

# EFFICIENCIES ON THE ROAD TO A MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

*A case study of Generations Incorporated's efforts to reduce turnover, rethink the role of older adults and save money — all while engaging hundreds of people over 50 to help thousands of Boston's children learn to read*

by Mary Gunn



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past eight years, Generations Incorporated, a Boston-area nonprofit working to strengthen the literacy skills of young children by engaging people over the age of 50 as volunteer literacy tutors, has achieved something remarkable.

The organization I once led has grown considerably, increasing the number of children served by 75 percent and the number of tutors by 40 percent. It has improved program quality as evidenced by better student reading outcomes. And, here's the kicker, the nonprofit's team has done it all while decreasing its operating budget by 12.5 percent.

There are many reasons for this surprising result, including the development of a long-term strategic plan, investments in curriculum and training, and a lot of dedication and creativity. But this is the story of just one building block of the overall plan — our efforts to create an intergenerational team.

It all started for me when I attended my first staff meeting as the new executive director of Generations Incorporated (GI). Looking around the table, I was struck by how young the staff was. I was easily 25 years older than the next oldest person in the room.

All my colleagues were bright, hard-working and passionate about our mission. I was lucky to be among them, even if I was old enough to be their mother.

I learned quickly that while the staff was young, we relied on 200 committed, caring tutors over the age of 50 to tutor thousands of children each year. They were the drivers of our mission — and one reason for my surprise at the age of the staff.



## A BLESSING AND A CHALLENGE

Our work took place in elementary schools across the city, so site management was always a challenge. We organized the tutors in teams and assigned a team to each partner school. We needed a point person — a Team Leader — at each school to help manage data collection, quality control, scheduling, teacher relations and ongoing support for the tutors. Because of limited funds, Team Leaders have always been stipended volunteers.

Traditionally, Team Leaders were AmeriCorps members who worked full time for one year. Most were recent college grads doing a year of national service, then moving on. Over the course of many years, these young adults made tremendous contributions to our work as Team Leaders — and after their AmeriCorps service, some made contributions as staff members, too.

Our program was a big success, but not an uncomplicated one. Our costs-per-child were high and unsustainable. And the turnover of AmeriCorps Team Leaders was expensive for a variety of reasons.

“The Team Leaders are incredible,” Bill Wolff, a retired businessman and long-time tutor, told me. “But I’ve worked with four Team Leaders in four years, and this turnover every year isn’t great for us.” Bill made an important point.

I agreed that the turnover was tough on the tutors and knew it was expensive. But AmeriCorps members had played critical roles as Team Leaders since 1995, and their presence created bonds across generations, building real community. Truly, they were invaluable.



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I spent a lot of time considering solutions. Was there a way to rethink the Team Leader position to reduce turnover? And was there another way to engage AmeriCorps members, with their one-year terms of service, outside of the Team Leader role?

In my mind, the answer to both questions was yes. Most of our tutors were finished with their midlife careers, done with raising their families, and rooted to their homes and neighborhoods, close to the schools where they served. They needed purpose and connection in their lives and loved working with children. I was certain we could convince a few of them to become Team Leaders and stay in the jobs for years, eliminating the turnover problem.

And I believed we could tap another service program. AmeriCorps VISTA members — most young and right out of college — also serve for a year, but they don't provide direct service to children or volunteers. AmeriCorps VISTA members are assigned instead to build organizational capacity. They could help us collect data, develop marketing materials and fundraise. Yes, they would leave after a year, but it wouldn't be as disruptive to the children or tutors.

We had a lot of challenges and questions as we set out to change the program's structure. Would people in their 60s and 70s have the desire or capacity to do the Team Leader job? How could we make the economics of such a change work?

It took us three years to get answers, but it was worth it. Here's a look at some of the steps we took and the lessons we learned along the way.



## Step 1: Create an intergenerational workplace.

In an early phase of growth, we made it a priority to hire older professionals into staff roles. We had 200 older tutors serving thousands of children, but our central office staff was still very young. Whenever there were staff openings, I felt we should consider older adults for the role. I was concerned about “walking the talk.”

