BEST PRACTICES

FROM GERRY HOEFFNER...

Managing Across Generations

Younger generations — the so-called Gen Xers and New Millennials — comprise half the U.S. work force. The other half consists of 45% Baby Boomers and 5% veterans, many of whom are charged with motivating newer employees.

But what happens when generations don't share the same values and beliefs about workplace success?

Business consultant Cam Marston presents new insights into managing across the generational divide in Motivating the "What's In It For Me?" Workforce (2007, John Wiley & Sons). Now, more than ever, American workers born after 1965 aren't following in their elders' footsteps. They have different workplace values and definitions of success.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1965, occupy most positions of power and responsibility on organizational charts. Most of today's corporate management practices still reflect the systems and values of their predecessors, the veterans.

Gen Xers and Millennials therefore present unique challenges for Boomer managers. They aren't interested in time-honored traditions or "the way things have always been done." Rather, they're single-mindedly focused on what it takes to get ahead and reach their perceived career destination.

This group shuns past definitions of success: climbing the company ladder and earning the rewards that come with greater responsibility. The company ladder, in their view, is irrelevant.

Mature workers and Boomers in managerial and leadership positions struggle with these differing values and beliefs, wondering how to motivate their younger colleagues. If promotions, raises and bonuses fail to motivate, then what does the trick?
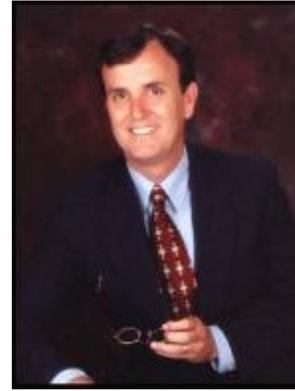
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Gerry has found a unique and energizing approach to training management teams and their employees. His passion for the study of human behavior and his experience in manufacturing, retail sales, financial services, real estate and the medical field imparts a broad spectrum of insight and knowledge to his presentations. Gerry is known throughout the United States and Canada for his high-energy presentations and "straight talking" approach to managing the human side of your business.

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We can identify several differences in values. The new generation of workers has:

1. A work ethic that no longer respects or values 10-hour workdays
2. An easily attained competence in new technologies and a facility to master even newer ones with little discomfort
3. Tenuous to nonexistent loyalty to any organization
4. Changed priorities for lifetime goals achievable by employment

The most significant changes in perspective involve time, technology and loyalty.

Time

Different generations value time in distinct ways. For Boomers, time has always been something to invest in the future. They work hard and pride themselves on putting in 55+ hours a week, but they count on future rewards for their efforts. This payout hasn't always materialized as expected.

Gen Xers and Millennials regard time as something to control, just like money. In fact, to them, time has equal value. Some employers are realizing that time off is a satisfactory trade-off when they can't pay their younger employees higher salaries.

For younger workers, time itself is a currency, and they aren't willing to invest it in a career or job with uncertain dividends. In today's climate of job insecurity, layoffs and changing industries, any employment is potentially unstable. "Why put in long hours?" they wonder.

Technology

Gen Xers and Millenials eagerly embrace technology. After all, they grew up using computers, beginning in preschool. When they interact with older colleagues who are confused and somewhat fearful of technology, a real role reversal often occurs.

It's critical for leaders to combine the wisdom of experience and the technological savvy of youth to benefit all employees — and the bottom line.

Loyalty

Gen Xers and Millenials have many reasons to question authority, rather than bow to it. They don't automatically believe their leaders tell the truth. They have seen plenty of lies from presidents, CEOs, legislators and even religious institutions, which bred skepticism. Advertising and media hype simply don't fly.

Instead, younger generations invest their loyalty and trust in individuals. They want to work for the right boss, and they'll change jobs if they can't.

The silent generation of mature workers and Boomers never had that luxury. Working for a disagreeable person was something you had to endure.

Company loyalty has gone out the window. Loyalty to an individual is now the No. 1 reason Gen Xers and Millenials stay at a job, especially during the first three years of employment.

Dissatisfaction with a boss is the No. 1 reason they quit. This upheaval in values is creating new priorities and business practices in America, and it puts pressure on managers to lead with both head and heart.

Changed Management Practices

Two other workplace changes — one societal, the other market-driven — strongly contribute to generational differences.

In the late 60s and 70s, individual expression in dress and language appeared for the first time in the workplace. Gray flannel suits and button-down shirts, the de facto uniform for mature workers and older Boomers, fell by the wayside. Personal possessions began decorating work stations and cubicles.

Today, expressions of tastes and preferences are still alive and well within the context of most organizations' HR rules. Although limited, individuals can express their tastes through personal styles in clothing and desk/cubicle décor.

