

Managing Across Generations

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Managing Across Generations: Motivating Gen Xers

By Mark Herbert

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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?

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 Millennials 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 Millennials have many reasons to question authority, rather than bow to it. They don't automatically believe their leaders tell the truth. They have heard plenty of lies from presidents, CEOs, legislators and even religious institutions, which bred skepticism.

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 Millennials stay at a job, especially during the first three years of employment. Dissatisfaction with a boss is the No. 1 reason they quit.

Changed Management Practices

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.

Today's workplace also 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.

“...younger generations invest their loyalty and trust in individuals.”

Questions to Ask Younger Generations

What is required to lead young people who believe Boomers are outdated and out of touch?

Leaders should ask themselves:

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. Every manager must learn to make adjustments to get the most from—and give the most to—the vast population of younger employees.