

Everyday Innovators in Aging

An Interview with Jo Ann Jenkins, Chief Executive Officer, AARP

EDITORS' NOTE Since joining AARP in 2010 and leading the organization since 2014, Jo Ann Jenkins has transformed AARP into a leader in social change, dedicated to empowering people to choose how they live and age. Under her leadership, AARP has been recognized as one of the World's Most Ethical Companies. Her best-selling book, *Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age*, has become a signature rallying cry for revolutionizing society's views



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on aging by driving a new social consciousness and sparking innovative solutions for all generations. She also established a new strategic direction and operating structure for the AARP Foundation, focusing on change in four critical areas – hunger, income, housing, and isolation. She created Drive to End Hunger, a multi-year, nationwide campaign which has donated tens of millions of meals and provides support to over 100 anti-hunger organizations across the country. Jenkins began her career with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, moving on to progressively more responsible leadership positions in the U.S. Department of Transportation and U.S. Department of Agriculture before serving as Chief Operating Officer of the Library of Congress where, among other things, she led 11 National Book Festivals. Jenkins holds a variety of board and advisory positions including AARP Board of Directors; General Mills Board of Directors; The Wall Street Journal CEO Council; Kennedy Center National Symphony Orchestra Board of Directors; Stanford School of Medicine Board of Fellows; AVNET Board of Directors; World Economic Forum Stewardship Board for the Education, Gender, and Work System Initiative; World Economic Forum Board of Governors for the Health Systems Initiative; and Vice-Chair, International Oversight Board, National Academy of Medicine's "Healthy Longevity" initiative. In 2019, she received the Baldrige Leadership Award, and was named by Fortune as "One of the World's 50 Greatest Leaders." She has been recognized with BlackDoctor.org "Top Blacks in Healthcare" award (2019); Diversity & Flexibility Alliance Luminary Award (2019); WNET New York Public Media 2018 "Woman of Vision" Award; Washington Business Journal's "Women Who Mean Business" award (2018);

Black Enterprise Magazine "Most Powerful Women in Business" (2017); Actor's Fund Medal of Honor (2017); International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics 2017 Presidential Award; Foreign Policy Global Thinker (2017); Power 100 – Washington's Most Influential People, Washington Life Magazine (2015-2017); "NonProfit Influencer of the Year" (2015); "NonProfit Times' Power and Influence Top 50" (2013-2019); Peace Corps Director's Award (2014) and Malcolm Baldrige Fellow (2013).

After earning her B.S. degree from Spring Hill College in Mobile, AL, she graduated from the Stanford Graduate School of Business Executive Program. Jenkins also holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from both Spring Hill College and Washington College.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF AARP (aarp.org) is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With a nationwide presence and nearly 38 million members, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families: health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also produces the nation's largest circulation publications: AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin.

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Will you highlight the history and heritage of AARP and discuss how the organization has evolved?

AARP was founded over 60 years ago when Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a retired teacher and the first female high school principal in California, went to look up a former Spanish teacher whom she had heard was ill and not doing well. She found the woman living in the back of someone's house in an old chicken coop without any health insurance. That was all the woman could afford after her food and medicine were deducted from her \$40 a month pension payment. Dr. Andrus was appalled and decided to do something about it. She began a campaign to provide affordable medical insurance to retired educators. Eight years later, after being turned down by 42 insurance companies, she was offering the first ever group health insurance to retired teachers across the nation – a full decade before Medicare was signed into law. She soon discovered that many other older adults needed help as well, and in 1958, she founded AARP to make affordable group health insurance available to all older Americans.

Dr. Andrus founded AARP to improve the lives of older Americans and to create opportunities for them to lead productive lives of independence, dignity and purpose. To her, AARP was a means of coalescing the wisdom, experience and power of older Americans under the tenets of collective purpose, collective voice and collective purchasing power to change the way older people were thought about and treated, and equally important, to change the way older people thought about themselves. She used AARP to drive the social changes necessary to create a better life for older people in this country.

People are living better today because AARP has worked over the last 60 years to make Dr. Andrus' vision a reality. She left us a very powerful legacy that we have continued to build upon to make life better for people as they age. Dr. Andrus and AARP's other leaders were all aging disruptors – challenging the stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about aging in their time to create a new narrative around aging and new solutions for helping people to age better.

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more people to choose how they live as they age. Building on our founder’s legacy and our treasured past, we are now the nation’s largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members – 23 million households – and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, we work to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families – health security, financial resilience, fun and fulfillment. We also work for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen products to carry the AARP name.

