



Coaching Generation X

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5 Tips for Workplace Retention Across Generations

The generational challenge is not one that rests solely on the shoulders of organizations or seasoned professionals. It's equally important to educate all generations on the magnificence and importance of these differences. Here are some tips and techniques for leading across generations, regardless of generation.

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Nine Questions About Baby Boomer Retirement That Your Company Must Answer

How will your company deal with the challenges of massive Boomer retirements? This article will look at several questions that you need to answer now!

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“Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.”

- George Orwell



Coaching Generation X



It has been said that Generation X is the most ignored, misunderstood, and disheartened generation our country has seen in a long time. No one can define who belongs to Generation X. While most agree that there is a generation after the Boomers, no one agrees on who it is. In a September 23, 1996, article in USA Today, six experts defined Generation X, each with a different answer. They ranged anywhere from those born between 1961 to 1981 (78 to 85 million) to those born between 1965 to 1976 (46 million). Although Generation X appears to be the accepted term, other labels have been applied. William Strauss and Neil Howe refer to them as the Thirteenth Generation (the thirteenth generation since the founding of our country). Baby Busters and Twenty-somethings have also been used.

One of the most fundamental requirements for effective coaching is the ability to understand others' motives, values, and goals, not forcing one's own on others. A slight variation of the Golden Rule—instead of “treating others as you want to be treated,” coaches should “treat others as they want to be treated.” This means understanding and accepting that people are all different. It also means that there is no “script” for coaching—it is different for every person you coach.

The need to understand differences is especially apparent in the ongoing conflict between Baby Boomers and Generation X. These struggles are rooted in the desire (on both sides) to want everyone to be alike. This would certainly make our lives and relationships easier, but it is not based in reality. Of course, clashes between generations are not new. Remember the generation gap in the 1960s between the Boomers and the Silent Generation?

The fact remains that Generation X are the employees in the workforce today; they are the future. They aren't going away, nor are they likely to conform to the previous generation's definition of work. Boomer managers cannot continue to ignore Xers' differences and try to manage them according to their own mindset. This does not mean agreement with an Xer's attitude, but understanding them to make coaching easier. The better you know them, the more likely you are to have insight to their “hot buttons”—what motivates them. And, at the very best, understanding them may begin to remove the conflict and hostility that exists between the generations and will lead to positive actions and results that are mutually beneficial to the individual and the organization.

The problem with generalizations is that they only go so far, and stereotyping runs the risk of alienation. There are always exceptions to the rule, those who will say “that's not me.” I can sometimes identify with Boomers and sometimes with Xers (you guess my age!). It is impossible to suggest a prototype for how to coach 46-85 million people. As a start, the generalizations made here are based on a review of the relevant literature and personal observations/discussion with coaches—all with the hope of understanding this generation and offering suggestions on how to effectively coach them. To successfully coach and help Generation X, we must learn what they want, how they feel, and how they view their world.

WHAT WON'T MOTIVATE?

Generation X won't do things because they have a deep sense of mission or loyalty to an organization. They have nothing but disdain for corporate politics and bureaucracy and don't trust any institution. They grew up watching their parents turn into workaholics, only to be downsized and restructured out of their chosen careers. They believe work is a thing you do to have a life (work doesn't define their life).



Coaching Generation X (continued)

During the practice situations in our coaching workshops, the coach will often say, "Your behavior is affecting the company and if you don't change, we won't be in business in the long term." They raise the company flag and pull out the loyalty line. This means nothing to Xers—it will not capture their interest, raise their awareness, or stir them to new thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Xers have no expectation of job security, so they tend to see every job as temporary and every company as a stepping stone to something better, or at least to something else. They have been accused of not wanting to pay their dues. But, in today's changing workplace, anyone who is thinking about doing a job long enough to pay dues is out of touch!