Luckily, we had a multi-year grant to grow our program. In short order, we hired four part-time (20 hours per week) Cluster Managers. Joining our staff were a school principal, a kindergarten teacher, a social work administrator, and a bank employee — all retired. They wanted meaningful, but not full-time work. They would oversee four sites each, supporting the Team Leaders, ensuring program quality and strong partnership relations. They were in charge of their own schedules with lots of flexibility, received a salary and had ample time off with pay.

These new staff members helped to create a vibrant intergenerational team — and a better workplace for all involved. The older staff members were not fazed by a hiccup here and there; they’d seen hiccups before. They were approximately the same age as the tutors and could relate to them well. They mentored the younger staff in many different ways.

And vice versa. The younger staff provided endless support to the training of the older staff members, who faced a huge learning curve when they first started.

Turnover on the central office staff level had always been low and still is today.

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**Lessons learned:** Jobs that are part-time, flexible, and offer meaningful work are perfect for people over 50. Diverse, multigenerational workplaces are fun, efficient, learning organizations. And it turns out that they can be more affordable, too.

## Step 2: Identify and remove obstacles.

We wanted some of our tutors to move into the Team Leader positions, coordinating schedules, tutors and data collection; developing relationships with tutors, teachers, administrators and students; and serving as the primary communications conduits between the schools and our central office.

When AmeriCorps members were Team Leaders, they were full time and received a modest living stipend of \$13,000, plus an education award they could use to cover tuition costs. Our tutors were mostly retired and not interested in full-time work, but we hoped that a stipend would help motivate some of them to step into a new role with more hours and more responsibilities.

The immediate challenge on the road to efficiency was to make what was a full-time Team Leader position into a part-time one. Data collection was the big obstacle, often taking our AmeriCorps Team Leaders up to 40 percent of their time. If we could move the responsibility for data collection to the individual tutors, the Team Leader position could be done on a part-time basis.

We figured that we could, with the right technology and training, eliminate the time it took Team Leaders to get the data we wanted -- if the tutors themselves took on the task of entering the data. And our new AmeriCorps VISTA members could be the ones to do the technical training.

We told the tutors what we wanted to do. They were not impressed. Some of them — 80 percent of whom came from the same neighborhoods as the children they served — had never used email. It would take a lot of love to move them on this idea.

Each of the 200 tutors would need to be trained to use a database called Salesforce. They would need to spend about 10 minutes after each tutoring session entering data. Team Leaders would then be responsible for data integrity, which would take no more than a few hours per week.

Tara Finnegan, a long-time champion of GI and its current board chair, feared an uprising. "I hope the tutors don't quit," she said. "They want to read with kids, not enter data."

They did grumble, but they trusted us. We provided training to small groups of tutors, with a lot of support. For those who couldn't manage, we did not push. Their peers stepped up to help them. They felt proud of themselves for learning a new skill. And they could see the progress they made with the students at the touch of a button.



**Lessons learned:** Don't rush a major change, and take the time to involve all stakeholders from the beginning. Our tutors needed to understand why the change was necessary. And they had to trust that this change was in the best interest of the students and themselves, as well as the program.

And don't assume that people over 50 can't learn how to use technology. That's just plain wrong.

