



MANAGING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

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We often hear Baby Boomers grumble in their microbrews about the independent attitudes of their twenty-and thirtysomething colleagues. The Gen Xers are faulted for laid-back work habits, lack of motivation, and absence of commitment. They seem to have no respect for traditional values or organizational culture. There is some truth to this. Younger workers know there's a labor shortage and they're not about to be exploited, work longer hours, be loyal as dogs, as the Boomers were. This feeling of disconnection is a two-way street: Younger employees have different priorities in their lives than their older co-workers. They don't understand the competitiveness and intensity of the Boomers at the expense of,

what the Gen Xers consider, a more balanced lifestyle. These opposing viewpoints often lead to friction in the workplace.

Surprisingly, the different generations actually have some things in common. In the interest of establishing a greater rapport between the age groups, let's dispel some myths. Here are some generalizations that may not with-

stand close scrutiny — and some that will.

Hard work is a function of age.

Are all Gen Xers slackers and all Boomers (and pre-Boomers) intrinsically worker bees? Of course not. Every Boomer isn't a workaholic, including many who claim they are. Conversely, younger workers will work intensely and enthusiastically if they're emotionally engaged in the job. Moreover, many Gen Xers have an eye toward self-employment. When they eventually strike out on their own, they will work non-stop and recruit family members into the business.

What a manager perceives as the lack of ambition or a poor work ethic may be caused by subordinates' boredom: Younger workers demand high content and meaning in their work. It must make a visible difference to the organization — right now. Gen Xers do not subscribe to the idea of "paying your dues." Having their ideas ignored or told to wait until they've learned more about the organizational culture doesn't make sense to them. If a job lacks content or the break-in period seems to go on interminably before real challenges emerge, they are gone and quick to say why.

In this preoccupation with job satisfaction, many Boomers are being influenced by their younger colleagues. Sometime between 1990 and 1995 an idea grabbed the collective worker conscious-

ness: Since job security doesn't exist, it makes no sense to remain in an unhappy situation — unless you are strapped for cash. Even in this sluggish job market, Boomers will follow the lead of their younger colleagues: job hunt surreptitiously and leave without explanation for a better — or more interesting — opportunity. The difference is this: A Gen Xer will decide in a week that a job has no future; a Boomer will suffer longer before facing this truth and acting on it. Our conclusion: Hard work is a function of interest, not age.

Professional attitudes are different.

The most rigid generational differences cluster around expectations of the role that work plays in life. Young workers see what they do for a living as part of their identity — and often not the most important part — whereas most Boomers self-identify by their jobs. A younger person will say, "I'm a civil engineer but I also cook a mean risotto, wield a wicked backhand, and I'm a Cub Scout leader." Boomers find this attitude unprofessional because, for most of them, their identification with their job is total.

One result of their desire for a more well rounded persona is that Gen Xers put a greater emphasis on lifestyle choices. They try harder to make more time for family and leisure. This philosophy is slowly gaining ground across the age spectrum. Some Boomers are questioning their commitments as they realize their younger coworkers think devotion and loyalty are not necessarily admirable nor particularly useful. Until the economy faltered, Boomers watched Gen Xers dictate the terms of their lifestyles without negative influences on job or social position.

Today, even a dedicated Boomer may rethink his frenzied schedule, especially if his wife returns to the workplace. Not surprisingly, two incomes can shift priorities. This again reflects the impact of the under-35 crowd, a "trickle up" effect. Unfortunately for many Boomers, the economy has seen their savings dwindle, thwarting their plans for early retirement.

This desire for a life outside of the organization translates into less time for workplace-related socializing or participation in non-essential activities such as after-hour gatherings or volunteer endeavors. Ask any organization in any industry and you will hear how it struggles with poor meeting attendance. Boomers will arrive early, network, and stay late; Gen Xers are out the door after an hour, if they show up at all.

Job expectations are fundamentally different between age groups

True. Younger workers are less interested in a long-term career plan; they want to work at an interesting series of short-

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term jobs. They're focused on learning transferrable skills and getting results they can showcase on a resume. In a healthy economy, this becomes the main reason turnover rates are so high among Gen Xers.

In contrast, many Boomers — despite all the evidence against the odds of achieving this goal — still yearn for long-term employment even if they will have to give up leisure time and money to get it. Most Boomers who have recently lost jobs are still in a state of shock. The idea of a job hunt— especially in this labor market — is too dreadful to contemplate. Some may not have undertaken one since graduation.

Gen Xers are loners.

Boomers have traditionally formed close friendships at work; younger workers are not interested in building such relationships. Any discretionary time is likely filled with obligations to family or friends. Besides, people just passing through on the way to the next gig have little interest in developing a relationship with coworkers or the boss.

This isolationist attitude extends to teamwork. Young people want to work alone. The forty- and fiftysomething Boomers were part of a crowded generation. They had to "play well with others." Thirtysomethings belong to an uncrowded generation and they're determined not to be part of any crowd, even if it's called a team. They want to follow their job descriptions to the letter, i.e., specific tasks to be done within a set time frame so they can check them off a list. They think team participation wastes time. Younger workers dislike office politics, too. Why gossip over the coffee pot or give credence to the grapevine when you don't care about the subject matter and won't be around to hear the end of the story anyhow? This is another reason they dislike teams: teams without politics don't exist. They involve give and take and maneuvering for power.

