Simmering under the surface or bubbling to the top of your association are intergenerational differences: disagreements on goals and tactics, diverging ideas about who your customers are and how they should be served, worldviews that clash or maybe don’t connect at all. Around the watercooler, in the chat rooms, and in the blogosphere, there’s grumbling that “they just don’t get it” and that “it’s time for a fresh approach.” Subtle but very real, the desire for change among 20- and 30-year-olds should rank as one of the leading challenges for any association, but it rarely makes the list. Instead executives focus on concerns such as economic pressures, changes in the tax code or industry-specific regulation, and so on. All worthy issues, as long as you realize that the intergenerational challenge can’t be ignored for long. Need confirmation? Just think of the more than 40 million 10 to 19 year olds (teenage population from the 2000 census) who will enter the workforce across the next decade.

In the near future, an association’s strategy for tackling its list of concerns will be heavily influenced by the attitudes and perceptions of younger cohorts. More than that, the list itself will be influenced and ultimately written by those younger cohorts. So what’s your association’s plan for bridging the generation gap?

By Daniel A. Rabuzzi  |  PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN EMERSON
Reducing Presentation Stress

Whether you are standing at a podium or seated at a conference table, speaking before a group of people (large or small) is not a natural situation. Professional or formal speaking situations take stress to a whole other level. Learning five basic physical skills helps you manage the pressure of various communication situations and then sets you free to add the nuances that ultimately define your authentic delivery style. The video camera is an invaluable tool for gauging your initial performance and achieving ongoing improvement.

Focus separately on each of the five physical skills—balance, breath control, eye contact, hand placement and gestures, and vocal power. Start by assessing the positive in each area. Find a couple of things that you do that make you come across naturally and authentically. This creates a benchmark against which to determine what is unnatural, inauthentic, or distracting, and why.

Don’t be too defensive or too hard on yourself. The objective is to get an accurate assessment of what is going on in each skill area so that you can put together a plan for dealing successfully with the changes that you need to make.

Give yourself all the ammunition you need to get your delivery style to the next level. As you isolate each skill area, ask yourself the following questions, and answer yes or no—and why:

- Do I come across naturally and confidently?
- Do I recognize the person I see? (For example, you may think of yourself as outgoing and expressive, but the person you see is low-key and practically inaudible.)
- Does my behavior match my words? (For example, you are saying, “I am very happy to be here today,” but everything else about you speaks, “Help! I’m being held prisoner.”)
- If the person I am watching were not me, would I believe that person?
- If the person I am watching were not me, would that person hold my attention for more than a minute?
- Is that behavior distracting? (For example, you move around so much that you look like a duck in a shooting gallery. The behavior needs addressing, because if it is distracting to you, it probably will be to your listeners, as well, and will take their focus off your message.)

Choose one or two skills to work on at a time. You may find that as you are working on vocal projection, your gestures and overall energy automatically improve. Keep track of how you feel about—and how others are responding to—your new delivery style.

—Excerpted with permission from Speak Without Fear (2004, HarperCollins) by Ivy Naistadt, speaker and executive speaking coach

Dental Society Says, Wear Those Mouthguards

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS), Southborough, has a lot to smile about these days. Its public awareness campaign promoting the use of mouthguards for children participating in contact sports attracted widespread member participation as well as positive response from the general public. What’s more, MDS subsequently convinced a state body to mandate mouthguards in school basketball.

MDS’s “Grin and Wear It” campaign promoted the use of mouthguards, particularly in school basketball. About 130 member dentists volunteered to make customized mouthguards for school-age children on request at a special discounted price.

The positive response of dentists as well as the public convinced MDS to expand its efforts and bring the safety issue to the attention of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association. MIAA subsequently approved a proposal requiring the use of mouthguards in school basketball.