Because they won't put in long hours at what they mostly term "dead end" jobs (Douglas Coupland coined the term "Mcjobs,") and they don't exhibit the same loyalty as Boomers do towards an organization, they have been called slackers. However, Xers will work very hard for a job that they believe in, for something that challenges them. In a 1995 survey, Babson College Professor Paul Reynolds found that "10% of Americans between the ages of 25-34 are actively involved in creating a start-up company, a rate about three times as high as any other age group ... it should help dispel once and for all the myth that today's youth are motivationally challenged." (U.S. News and World Report, September 23, 1996)

WHAT DOES MOTIVATE?

Value The Individual and Nurture Relationships

Although there doesn't seem to be one description of Generation X, most will agree that a defining characteristic is that they don't like to be characterized (as I'm doing in this article!). They don't want to be treated as a single entity, but want to be looked at as individuals. In addition, this is the first wave of latchkey kids to hit the work force. They are homesick for the home they never had (due to both parents working). Their focus on relationships over achievement is what leads Boomers to complain about their laziness. Isn't this strong sense of community and personal relationships in the workplace just what we need?

Challenging Work

This generation has sometimes been called the MTV Generation because of their short attention span. Xers want new challenges and the opportunity to build new skills. Training is one of the best motivators. They have a tremendous capacity to process lots of information and concentrate on multiple tasks.

They don't want to spend a lot of time talking about things or having meetings. They want to get in, do the work, and move on to the next thing. If you're looking for someone to deliver a report every week, you don't want an Xer. I recently brought up the subject of understanding twenty-somethings during a coaching workshop. Immediately a manager complained, with a lot of emotion, that kids today don't want to work and will only stay for a week or so and then leave. Well, the job was very repetitive and offered little challenge. No wonder!

Freedom to Manage Time and Work


Xers don't want over-your-shoulder, in-your-face managers who constantly check what they're doing. Perhaps as a result of their latchkey childhood, these young workers are not used to being closely supervised and are remarkably good at working on their own.

Feedback and Recognition

On the other hand, members of Generation X seem to crave time with their bosses and can never get enough feedback on their performance. They may be searching for what was missing when they were growing up. Because of their short attention span, recognition and rewards must arrive quickly. Employee of the month doesn't do anything for them.

CONCLUSION

The characteristics for which Generation X has received such bad press are the very qualities that make them valuable. We say we want an empowered work force ... give Xers the ball and they will run with it ... we want a self-directed work force ... these workers have been self directed from a very young age ... we want computer literacy ... Generation X comes out on top ... we want flexible, adaptable workers—right on again.

Xers will respond to Boomer managers if they put meaning into the buzzwords they use so often—empowerment, teamwork, communication. Create an environment where they are challenged by and enjoy their work, where they're measured on performance rather than on which clothes they wear, where they are informed, included, and recognized. Gee, maybe Xers aren't so different from anyone else! 

By The Center for Management and Organization Effectiveness Development Team

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5 Tips for Workplace Retention Across Generations

The generational challenge is not one that rests solely on the shoulders of organizations or seasoned professionals. It's equally important to educate all generations on the magnificence and importance of these differences. Here are some tips and techniques for leading across generations, regardless of generation.

1. Educate Yourself.

Generational differences are real and, if not well understood can cause clash, which slows productivity. That said, locate three professionals of different generations and ask them to share about themselves: what's important to them, why it's important to them, how they got to where they are. This will help you to gain an understanding and respect for your differences and locate your commonalities. Also, find three books on generational diversity and dive in. The three that I highly recommend are: *From Boomers To Bloggers: Success Strategies Across Generations*, *Generations at Work*, and *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Young Employees Young and Old can Find Common Ground*.

2. Generate a Clear Vision.

If you are in a leadership position, it is your responsibility to create a clear vision for your team. While your organization may have its own mission/vision statement, it is incredibly valuable to create one for your team. The leader creates the vision, which gives the long-term goal of where you, the team and the organization are headed. Doing so will create a clear pathway to success and everyone enjoys the great feeling success brings. In order to create a vision, ask yourself the following questions: What problem(s) do you solve? What needs do you fill? What specifically do you sell? How do you make money? What is your revenue model? How is your organization different from every other organization out there? What is your organization's unique selling proposition?