Our members span four generations and reflect a wide range of attitudes, cultures and lifestyles. Approximately one-third of our members work either full- or part-time. Nearly two-thirds are retired and tens of thousands of them volunteer to deliver AARP programs. Just as Dr. Andrus did 60 years ago, we envision a society in which all people live with dignity and purpose. We want to empower them to fulfill their real possibilities over the course of an ever-longer lifetime while living healthier, more financially secure and more fulfilling lives.

How do you define the AARP culture and how critical is culture to the success of the organization?

Culture is critical to the success of any organization. I like to say that culture trumps strategy any day of the week. That’s why we’ve been very deliberate in defining our corporate culture at AARP. As the CEO, it’s my job to lead in setting the tone in defining our culture. That means:

- Having a clear vision and mission – our leaders need to know why we’re here. As CEO, I need to feel confident that we’re all trying to get to the same place. We must convey a clear and aspirational vision. That vision comes from the organization’s purpose. It’s about understanding what we’re in business to do and imagining what it would look like if we were successful in doing it. Then we have to have a sound strategy for making that vision a reality. This is our mission. Our vision tells us where we want to go; our mission tells us what we need to do to get there.

- Having a clear message – don’t complicate it...make sure people understand it in the same way.

- Demonstrating the integrity and courage to execute on the vision and mission. Change, especially transformational change, is hard. It requires a leap of faith on the part of employees and the board. To get them to take that leap, you have to demonstrate integrity in every action, no matter how small, and convey your own belief in the organization’s ability to succeed. As the CEO, I have to be fair, but also hold people accountable. That also means rewarding exemplary performance.

Our culture is a reflection of our organizational character which is made up of:

- Our purpose to empower people to choose how they live and age;
- Our role as “everyday innovators in aging;”
- Our values – Impact, Innovation, Humanity, Empowerment and Honesty – that guide our actions and behaviors; and
- Our core leadership behaviors that we expect every AARP leader to practice – Talk Straight/Listen Actively, Take an Enterprise-wide View, Make Informed Decisions, Inspire and Engage, and Exhibit Integrity.

By applying this philosophy at AARP we are developing a culture that is challenging the status quo, innovating new solutions to old problems and taking AARP in new directions. With that as a foundation, I’ve been trying to encourage our staff to take strategic risks. I tell them that it’s okay to fail as long as you fail fast and you learn something from it, and you share that learning across the organization so nobody else makes the same mistake. I think that’s been a big change for us at AARP. We’ve always been much more risk averse. So now we’re embracing this opportunity to take some strategic risks, but those risks need to be towards big opportunities for us to engage more members and engender more brand loyalty.

You have focused on transforming AARP into a leader in social change. Where is AARP on this transformation journey and will you discuss the progress that has been made?

We began our transformation six years ago. We learned from research, member feedback, and futurecasting that in order to create the future we envisioned, we would have to change and transform AARP into an organization that could adapt to meet the ever-changing needs of its members and society.

Three significant conclusions emerged from this research that led to our decision to transform the organization:

1. Demographics – more people were living longer.
2. The way people are aging is changing, and that change is largely driven by innovations in technology, and
3. The things that made us successful in the past would not necessarily make us successful in the future.

When we evaluated all of our research, we realized that, because of the demographic changes and the changing way people are aging, doing the things and operating the way we had in the past would not necessarily make us successful in the future. That meant we had to adapt our business model to be ready to meet our members’ needs, not just today, but also in the future.

We could no longer assume that people 50-plus would come to AARP; we have to go where they are. When we have the opportunity to interact, we have to be prepared to serve them what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. We realized that our siloed technology didn’t allow us to do that. To get there, we would have to change the way we think and the way we execute.

This set us on a transformation journey to build on our role as everyday innovators in aging to accelerate our impact externally. We were determined to create more relevance, more innovation, more influence and greater impact to achieve our purpose of empowering more people to choose how they live as they age. We have made tremendous progress in our transformation journey. We’re transforming ourselves to better align our technology, data collection and business strategy to create a more integrated and flexible business platform that can reach members where they are and deliver personalized experiences, capture new data, and offer new products to the right members at the right time on the right device – whether it be by phone, print, email, social media, text or in-person events.

We call this our Digital Business Platform Transformation. It is transforming how we work and leading us to produce data-driven outcomes and better consumer experiences, allowing us to provide improved and desired experiences to our members in real time, improve our business-to-business value with our partners and

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advertisers, synchronize messages across multiple channels, and to scale and deliver tangible value and social impact in ways we have not been able to do in the past.

Because of our relentless efforts to put the consumer first, combined with a laser focus on empowering people through critical life transitions and on being a social force for good, we're empowering more people to choose how they live as they age.

How critical is innovation to AARP's work and where is innovation taking place within the organization?

