

## Why aren't you more like me? The generational gap in the workplace

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The workplace is facing a generational adjustment of values, learning and working styles that will have a huge impact on how leaders think and act. Generation X and Generation Y will transform the nature of the workplace.

Generation X (born 1965-1980 and approximately 55 million in North America) accept diversity; they are skeptical, pragmatic and practical, self-reliant, independent and individualistic; they reject authoritarianism and control; they were latchkey children and separate friends from family. They like a casual, friendly work environment, seek challenge, involvement and flexible learning arrangements. Work-life balance and family priorities are very important to Gen Xers.

Generation Y (born 1981-1999 and approximately 80 million in North America) celebrate diversity; they are optimistic, inventive and individualistic; they rewrite the rules; they enjoy a pleasurable lifestyle; they don't see the relevance of most institutions; they are masters of technology and social media; were nurtured by their parents; see friends as family; like a collaborative supportive work environment and interactive work relationships; have high demands and expectations; want to work for companies that are socially responsible and they want a balanced life.

The Pew Research Center has published a report profiling Generation Y entitled, "Generation Next." The report cited these characteristics of Generation Y:

- More than 50% of them are immigrants and not native North Americans, with liberal attitudes toward such issues such as gay marriage, and interracial dating;
- They are critical of the ethics and morality of business;
- They maintain close ties with their families;

- When they identify with a "hero" they are more likely to identify a family member, teacher or mentor rather than celebrities or politicians;
- They are more involved in politics than Gen Xers;

Bruce Tulgan, the founder of Rainmaker Thinking and an expert on Generation Y, says that they are a pampered and nurtured generation, being both high performance and high maintenance, with a very high sense of self-worth. Tulgan calls them "Generation X on steroids."

Generation Y does not like authoritarian leadership styles because they've grown up being able to question their parents. Generation Y, unlike Baby Boomers, is interested in making their jobs accommodate their family and personal lives. They have an extremely high value on self-fulfillment; they don't expect to stay in a job or career for long, seeing career change as normal.

In the workplace, the practice of the annual performance review is commonplace, but not one to which Generation Y is receptive. They grew up used to constant feedback and recognition from parents and coaches and teachers and expect more regular communication from bosses.

Generation Y's attitudes, values and behaviors are already beginning to show conflict with Baby Boom leaders and some Generation X leaders as well. According to a survey by Lee Hecht Harrison Company, 60% of employers are experiencing tension between employees of different generations. The survey found that 70% of older employees are dismissive of younger workers' abilities, and 50% of Gen Y workers were dismissive of older workers' abilities.

In the July 7, 2007 article in Time Magazine, writer Penelope Trunk observed that what distinguishes Generation Y is their attitude toward work and home. She says that Baby Boomers usually put work first, and Generation Xers try to juggle equally work and family, while Generation Y wants to spend quality and meaningful time in both. Another big difference for Generation Yers is their comfort in continuing to live at home with their parents, while they find the right kind of work. Many Generation Yers choose jobs just to be with their friends because friendships are a high value, or they choose jobs that allow them to work as volunteers in the community.

So what do employers and leaders need to know and do to address these generational differences, and in particular respond to Generation Y workers?

Sylvia Hewlett, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg wrote in the August 2009 issue of the Harvard Business Review that when economic times improve the landscape of talent management will have been transformed. Because of the

impact of the recession, a combination of large numbers of Generation Yers entering the workforce combined with a refusal of Baby Boomers to take retirement will dramatically shift the composition of the workforce.

Two large surveys of college graduates the combined efforts of Booz, Allen Hamilton, Ernst and Young, Time Warner and UBS, concluded that on the surface--which is somewhat contradictory--that Generation Y shares some similarities with the Baby Boomers, more so than with Generation X. They both want to make social contributions through their work, they value social connections and loyalty to friends, and they prize other rewards over monetary compensation.

So what are smart employers and leaders doing? In essence, they are aligning jobs with the shared values of employees, which allows Baby Boomers to scale back hours but still provide their experience. For example, American Express is providing more job flexibility, allowing people to work where and how they want; and like Citigroup's Alternative Solutions Work program; which provides opportunities for social contribution and like Ernst and Young's Corporate Responsibility Fellows Program which has instituted progressive work policies that value multiple bottom lines including CSR and sustainability; and like Time Warner and Cisco which has instituted intergenerational mentoring.

Another interesting feature of the current generational shifts is the current leadership challenge of Generation Xers. As Baby Boomers retire and Generation Yers are not yet old enough to assume the reigns of power, Generation Xers will step into leadership positions and face the challenge of managing significant generational differences, which will require the best attributes of a transformational leadership style. The next decade in the workplace promises to provide some interesting generational dynamics.

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