3. Generate a Clear Mission.

A mission is a statement of purpose put together by a team of people, which creates clarity, focus, teamwork, personal accountability, and inspiration. It gives direction as to how the vision will be achieved. Bringing key people together to strategize on your mission naturally creates synergy, teamwork, and collaboration. Consider bringing your team together, articulating your vision, let them know that none of it is possible without them, and request their support in generating a short, pithy, inspiring mission. You can use some of the same questions to prompt their thought process. Ask your team: Are you clear about where we're headed and the importance of your contribution?




4. Get to know your team.

Consider what you will gain by knowing what motivates your team members. It is possible that either you are in a position that plays against your strengths or you have people on your team who are in positions that are not in alignment with their natural talents. Getting to know yourself and/or your team will aid you greatly in getting the most out of each person, yourself included. Each generation is motivated and inspired differently – understanding these differences and learning how to best harness your talent will only add to your credibility as a leader. Ask yourself: Am I playing to my strengths? And, am I leading others to play to their strengths?

5. Acknowledge your team consistently.

Identify ways to publicly and privately acknowledge your teammates for their hard work. Give them the credit they desire and deserve. I distinctly remember a Senior Vice President at a Fortune 500 company say these specific words: "I know I have an excellent Sales Manager when I compliment her/him on their work and they quickly ensure I know it's their team doing all the heavy lifting."

Remember ... if you don't know yourself and your team, you'll never get the most out of them. "Be the change" – take time to learn about YOURSELF and YOUR team. Capitalize on playing to your strengths. 

As the CEO of Inspirion Inc., Misti Burmeister is committed to helping organizations and individuals reach their potential across the generations through individual and corporate coaching, speaking and emerging leadership seminars. She has worked with top fortune 500 companies, military leaders, national associations and education institutions around the country.

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9 Questions About Baby Boomer Retirement That Your Company Must Answer



The Baby Boomers are the members of the generation born between 1946 and 1964. At 79 million people, they're the largest U.S. generation in history. The oldest Boomers will turn 65 in 2011 and many of them may choose head for the exits.

Can you answer these questions about Baby Boomer retirements at your company? The first five are about raw numbers:

How many people at your company are eligible to retire in each of the next ten years?

The odds are good that not everyone who is eligible to retire will do so. But it's a good idea to consider how many people could leave at a moment's notice and when they're eligible to do so.

How many of your senior managers are in that group?

Senior managers have mission critical knowledge and experience. When they leave, they take it all with them, unless you've created alternatives for them to stay on or work as a consultant. Review your succession planning. Identify the less experienced managers that are best qualified to move up. Help them with personal and career development, especially growth assignments, so they're ready when their time comes.

How many of your key technicians and craft workers are in that group?

We're talking here about the kind of hands-on technical work that it's hard to outsource or offshore. Many of the pipelines for technicians and craft workers have been slowly drying up over

the last couple of decades. Union apprentice programs have been hit especially hard.

How many of your first line supervisors are in that group?

Your front line bosses have more impact on morale and productivity than any other group of people in your company. Make sure you're ready to replace retiring supervisors with qualified new supervisors who'll get the benefit of solid supervisory skills training.

How many of your knowledge connectors are in that group?

Knowledge connectors are vital to your operations, but they don't have that title on any organizational chart. Knowledge connectors are the people other people call for help because they're experts or because they know how to find people or knowledge to help solve problems. You can do a social network analysis to find out who they are, or just ask around. I call the problem the "Boomer Brain Drain" because of the loss of knowledge and experience when Boomers retire. If you've answered the questions above, you have an idea how big a threat this is to your company and you can start to work on responses. The next four questions deal with different kinds of responses to the potential Boomer Brain Drain.

What human resources measures are you or will you use to meet the challenges of Boomer Brain Drain?

Human Resources (HR) responses to the challenges of the Boomer Brain Drain include everything you do to modify your recruiting, training, retention, and succession planning. They also include changes to policies and procedures and may include union negotiations.