Innovation is at the core of AARP's work and drives our success. When we think of innovation, we usually imagine some new product or service, an invention that revolutionizes our lives or that's never been done or seen before, like the smart phone or autonomous vehicles. But innovation is more than that. Our quality of life in the future will also be determined by innovations in how products are designed, how services are delivered and how policies are implemented.

Our founder, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, was truly one of the great social innovators. While business innovation is often designed to address individual needs and interests, social innovation is more about finding new solutions to social needs or problems such as hunger, isolation, affordable housing, health and long-term care, etc. Social innovation helps change society as well as helps people live their best lives. At AARP, we focus on both business and social innovation.

At AARP, we call upon our staff to be “Everyday Innovators in Aging.” We see innovation as everybody's job, and we drive innovation through all of our Issue Areas and Strategic Priorities as we strive to develop innovative offerings and support processes at the operational level. We have also launched several specific innovation initiatives. In 2015, we established an Innovation Fund, the first of its kind in the nonprofit world. Our goal was to push out more capital to the market to drive more products, services and technology for the 50+ market. Our initial focus was on Aging at Home, Convenience and Access to Healthcare, and Preventive Health.

To enable the exploration of significant innovation opportunities, we created an internal innovation center called AARP Innovation Labs. It includes a dedicated Design Thinking

function that applies best practices to quickly analyze, design and iterate potential solutions incorporating in-person and consumer feedback. If a solution is successful, it flows into the appropriate part of the business for further design, launch and scale. AARP Innovation Labs is also an innovation accelerator that works with start-ups and investors to discover big ideas and bring them to scale. It creates tangible value by identifying and engaging startups from across the world that are working to create solutions that align with our Issue Areas and Strategic Priorities.

Additionally, in partnership with the Research Park at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we established Tech Nest, an innovative technology lab that employs academic talent to create technology solutions for people 50+.

Our staff throughout the enterprise have embraced their roles as “Everyday Innovators in Aging” to enable people to live healthier, more financially secure and more fulfilling lives. AARP was recently named one of Fast Company magazine's Best Workplaces for Innovators, placing 14th out of the top 100 companies.

How critical is it for AARP to build a diverse and inclusive workforce in order to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when making business decisions?

At AARP, we view diversity and inclusion as a business imperative. It's not just a part of our business strategy, it is our business strategy. It's in the DNA of everything we do. This is our public policy, our HR policy and our organizational strategy. Everything we do must include diversity, inclusion, and serving the low-income vulnerable in this country. We have a saying at AARP that goes all the way back to our founder – “What we do, we do for all.” This is an essential part of AARP's social impact mission. This means that multicultural insights are embedded in the design, training and implementation of all the work we do. Our country is evolving into a multifaceted, multicultural society. By 2030, racial and ethnic minorities will be 42 percent of the U.S. population, and one in five Americans age 65-plus will be Hispanic. So, to achieve our purpose of empowering people to choose how they live as they age, we incorporate inclusive principles into our Enterprise Strategy to form our goals, social impact agenda and strategic priorities.

We do this by creating a work environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully and have equal access to opportunities and resources, so they can contribute fully to the organization's success. We achieve that by aligning a diverse workforce with diverse work arrangements to create business practices and an organizational culture behind a shared mission with shared leadership to achieve a shared purpose.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

My leadership philosophy has always been focused on trust. Leaders need to build trust. I think that's part of who I am; that I don't say things I don't mean. If you ask me a question, I'm not the one to come to if you want me to tell you what you want to hear, versus what I think you need to hear. I think that if you talk with any of our employees or any of the people that I work with, they would say that being authentic and being trustworthy and being transparent are at the core of my leadership style.

I've always liked what Eleanor Roosevelt said about leadership. She said, “A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader; a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves.” I believe that to be successful in today's constantly changing world, you need talented, innovative and trusted leaders at all levels of the organization, not just at the top. As CEO, it's my job to help develop those leaders and then help them succeed. I always say that my biggest job is to help people achieve more than what they ever thought possible; to remove the barriers in the workplace so that they can do their best work. That's what we thrive on here at AARP, because we know we have to continuously innovate in order to meet the needs of our members, not just today but well into the future.

AARP has achieved great success under your leadership. Do you take moments to celebrate the wins and appreciate what you have accomplished or are you always looking at what is next?

We do both. I think it's important to celebrate wins and to recognize the hard work and totality of effort, resources and teamwork it takes to achieve those wins. At the same time, we can't just sit back and rely on past successes. We have to recognize that what made us successful in the past won't necessarily guarantee our success in the future. So, we must continually look ahead to the next challenge and prepare to meet it. ●