

How to Engage the Next Generation

In pondering the legacy they wish to leave behind, one of the questions many donors ask is - Who will carry on the work? For donors who want their charitable work to continue after they are gone, long-term planning is not only a financial matter, but also a familial one.

The next generations have great strengths that can be nurtured through training, experiences, and mentorship.

Preparing the next generation is not as simple as showing them how you perform your philanthropic work and expecting them to follow suit. They've grown up in a different era, shaped by different formative experiences, and they approach philanthropy, and the whole concept of "doing good," with a different philosophy. They will want to make their philanthropic work their own, just as you have.

But first — what do we mean when we talk about "next generation," or "Next Gen," philanthropists?

For some, the answer is demographic, referring to donors who are members of the Millennial and Gen Z generations — born between 1981 and 2003, now anywhere between 18 and 40 years of age. For others, the term "next generation" refers more to a mindset, descendants of a philanthropic family who wish to carry on that legacy in an innovative and non-traditional fashion.

However one defines the term, Next Gen philanthropists often like to be hands-on in their involvement, they like to work in groups with their peers, and they may be more devoted to causes than individual organizations. They care more about attaining positive results than using traditional non-profit models to attain them. They are passionate about racial equity and diversity, and they want organizations to be responsive to their preferences and values. All of these are great strengths that can be nurtured through training, experiences, and mentorship.

Here are a few suggestions on how to make that happen:

1. Engage the next generation sooner rather than later.

Philanthropy is a skill developed over time, and while your Next Gen family members may approach it differently than you do, they will develop and grow both from their own experiences and from the mentorship they receive from you and others. The earlier you engage them, the more time they will have to refine their skills. Wait too long and they may lack confidence in their abilities and avoid philanthropy rather than take on a task that overwhelms them.

Working together will develop a shared sense of philanthropy as a family enterprise, rooted in common values. It will also leave time for meaningful conversations about what charitable work means to each of you, with space to identify shared interests and goals as well as those areas where your approaches diverge.

2. Seek to create opportunities for the next generation to practice leadership.

Research has shown that many Next Gen donors come to philanthropy ready and willing to rethink how its institutions work — indeed, they expect the work of changing the world to evolve and adapt to their vision of how change can be made. With those expectations in mind, it's valuable to give Next Gen donors leadership opportunities, which can include leading family meetings to discuss goals or grantees, or taking the lead on researching and recommending nonprofits to fund. This gives these donors an experience with what works and what doesn't work when it comes to philanthropy. These opportunities can also give them a greater sense of long-term responsibility for these projects.

3. Work together as a family, but also seek to help the next generation build and work across a larger network.

Philanthropic work and volunteering are both great ways to connect with one another as a family and to connect to the work that you are doing in common. In addition to deepening meaningful relationships, these times become opportunities to learn from one another and draw lessons from your different approaches to how you think about the work, and how you do it.

That said, your next generation family members will also benefit if you can expose them to a wider network of people, ranging from older and experienced donors to expert professional staff to younger peers who may be at similar stages in their own philanthropic journeys. This wider array of personalities, approaches, and experiences will provide a rich set of resources for them to consider and draw from as they develop their own approach to philanthropy. It will also give them an opportunity to develop a philanthropic peer network, something that many next generation donors value and which can be an important source of support and inspiration in their work.

By engaging the next generation of your family in philanthropy, you extend your legacy not only by ensuring that your family's resources will continue to be disbursed after you are gone but by fostering new philanthropic leaders whose ideas and vision can be a powerful force for good in ways nobody could predict.

Next generation donors may challenge us with their differing notions of how charity and change should operate, but they also bring insights to the work that are uniquely attuned to the ways the world is evolving around us. By investing your time and care in their paths now, you are ensuring that their creative spirit and passion will yield dividends whose value is beyond measure.

Please feel free to contact your Relationship Manager or the Donor Relations Team at donorrelations@calfund.org if you have any questions. We are here to help.