The second sweeping change is less beneficial. Today's workplace seems to be in constant turmoil because of demands for rapid change:

- Revolving-door management is endemic. CEOs frequently change, and mid-level managers are often eliminated. Work is regularly conducted by teams, in the absence of a readily identifiable hierarchy.

- Since 1998, more than 45,000 mergers and acquisitions of companies valued at $5 million or more have occurred. Job security is an obsolete concept.

While unemployment rates are a good indicator of the economy's health, there is no real measure for job security. With such rapid changes, corporate culture doesn't evolve quickly enough to meet most employees' demands for satisfaction.

Vital Differences

Here we are, nearing the end of the first decade of the 21st century, with four different generations working together — often side by side, in overlapping cubicles and desks.

Most people are managed by someone older. Some exceptions occur in technology departments and industries. For the most part, however, the older generation manages the work life of its younger and newer counterparts.

Most managers assume their direct reports will be motivated by the same values and rewards they hold dear. But as someone once said, "This is not your father's workplace."

Each cohort, or age group, has uniquely different values and beliefs about how to work, relate to authority and best motivate people.

The following situations make today's work force "not your father's workplace." Each generation has disparate attitudes and beliefs about:

1. Time
2. Technology
3. Loyalty
4. Individual expression
5. Job security

Boomers Versus Gen Xers

Time Magazine offered this definition of Boomers and Gen Xers in "Great Xpectations" (June 9, 1997):

" 'Boomers,' born from 1946 to 1965 grew up in affluence: Economic progress was assumed, freeing them to focus on idealism and personal growth. Young Xers, however, lurched through the recession of the early '80s, only to see the mid-decade glitz dissipate in the 1987 stock-market crash and the recession of 1990–91. Gen X could never presume success.

In their new book, Rocking the Ages, Yankelovich's Walker Smith and his colleague Ann Clurman blame Xers' woes on their parents: 'Forget what the idealistic boomers, intended,' Xers say, 'and look at instead what they actually did: Divorce. Latchkey kids. Homelessness. Soaring national debt. Bankrupt Social Security. Holes in the ozone layer. Crack. Downsizing and layoffs. Urban deterioration. Gangs. Junk bonds...' "

Hours and Output

Another major difference between Boomers and Gen Xers — and an ongoing source of contention — is work habits. Boomers pride themselves on putting in long hours and being the first one into the office and last to leave. They have a stereotypical idea of Gen X employees: slackers unwilling to put in enough time.

But Gen Xers think of hard work as effective output. They are unwilling to put in long hours once they have produced the necessary output for that day. They're less concerned about who sees them in the office, and they largely reject Boomers' definition of hard work.

Gen Xers grew up observing their parents' roller-coaster ride in the workplace: layoffs, downsizings, difficulties with bosses and years of hard work without anticipated rewards.

Instead, new workers consider control of their time the primary goal, even if extended hours lead to monetary benefits.

Questions to Ask Younger Generations

How can leaders harness a multigenerational work force's skills? What is required to lead young people who believe Boomers are outdated and out of touch?

Leaders should ask themselves the following questions:

1. What do my employees want from their jobs, bosses and work experience?

2. How do salary, benefits and promotion opportunities affect loyalty?

3. How do my direct reports define themselves? How do one's job and the company enter into this equation?

4. Do my newer workers believe in paying their dues for a given time period, or are they motivated by challenges and self-fulfillment right from the very beginning?

5. How self-sufficient are my younger workers? Are they still living at home? How much are they committed to their jobs as their only means of support?

For younger generations, the job future has never been more precarious and uncertain. As a leader, one of your primary responsibilities is attracting and retaining employees, especially talented ones.

You must learn to put yourself in the younger generations' shoes, without prejudice or judgment, even though it's human nature to view them as inexperienced and naive.

Bridging the Gap

The generational gap has never been wider. On one side, we have an entrenched group with 30+ years of workplace experience, often with only a few companies.

Most believe there's only one way of doing things, including carrot-and-stick motivation. On the other side, we have a large, skittish group of employees who have entered the workplace with college degrees, superior technical skills, and completely different life and work strategies.

The gap can, and must, be bridged. If you're in the older managerial group, you must learn to make adjustments to get the most from — and give the most to — the vast population of younger employees.

Your challenge is straightforward, yet complex: You must determine which personal differences are superficial and which convictions are deeply held. Then, reconcile the valid convictions with the traditional work-force hierarchy model. There is no escape! Each group must make a concerted effort to understand the other so teams can discover the best ways to define workplace success.

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