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“Duh: Uncle Daniel,” Nick, left, and Than have been known to say. But that doesn’t stop Daniel Robuzzi, CEO and president of The Leader to Leader Institute, from asking the questions that help him better understand intergenerational issues.
Measuring the chasm
Before you can bridge, you need to know how wide and deep the generation gap is at your association. And, unfortunately, direct questions about generational differences aren't likely to get you the answers you need. Instead direct queries will likely yield either polite fictions ("oh no, we all agree here") or true but insufficient demographic data ("83 percent of the American workforce holds a baccalaureate degree in subject X"). So before you query, listen and observe. Observe the minute details of daily life that reveal attitudes and beliefs. Listen as an anthropologist or novelist does. As you listen, humble yourself in the face of behavior you do not understand. Above all, embrace the Duh Factor: the experience of learning from your own ignorance, when one generation's assumed wisdom is another generation's brave new world.

The Duh Factor works like this: My 13-year-old nephew is playing a video game on his handheld, with his 10-year-old brother kibitzing, while I try to follow the logic of their choices as they strategize and execute at lightning speed. Watching as closely as I can, I cannot match their seemingly intuitive grasp of the game's design. In frustration, I ask how they knew what to do. They don't get that I don't get it. After all, that's what's not to get. In their world, only macrothinkers don't know how to navigate multidimensional matrices and beat the game, all in real time.

A large part of listening and observing for intergenerational issues at your association is seeking out the Duh Factor. Sure, it's tough. Who wants to be on the receiving end of the shaking heads and rolled eyes? But the Duh Factor will tell you a great deal about the gap between one generation's worldview and another's. Pay attention to how often you get hit with the Duh Factor. (Lately I seem to have a lot of these humbling epiphanies.) Isolated misfires are one thing, but a series will tell you something about emerging trends. Incidentally, it works both ways—that is, sometimes youth is on the receiving end. For instance, ask someone raised on e-mail what "cc" means. "Collaborative correspondence?" she might say, or "coordinated communication?" To her a piece of carbon paper is a thing of wonder, just as an iPod may be to you.

Let me share a few thoughts gleaned from recent encounters with my own intergenerational ignorance. My goal is to help promote a conversation in the association sector about the impact of intergenerational difference.

Hierarchy no more
Rebelling against the generation in power is an ageless theme. The first conflict in ancient Greek mythology pitted the young Olympians against the Titans. This time, however, the conflict may be different. From the ancient Greeks to the 1960s, rebelling has meant replacing one set of leaders with another without fundamentally changing the nature of leadership. Now the concept of leadership itself may be under assault—rejected in favor of something new.

Younger workers seem to resist the notion of an individual or small group of individuals holding formal authority over others for any significant amount of time. When you think about it, that description pretty much captures leadership as practiced in most organizations. Twenty- and 30-somethings tend to be very self-reliant—perhaps because so many of them were latchkey kids, as a younger colleague suggested to me. For many young professionals (and those still in school), no one has ever sat at the head of the table, in part because no one sat around a table at all.

Not long ago, I asked a group of college students whether they missed family meals now that they were living on campus, and I mostly got blank stares. (There's the Duh Factor.) Most had never had meals together regularly with their families. They prepared their own meals (thank heaven for the microwave), which they ate in the privacy of their rooms, while watching their televisions, listening to their music, and electronically connecting with friends. Or else they grabbed fast food with friends in between athletics practice and piano lessons. Everything was done peer to peer, a term from information technology that epitomizes the organizational structures now emerging. Not hub and spokes, not pyramidal, but peer to peer.

Decentralized networks
Here is the corollary to the point just made. In the view of younger generations, there should be no top, and there should be no center. Instead the world should be—and with new forms of technology can be—polycentric and multilateral. After all, many young professionals have grown up in physical surroundings that embody the lack of a center and expect the same decentralization to hold true in organizational life. As Joel Garreau in Edge City (1991, Doubleday) and David Brooks in On Paradise Drive (2004, Simon & Schuster) document, suburban sprawl has given rise to suburbs that are no longer tied even tenuously to a downtown. Where many Americans live is now a node on a network that connects in many directions and does not look to any one leading entity for guidance or control.

