of the big picture.

Frank Harrison, an organizational development consultant and author of *Generation Connections*, was Farkus's first choice—and fortunately, he was available and intrigued.


“As we explore what holds organizations back, a recurring problem is the failure to make the most of the people involved in the organization—to create conditions that allow each distinct generation to achieve its potential,” Harrison wrote. “That is the essence of generational determinism. The new realization sweeping the country . . . is the recognition that the generation you belong to is as immutable a fact as your blood type, Myers-Briggs score, or Social Security number.”

The retreat itself began with high hopes, a board-versus-staff softball game, and about 50 TFA trustees and managers between the ages of 20 and 67.

After describing the group's opening exercise, Harrison divided retreat attendees into four groups:

- Traditionalists (silent generation),
- Boomers,
- Generation Xers,
- and Millennials.

Each group had a facilitator. The assignment: to thrash out the stereotypes associated with it and to document specific incidents where the group had been

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discounted or overlooked.

The traditionalists and the boomers met separately, but both groups mostly laughed and joked about Social Security and shared stories about their efforts to get young staffers to stop texting long enough to show them how to get onto Facebook or YouTube.

Generation Xers shared their frustration with waiting for boomers to retire and the desire to get on with life but also their fear that Millennials might leapfrog over them for leadership positions.

The Millennials quickly left their meeting room, facilitator, and flip chart paper behind to have a candid conversation around the fire pit.

This youngest group spent an hour swapping stories about upper management, funders, and other organizations treating them as expendable hired help. The Millennials then homed in on their key gripe: the gap they experienced between TFA's self-pronouncements and inspirational public image as compared to their limited options in the lower ranks.

Daniel Duran, who had come to TFA after two years in the Peace Corps in rural New Guinea, was one of the most outspoken. "You know, I'm five years older than Vanessa was when she started TFA, and we are constantly reminded that TFA was started by young people. Now look at who's on the board and who's in senior management. Holy crap! I can't believe I let them rip me off for three years!"

"We should have been the first organization to Twitter, not the last," said Hua Que Fong. "This place talks innovation but just delays decisions or pleads poverty. I am so ready to be a program director. That job would be perfect for me, and I would really enjoy it," Fong said, "But these managers in their forties act like they're going to stay in their jobs forever!"

"This may be our only chance to change this," said Aubrey Gentry, who, after four years of employment at TFA, had the longest tenure among the group.

"We need to be very specific about what should happen. The way things go, most of us will be gone in a year."

The ultimatum generated by the TFA Millennial Generation caucus was brief and to the point:

We demand an end to the authoritarian and patriarchal relationships at TFA—and will not participate further until senior management agrees to authentically egalitarian and reciprocal patterns of mutual respect among generations. The only acceptable evidence is equal sharing of budget and promotion authority, with equal representation from each of the four generations.

When they reconvened, Harrison tried to dilute the antagonism by saying, "Let's take a step back and analyze what's going on here."

Aubrey Gentry shot back, "Let's not. We want an actual response, not more process and analysis."

As he tried to bring the meeting back together, Harrison proved a better thinker than facilitator and was clearly in over his head. As the heated discussion went downhill fast, Ellen Farkus suggested a recess until the next morning. At this point, the Millennials piled into their small cars and scooters and headed for the city.

The following Monday would have been the monthly organization-wide TFA staff meeting, comprising a series of updates from the top and some motivational sharing of success stories. Fifteen minutes after the meeting began, the large meeting room was only half full. Then CEO Rothman got a text message telling her that the rest of the staff was meeting off site.

### Six Months Later

After 18 years running TFA, first as a youthful rising star and later as an accomplished leader of a growing organization, Vanessa Rothman saw no small irony in the latest development. Her first

funding proposal for TFA made the case that existing arrangements weren't meeting the needs of the new generation of high-school students. Now she faced rebellion in the ranks—including several children of TFA's first students. Suddenly, TFA had two new competitor organizations launched by former staff, both pursuing TFA's funders with vigor—and with some early success.

Suddenly having to replace another chunk of staff was a disruption, but actually not that difficult for TFA, as is the case with many employers. TFA always seemed to be surrounded by hungry young prospects: bright, highly motivated idealists from the same places the last group came from. Rothman explained away their departures to the new recruits as "good people committed to social change, but they were simply not well suited to the dynamics of TFA's going to scale."

The prospect that some might split off had always occurred to Rothman, but she was unprepared for the bitterness and vitriol. And now the attempt to mend fences and bring generations together had only driven them further apart.

Another e-mail arrived from Ellen Farkus, this time with a quote, as featured on *Oprah*, from a new expert who decried generational divisiveness.

The erosion of respect for elders by the younger generations is a greater threat to destroy Athens than any of the enemies at our gate. Youth that fail to honor what came before, and expect quick advancement without labor or sacrifice, will in their own time visit regret.

—Unknown Greek philosopher  
431 B.C.–355 B.C.

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