

A CHANGING OF THE GUARD Preparing the Next Generation of ASSP Leaders

By Wyatt Bradbury & Matthew E. Law

Something truly remarkable is happening at ASSP's National Capital Chapter, and looking at the chapter officers' web page only tells part of the story. While many chapters may struggle to engage Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2004), two chapter past presidents, Rob Matuga and Jerry Rivera, have another frame of thought. "At the National Capital Chapter, we want to make this a leadership hub for young safety professionals," says Rivera.

Currently, the chapter's president, president-elect, secretary, director and programs chair are all under age 40. Some members recently finished school and are still defining the type of safety professional they will become.

Some may see a fatal flaw in allowing Millennials to influence the direction of such a prestigious organization. However, Matuga and Rivera have quite the opposite opinion. "Right now, Millennials are the largest generation in the workforce. It is important to bring young members into chapter leadership positions as they are often looking for more advanced and meaningful opportunities," says Matuga, 2016-17 chapter president. Matuga and Rivera, among others, have realized that their careers are far from over, but the direct benefits that come from these leadership positions are best given to young professionals who can launch their careers through these opportunities.

According to a recent survey, Millennials look for collaborative and consensual responsibility in their working environments and professional organizations. They are empowered by the opportunity to make an impact and willing to take on leadership roles if given the chance, rather than relying on a leadership structure based on seniority or age (DTTL, 2017; Happ, 2017).

"Our goal is to provide support and guidance to young professionals, who are often looking to be mentored. In return, they have added value to our chapter leadership," says Rivera, 2014-15 chapter president. Millennials are often confident in their abilities to be leaders, but they also crave leadership development (Brousell, 2015; Happ, 2017).

Instead of fearing that our age or generational title might lead to unconventional ideas or challenge the system, nationally recognized safety professionals such as Rivera and Matuga embrace it and help to ensure our success despite it. Previous chapter officials are ensuring that their mistakes and challenges are not repeated so that future leaders can grow and improve.

Baby Boomers or Generation Xers may cringe at the exuberance exhibited by Millennials, fearing complete upheaval of the system

that has been so carefully and thoughtfully established. Why not help harness that energy, enthusiasm and genuine passion for bettering the world around them to improve the chapter rather than stifling it in such a way that makes them look elsewhere? Author Bradbury left the national leadership of two other established volunteer organizations because he felt he was not taken seriously. If a volunteer has an idea that s/he is passionate about, that individual can likely summon the energy to see it through to completion. Why not provide the platform and support to make failure less likely? The more eager volunteers are coached and sharpened from the wisdom of experienced leaders, the easier the transition between generations will be, and the likelihood of long-term success of the Society sharply increases.

Young professionals today may not yet possess the knowledge and experience that their predecessors have in the industry, but they have the drive, motivation and inspiration to create meaningful contributions to the organization and the industry. The ideas that this generation brings to the table must be fostered, and it seems to be happening at the National Capital Chapter. At the same time, the relationship between young professionals and previous chapter officials must be symbiotic. Both have to open themselves up to each others' expertise and networks, then be willing to give back.

However, it is easier to discuss these ideals than put them into practice. It will not be without hard work and effort by both groups to understand, appreciate and begin passing the leadership baton. Once that transition is initiated, both groups must remain engaged with each other to ensure that the baton is not dropped during the critical handoff. Here are some guidelines to consider for both groups.

Experienced Generations

- Open your mind and be willing to try everything. Millennials bring energy and time, but they also need your wisdom, guidance and support.

- Remember that young leaders thrive when faced with meaningful challenges. Present opportunities for young professionals to grow as individuals through challenging scenarios and meaningful contributions.

- Empower young leaders to create beneficial opportunities and embrace change when it happens. You are a resource and your influence will be evident in the great work accomplished by this generation.

Future Leaders/Young Professionals

- Be open to opportunities and willing to serve in any capacity. Even the simplest position can be made more efficient and presents an opportunity to be mentored and grow.

- Actively listen to older generations. Respectfully question and try to understand the process before trying to create change. This will help shape your ideas, combining them with the lessons learned from others and ensuring long-term success for the entire team.

- Engage peers and challenge them to serve as well. Leadership is perpetual; you must continually empower the next group of leaders to take charge and grow the organization.

This model is helping the National Capital Chapter succeed and ensures that future leaders will appreciate the work of previous volunteers. "If we are invested in the growth of the next generation of safety professionals, they will be more likely to develop a stronger relationship with ASSP," says Rivera.

We welcome feedback and hope these ideas can help create new conversations and opportunities across the ASSP community. **PSJ**

References

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