Twenty- and 30-somethings bring an exurban mentality to their work. Authority flows from merit and consens, not from position, protocol, and anointed individual. Decentralized decision making is the backbone of groupware and shareware, of the open source software movement and IT users' groups, and of blogs and wikis. (Duh, if you have to ask what these are.) Everyone in the group helps make the rules, which are tested transparently and ferociously. If your code or your design doesn't work, it is dispatched quickly. And the rules are made to be changed on the fly (again through group interaction) to meet the group's needs and most especially to meet client needs. Massachusetts Institute of Technology management professor Thomas W. Malone, who explores the implications of decentralization in his new book The Future of Work (2004, Harvard Business School Press), equates the new organization of work with the core concepts of freedom. Given their membership structures, associations and other nonprofit organi-
Authority flows from merit and consensus, not from position, protocol, and an anointed individual.

Meaningful work
Malone is right. Decentralization empowers everyone, which reduces the authority of a top or a center. Older generations, clinging to organizations with a top or a center, may find the self-reliance of 20- and 30-somethings glib or truculent. To many current leaders, younger cohorts don’t take direction (orders? well, have an outsized sense of entitlement, and appear to live up to the (boomer-created?) name of slacker. Yet, to me, the younger folks are the ones embodying what American leaders have proclaimed for centuries: independence, accountability, and self-discipline. Young professionals are taking older generations at their word and seeking to continue the American project of securing “the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Older structures of authority look more and more like a distant and unresponsive parliament imposing taxes on tea.

If freedom at work is one crucial strand for many young thinkers, then so is the idea that work should have meaning outside of quarterly targets or tactics for the next legislative session. Former McKinsey partner Douglas K. Smith, in his new book On Value and Values (2004, Financial Times Prentice Hall), analyzes the search for purpose in organizational life. Smith emphasizes the need for organizations to link their good to a broader common good and identifies the increasingly empowered middle tier in organizations—what he calls the “thick we”—as the key voice for making that linkage happen. The thick we knows how to build internal consensus, and it knows that a “thin them” is not the leadership model of the future. How does your association foster its thick we?

Beyond functional
The industrial revolution was about creating things that worked for the masses. The post-industrial age assumes that things will work and requires individualized solutions that appeal to our aesthetic sense. On the street recently, I overheard a girl, perhaps 11 or 12, say to her mother, “How on earth did you live with just five channels?” This was a mutual Duh Factor. I could not hear the passing mother’s response, but her body language spoke volumes. Remember when folks were happy if the rabbit-ear antennas brought in a black-and-white picture, so that everyone could watch the same few offerings? Like the family dinner, that low threshold of satisfaction is long gone.

What this means for associations is that programs and communication cannot merely work, they must attract, delight, and inspire. Many younger colleagues are members of or inspired by what Richard Florida calls the “creative class”—no longer a fringe but the heart continued on page 83

Using the Power of “Duh”

Words reveal attitudes. Listen to how different generations use words differently. Listen for how labels are created and how concepts get captured in toss-off phrases. Recently, a 28-year-old said to me that he and his cohort are “1098s,” as opposed to older folks who are “W-2s,” because his generation views work more as a series of finite projects, less as a bundle of ongoing relationships. Sit up straight when you hear words like that.

Pop culture is smarter than you are. Sure, you cannot always understand the lyrics or figure out the logic of the game, but current pop culture has much to teach you. . . if you take the time to inquire. (You may not like what you learn, but that’s another story.)

Share your ignorance. Let people know when you don’t get it. Ask for help understanding the gap. Tell stories about what you don’t know. Create action steps from the stories and from the responses to the stories.

History helps. Take the long view. Society has been here before and lived to tell the tale. Set up a book circle at work that focuses on eras with similar generational issues, for example, the 1780s, the 1890s, or the 1920s. Capture the circle’s discussions as action steps for the organization.