



**13ERS PRESENTATION**  
**Boomers and 13ers: When Museum Talents Converge**

American Association of Museums Annual Meeting  
May 14, 2007, Chicago, Illinois

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“13ers,” according to Strauss and Howe, are those born between 1961-1981.<sup>1</sup> We are not shed in good light (probably because they are Boomers): “dumb, greedy, and soulless,” pragmatic and quick, scrutinizing and determined, informal and anti-institutional. They conclude by stating, we will “have a miserable old age” – not quite dinner party material.

As much as I want to reject how they describe the collective mind-set of 13ers, I guess I mustn’t since this would squarely characterize me as one: reactionary. I hate this.

Putting this aside, reflecting further, turning it over to the Boomer’s higher power, I do see possibilities in what they describe: We’re the generation of “mall rats,” “drug gangs” and “college grads who can’t find Chicago on a map.” We are also the generation of critically perceptive artists and successful large-scale entrepreneurs.

We grew up fast and independent as latchkey kids. We’re pioneering survivors of a divorce culture. We were the first to fully adopt personal computing into our lives. Our goal is to achieve balance; play is as important as work, and in many cases, play is work. Hey, our startup companies reinvented business casual.

Speaking of 13ers in the workplace, it’s important to remember, we haven’t seen much in terms of a glorified future – what it could be, how to achieve it, knowing when we’re there. Skepticism is the name of our game. We had the Gulf War and the subsequent Energy Crisis. We entered the job market more or less at the tail end of the roaring 80’s and during the recession of the early 90’s. We were to be grateful with any entry-level job. In some ways, I agree with Strauss and Howe when they state ours is “an ill-timed lifestyle.”

I understand this may be accurate in so far as it goes, but of course, it’s not the whole story.

So when I move more specifically to my immediate world, the world of museum colleagues, let me share with you what I see. Dare I say, I see a variant.

I see those 13ers on a path less taken: We are authentic. We have multiple interests. We challenge openly and directly, some more politely than others. We are self-directed and value action. We are also curious, creative, and exploratory with both feet on the ground. I disagree with Strauss and Howe in spirit when they state 13ers are “not looking for any grand collective mission.” We just don’t need a bullhorn like Boomers to proclaim our sense of purpose to the world. Nor do we need mirrors faced entirely

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<sup>1</sup> William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations, the History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).

inward to find meaning like the up and coming narcissistic Millennials. Our loyalty is to person and idea. And although we are free-agent thinkers, we do and can commit to a greater good.

By the way, we are great dinner party guests.

You will find these 13ers aplenty in the cultural sector.

Now to understand how these two generations mix, the leadership of today and tomorrow, much of my focus at the Getty Leadership Institute...

Is it true as Strauss and Howe put it, Boomers and 13ers dislike each other as they are? This personality clash is enduring and will sharpen? We're in bitter conflict?

Perhaps so, and for the field, I hope so. Conflict is a constant presence. There's no way around it. Rather than fixing it, brushing it aside, or being drained and consumed by it, how to constructively use conflict as a positive – for oneself, for the institution – this may be the lasting bond between Boomers and 13ers. Let us honor honest disagreement, all the while, with 13ers continuing to “trim the sails of our smug next-elders” and with Boomers reluctantly peeling their grip off the tiller. Let us turn over disenchantment, miscommunication, and ill will and build greater understanding and awareness of our differences. Let us be big, see the world with varied tinted glasses.

The responsibility of building a mutually beneficial relationship between Boomers and 13ers rests precisely with each individual. Bridges can be made from both sides. For example, Boomers can temper their need for a personable style and call fewer meetings. Keep in mind Boomers, 13ers don't feel meetings always build rapport. 13ers can exercise more patience, rather than constantly cutting to the chase. Remember 13ers, immediacy and efficiency are not always virtues.

Are classic mentoring relationships the answer? I'm not entirely convinced they are. There are many different sensibilities at play today. Mentoring as we know it worked for Traditionalists, those senior to Boomers. In any case, what we know intuitively – communication, communication, communication – of any kind, will have to work. Have a dialogue. Perhaps mentoring reimagined for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As for leaders and leadership, how can this field harness its best talent? It's a combination of raw talent emerging in an environment committed to actively seeking, recruiting and nurturing talent. And let's face it senior executives, you have most of the control here. Junior staffers, however, are not off the hook. Tap into the good side of your risk-taking nature. Take an active role and constructively seek and stretch beyond your functional job, aim for a larger organizational and world perspective while on task, become relevant, impactful and influential. The museum field grows more complex with each passing season. We are each dependent on one another and we are also all empowered to make good choices for our future.

And so, for the benefit of culture – our field, to ensure and sustain the legacy of Boomers, and to enrich and strengthen the next generation of leaders in 13ers, we museum professionals all owe it to ourselves and our communities to concentrate our efforts in forging our bonds – no matter what shape they take. Let us keep butting heads if need be. Thank you.

Suggested Reading: David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen. 1998. Addressing Conflict. In *Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*, 276-291. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.