There is one exception to the generational trait of eschewing workplace relationships: Gen Xers are crazy about the idea of mentoring. Mentors are a wealth of information and therefore a shortcut to any career goal — however short-term — a Gen Xer might have. A mentor can also ease the transition into the organization by explaining the culture and values.

Managers faced with motivating an age-diverse work group face enormous challenges. There is no universal motivation because the age composition of the workplace isn't stable and isn't likely to become so. Not only is there a coming shortage of younger workers but some organizations are actively recruiting older workers — clones of themselves — whom they hope will prove more stable and provide role models for the young. Here are some ideas for bridging the gap.

Begin a cross-generational mentoring program.

Employees absorb organizational culture through co-workers, not from the annual report. A new hire, eager for knowledge about the company (department, etc.), sees the mentor as a fountain of nuts-and-bolts information about the organization and often as the dispenser of political insights. When Boomers are willing to share their wisdom, they can often mentor the Gen Xers into compliance and cooperation — not to mention the bonus of longevity. In exchange, Gen Xers can bring their elders up to speed technologically and perhaps offer newer professional insights. Mentors slow turnover and in-crease job satisfaction.

Rethink your approach to team work.

First triage the team by separating people into those who've played their roles well in the past (probably Boomers) and the hard-core resisters (mostly Gen Xers). Meet with each group to decide what will induce them to cooperate. Don't be surprised if the resisters say that the only thing that will satisfy them is "clear goals and directions from management." They mean, "Tell me what to do and I'll get on with it. Don't try to make me think." Don't waste time try-

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Additive Effect of β Agonists and Anticholinergic Agents

Conflicting results have been found on the question of whether the bronchodilator effect of β agonists is increased by adding an anticholinergic agent, in either COPD or asthma. Many of the studies performed with combined anticholinergic and β -agonist bronchodilator therapy suffer from small sample sizes and poor statistical power. Before the approval of combined albuterol and ipratropium (Combivent), a large, well-controlled study was conducted over 85 days with 462 patients at 24 centers. Patients represented stable COPD. The study showed superior efficacy of the combination therapy of ipratropium and albuterol compared with either agent alone. Another study with ipratropium plus albuterol with albuterol or ipratropium alone on the percentage change in FEV1 showed a mean peak increases in FEV1 were 31 to 33% for combined drug therapy, compared with 24 to 25% for ipratropium alone and 24 to 27% for albuterol alone. Flow rates were significantly better on all test days. Symptom scores did not differ among the three groups, however. As a large, well-designed study, these results support combination anticholinergic and β -agonist therapy in COPD.

Anticholinergics are another solution to the fight to relieve air flow obstruction. These agents work well with beta agonists as well as on their own. The next time a patient is in distress the use of an anticholinergic may be needed.

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ing to change them unless you're willing to punish noncompliance. If you get a few members to cooperate, peer pressure will work better than your attempts at coercion. In the meantime, what tasks can most effectively be assigned to individuals?

Make learning the centerpiece. Gen Xers are hooked on email so use it liberally but judiciously: Save some important information for distribution exclusively during a team meeting and make sure team members know that is what's on the agenda. Like it or not, meetings are important so members can get feedback from others that's friendly and helpful — including from the boss who should always attend and participate.

Keep rethinking your goals. Is total participation really necessary except when strategic decisions are being made? If you're not going to change courses no matter what, don't demand an opinion from everyone. Gen Xers hate being lashed into discussion even when they know the boss has already decided the outcome.

Compensate only those who exhibit the desirable behavior even if that means some high performers don't get the reward they might have had if they'd been team-minded. They'll probably move on, but that's exactly what the reward system is meant to facilitate. As part of your evaluation, ask your direct reports, "What have you done (initiated) that has enhanced the productivity, effectiveness, and satisfaction of co-workers, especially your teammates?" Unless compensation reflects the individual's contribution to the team, teamwork is doomed. (It may be anyhow: As younger workers take over from the forty- and fiftysomethings they are much more likely to reward individual efforts and breakthroughs. That will doom teams no matter what top management wants or thinks.)

Understand the importance of lifestyle.

You will never get 100 percent commitment from Gen Xers. The word "loyalty" doesn't mean what it meant to their parents, many of whom were rewarded for their loyalty with serial layoffs in the 80s. As often as possible, make allowances for family or personal needs of employees. They will put family and friends before the organization regardless. In deference to family time, consider moving meetings to early morning. Schedule working lunches instead of keeping people late.

If an activity is not a command performance and you want cross-generational participation, understand that lifestyle rules. Make the meeting short. Provide an agenda for every meeting and stick to it. Make sure there some sort of a welcoming committee. Gen Xers will not work a room like their elders. If no one talks to them, they just won't come back. And don't expect 100 percent turnout even at an organizational social function that's free to all.

The goal of cross-generational harmony in the workplace is not impossible. Boomers can learn to manage, motivate, and retain Gen Xers. Gen Xers can learn to appreciate the Boomers' knowledge of organizational history and culture — and yes, their work ethic. As Boomers retire, Gen Xers may end up managing older workers — an excellent reason for them to develop an understanding of that generation's values and styles.

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