Since Boomers may be starting to flow out the back door, it's logical to plan on increasing the flow of recruits in the front door. It's logical, but it's dangerous.

Generation X is the generation next in line behind the Baby Boom. It's only about half the size of the Baby Boom generation, so you've got a smaller pool to draw from. You can't count on simply increasing recruiting to fill the spots left by retiring Boomers.

Several companies are investigating tactics such as having people return to work after retirement or stay at work past their official retirement date. There's some evidence that this will work since studies by financial services companies tell us that Baby Boomers don't have a lot put back for retirement.

9 Questions About Baby Boomer Retirement That Your Company Must Answer (continued)

Older workers are great hires in lots of ways. Their turnover rate is lower than that of younger workers. When CVS compared their older workers to younger workers, they found that older workers are far less likely to call in sick.

If you choose some set of retire late/come back after retirement solutions, there are issues to consider. Start with your current pension and retirement policies. Can Boomers continue to work without losing benefits? This may be something you need to have a dialogue with your unions about.

You may also need to modify your policies and procedures for part-time work. Retired Boomers may want a different kind of flextime than younger workers. They might prefer the ability to take more time off to accommodate medical appointments and visits to children.

Analyze your corporate culture. Do you see older workers as contributing members of the workforce, or do you see them as workers with their eyes on retirement and one foot out the door? Do you provide training to older workers the same as you do to younger ones?

You should also think about how you'll need to change your work processes to make them friendlier to older workers at the same time as you find ways to get more productivity out of fewer workers.

How will you change or adjust your business processes to meet the challenges of Boomer Brain Drain?

Older workers may be great workers, but they tend to have more physical limitations than younger workers. You may have to modify either processes or equipment so they're older-worker-friendly. You'll be in good company. Toyota has been doing this for some time. Make sure, for example, that the gauges on equipment are easy to read. If instructions are conveyed orally in a workplace, make sure they're loud enough for older workers to hear.

You can also make changes to business processes that make Boomer retirement irrelevant. If you eliminate some specialized equipment or standardize on fewer kinds of equipment, you may be able to increase your scheduling flexibility and handle more equipment with fewer workers. You can also use technology to capture the knowledge of experienced workers so that it's available to younger workers.

How will you use technology to meet the challenges of Boomer Brain Drain?


Knowledge management technology is often touted as the way to capture Boomer knowledge and put it to use. In reality, most of the knowledge that Boomers, like other workers, have is in their heads and will go out the door with them. But you can still do some things to capture important knowledge if you start now.

Consider job-shadowing as a knowledge transfer tool. Think about investing in people to chart and document processes that do not currently have formal documentation. Use simple technological tools such as electronic discussion groups to capture "shoptalk" and the knowledge that only comes with time on the job. Use social network analysis to identify which people get contacted to solve specific problems.

There are three rules to follow in using technology to capture knowledge. The first is that a tool that no one will use, because it's too complex or time-consuming, is a useless tool. The second is that culture always trumps technology. Rule number three is that technology that adapts to human habits works better than technology that demands that humans change the way they work.

Have you conducted a "Threat Assessment" to give you an idea of where you need to concentrate your efforts?

Before you move on to planning for Boomer retirements, take the time to do an accurate Threat Assessment. It will make your efforts more productive in the long run. Assess every position in your organization. Determine when the person in that job can retire. Evaluate how important the position is to accomplishing the mission, and assess how prepared you are to replace the incumbent.

These questions are just the start. Your next step will be to develop a strategy for dealing with a potential Boomer Brain Drain. But the sooner you get started, the sooner you'll see results. 

Wally Bock helps organizations improve productivity and morale, as well as deal with the challenges of massive Boomer retirements. Wally writes the Three Star Leadership blog (<http://blog.threestarladership.com/>), coaches individual managers, and is a popular speaker at meetings and conferences.

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"A generation which ignores history has no past and no future."

- Robert Heinlein