

## The Bylaw Straitjacket: How "Can't Do Unless It Says You Can" Impacts Younger Generations in Nonprofits

In the dynamic world of nonprofits, adaptability and innovation are often key to survival and growth. Yet, a recent encounter at a regional meeting highlights a rigid interpretation of organizational bylaws that could significantly impact engagement from younger members: “If it does not say you can in the bylaws, then you can't.” While seemingly a safeguard for order and governance, this stance can feel like a straitjacket to the Millennial and Gen Z generations, whose professional and personal lives are shaped by vastly different expectations.

### The Millennial Perspective: Seeking Impact, Embracing Evolution

Millennials (born roughly 1981-1996), often dubbed the "bridging generation," have grown up with one foot in the analog world and one firmly in the digital. They witnessed rapid technological advancement and learned to adapt quickly. In the workplace, and certainly within volunteer organizations, they are known for their desire to find “meaning and make a tangible impact”. They look for opportunities to contribute, solve problems, and see their efforts directly benefit a cause.

When faced with a "can't do unless explicitly stated" rule, a Millennial might react with frustration and a sense of stifled potential. Their thinking often leans towards:

- \* “How can we get this done?” rather than "Is this explicitly allowed?"
- \* “What's the spirit of the rule?” over a literal interpretation.
- \* “This is an opportunity for innovation,”. seeing gaps in bylaws as areas for new initiatives, not roadblocks.

The feeling that innovation is blocked by omission, or that they must fight bureaucratic battles just to try something new, can be a major demotivator. For a generation that values collaboration and continuous improvement, this rigidity can feel inefficient and out of touch, potentially leading to disengagement or a search for organizations that offer more autonomy and responsiveness.

## The Gen Z Perspective: Digital Natives, Agile Thinkers

Gen Z (born roughly 1997-2012) are digital natives, having never known a world without the internet. They thrive on instant information, constant connectivity, and a culture of rapid prototyping and iteration. Their worldview is often characterized by pragmatism, a strong sense of social justice, and an expectation of agility from institutions. They are accustomed to platforms and systems that are constantly evolving and responsive to user feedback.

For a Gen Z member, the "can't do unless it says you can" rule can be genuinely bewildering and off-putting. Their reaction might be characterized by:

- \* "Why isn't there a solution for this already?" A quick search online would yield numerous approaches; why is a nonprofit stuck?
- \* "This feels incredibly slow and inefficient." They are used to quick pivots and agile methodologies. The idea of waiting for bylaw amendments to address an immediate need can seem absurd.
- \* "Does this organization truly want to make a difference?" If basic flexibility isn't present, they might question the organization's commitment to its mission in a rapidly changing world.

Gen Z members are less likely to patiently navigate rigid structures. If they perceive an organization as unwilling to adapt or embrace new ideas due to outdated rules, they may quickly move on. They are highly discerning about where they invest their time and energy, and an environment that prioritizes procedural exactitude over practical impact will likely struggle to retain them.

## Bridging the Generational Divide

The regional representative's statement, while rooted in a desire for order and historical precedent, risks alienating the very members who represent the future of many nonprofits. To foster engagement from Millennials and Gen Z, organizations might consider:

- \* **Creating a culture of inquiry and adaptation:** Encouraging members to propose new initiatives and offering pathways for bylaw reviews or temporary waivers for innovative projects.

- \* **Emphasizing "why":** Explaining the purpose behind rules, rather than just enforcing them, can foster understanding and trust.

- \* **Balancing governance with agility:** Recognizing that bylaws are living documents that may need periodic review to remain relevant and effective in a changing world.

Ultimately, while bylaws provide essential structure, their interpretation and application can either empower or stifle the passionate contributions of younger generations. For nonprofits hoping to thrive, understanding these generational perspectives is not just about inclusivity, but about ensuring continued relevance and impact.