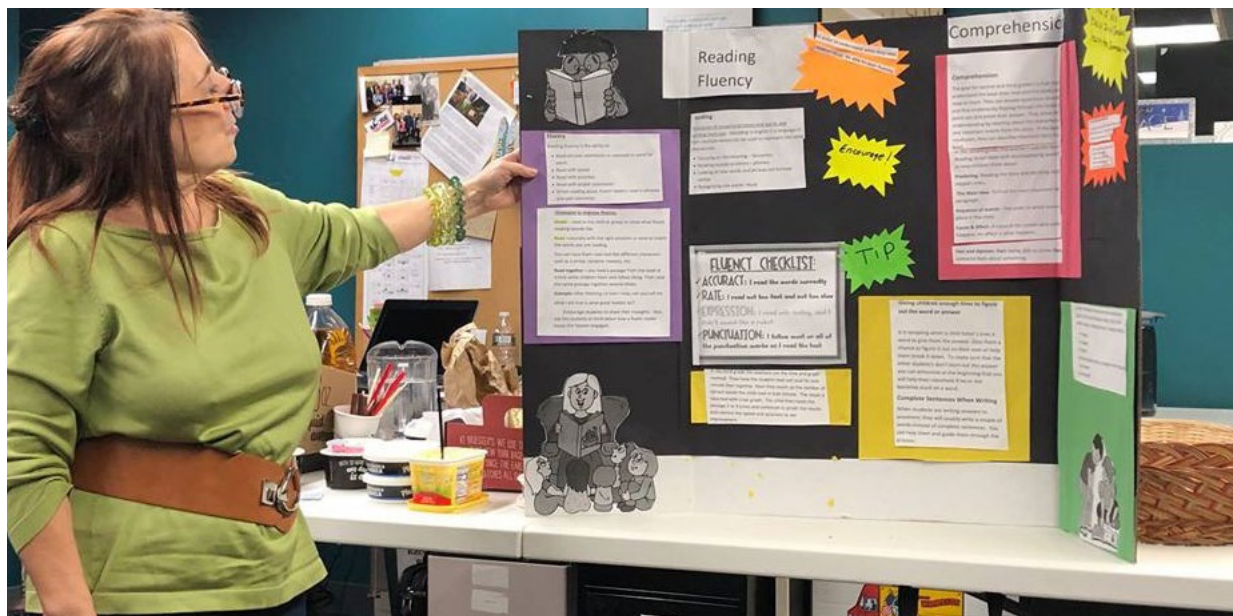
### Step 3: Lay the foundation carefully.

We knew we needed to create a new job description for the Team Leaders — one that reflected the new tasks, the part-time nature of the work, and the desires of the older adults who would move into the positions.

We asked five of our best tutors to step into the role in the pilot year, working 15 hours per week, side by side with the last cohort of AmeriCorps members. They would earn a \$5,000 annual stipend and would be responsible for oversight of the program.

We asked them to help us develop the new job description — and help determine how much and what kind of training they would need.

It wasn't without bumps, but it worked. By the second year, there were 15 Team Leaders, all over the age of 50. The new leaders became a learning cohort, coming together once a month for training, support and sharing. Eight years later, most of those early Team Leaders are still serving; turnover is no longer a problem.



**Lessons learned:** This work would have failed had it been top-down. The Team Leaders were instrumental in helping to design their own job description and the training they would need. Bringing them together as a learning cohort was powerful. They were experienced leaders, well-trained. They felt valued. This was a perfect role for older adults.

## Step 4: Keep going, keep growing.

Today Generations Incorporated serves 3,500 students in grades K-3, each receiving highly effective literacy tutoring at least twice per week.

There are 20 Team Leaders, all over 50. Bill Wolff is now in his tenth year in the position, as are many of his colleagues.

There are 280 tutors over the age of 50 serving at least five hours per week. The retention rate is 85 percent, and tutors stay an average of six years.

“They stay because they love the children and because they know we value them,” says Katie Klister Brown, who first came to Generations Incorporated as an AmeriCorps member and is now director of volunteer management. “We show that every day.”

Thanks to investments in curriculum and training, and the presence of consistent and culturally responsive older adults, program quality has improved and students have better reading outcomes.

And as I noted earlier, while Generations Incorporated tutors are serving 75 percent more children than they did before the transition, the organization’s operating budget has been reduced 12.5 percent, from \$2.4 million to \$2.1 million.



**Lessons learned:** Turnover is expensive, and older adults are resilient. They care about the children and will go above and beyond to serve them well. They’ll even learn Salesforce!



## AUTHOR BIO



Mary Gunn retired from Generations Incorporated in 2017. She's currently in her encore career, working as a consultant to Encore.org's Gen2Gen campaign and coaching five nonprofit tutoring programs eager to engage older adults for the first time.

**[Encore.org](#) is an innovation hub that taps the talent of the 50+ population as a force for good. [Gen2Gen](#) is Encore.org's campaign to connect the generations to help all thrive.**

Encore.org is pleased to publish this paper to start and inform conversations. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Encore.org.

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