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Leadership

From the Editor

I had a rare opportunity to sit on the other side of a seminar table recently. The leader was doing the usual preamble that spelled out the goals of the program, logistics, house rules, and what the style of learning process was. As expected, he encouraged us to be selective about what we took back to our work environments.

And then he did what most management educators do, he shared some wisdom from one of his clients, Honda. "To know and not to do is not to know."

Not bad: the litmus test for knowledge is action. I know that I really know when I do. I liked that. It became my mantra for the day: To know and not to do is not to know. And then, with little warning, my mind moved to another path on the same thought-mountain: action without knowledge misleads.

At LIVE Consultants we help organizations build their knowledge so they can take thoughtful action.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Contrasts help us to see what is there. So we compare this to that, some to others, us to them. The unfortunate consequence is that the very act of making contrasts, of noting the differences, can build walls instead of bridges.

In this article, author Stephen Baetz, identifies the different needs and aspirations of the younger Generation X workers and comes to some conclusions about how to create an environment where they can make outstanding contributions.

And then he asks us to think about how different that is from other populations in the workforce.

Stephen is a principal partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication. The research for this article was done by another team member at LIVE.



Stephen Baetz

Different-Good

“They’re different, real different.”

I had no way of knowing whether she meant different-good or different-bad.

“They’re not like us.”

I did a quick audit to determine what the differentiating factor or factors might be between *us* and *them*. We were a mix of male and female ... so were they ... couldn’t be that. We represented a range of cultural and ethnic groups ... so did they... couldn’t be that. We had diverse personalities ... so did they ... couldn’t be that. We were ...

“They don’t think like us; they don’t value what we do; they don’t work like we do.”

It was becoming clear that this was different-bad.

“And I’m at my wits end about what I should be doing to get them on board. They’re so, so ... “

“Young?” I offered.

“Young and ... “

“Restless.” I thought *restless* was at least somewhat neutral and had the potential to move us away from less positive even nasty descriptors. “And weren’t we all when we were that age?”

“I wasn’t.”

Silence was the only useful response. It gave time for reassessment. We baby boomers did live through the tumultuous ‘60s and early ‘70s with one digit raised in contempt for the previous generation whom we felt had sold out to the tedium of a Ward and June existence. Only to find that ten years later we had figured out that opportunities were there for the taking and all we had to do was invest sweat and we could be better off than the Cleavers had ever dreamt of being.

“Okay, maybe I was ... we were ... but then we settled down. These Gen-X’ers are so, so ... different.”

The discussion got me thinking about different-*how*: how have their experiences been different, how has that shaped their thinking, beliefs, and values, and how might I create a work environment that encourages that population to give their best.

The problem with these questions is that they are filled with the danger of generalization: that

these observations apply equally to everybody born between 1965 and 1977. They don’t. So before I begin, I recognize that these are broad brushstrokes that create a perceptual background so we can better see the detail of individuals in the foreground.

Shaped by Time and Place

Generation X was a term first used by Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland in the early 1990s. These are the children of the baby boomers who were out *making it* financially. They have been nurtured in daycares and when they got older they were left to fend for themselves after school. About 40% come from single-parent families. The emotional upheaval this causes has shaped their view of the family and the world around them. MTV and video toys have been the surrogate replacements for milk and cookies served by mom after school.

Their view of the world has been shaped by such negative events as the Persian Gulf War, AIDS, nuclear threat, and pollution as well as the positive influences of Bert and Ernie’s Sesame Street where diversity is valued, trying is recognized, and experimentation is rewarded.

They have become freedom-minded, individualistic, and convinced that life is more than work. They have promised themselves that they will balance work and life differently than their parents did. They are techno-compatible and look for cyberspace solutions. TV and the web have taught them to like their advertising with an edge and their information concrete, concise, and to the point. Education, knowledge, data are as simple as point and click; easily accessible and fun.

Many realize that for the first time in several generations they may not have it better than the generation before them. Some of them resent the boomers for having it all and messing it up; leaving them with the responsibility to pay the bills. Yet, making money is not as important for the X’ers as experiencing life. They like *cool* — the stuff that sets you apart from the rest of the herd.

If those are some of the realities that have shaped this generation, what should managers do to create a helpful work environment? Here is a starter list of ideas.

Develop flexible work options

Gen-X'ers want tangible evidence that their organization and their immediate managers support their lives outside of work. Provide some assurance that they will have time for a well-rounded personal life. That may mean flexible work schedules, tele-commuting options, sabbaticals, or worksharing. Or it could suggest providing on-site conveniences like banking, day-care, or time to take care of personal plans.

Provide learning opportunities

Offer continuous learning and development opportunities that will keep the individual employable; if not in your organization in another organization. X'ers want to build transferable, marketable skills, and knowledge. If possible, make them self-paced and build in the use of technology. Above all, ensure that they are fun and stimulating.

Create cool workplaces

Develop a workplace which is interesting and different; a place where people can express their individuality through either dress or personalized office decor. This might mean lattes in the lunchroom, theatre at noon, domestic partner benefits, contests for hot air balloon rides, extraordinary freedom to make customer-based decisions, sponsorship of community projects, or travel.

Provide regular feedback

Gen-X'ers value regular feedback on how they are doing and whether the contribution they are making matters. Catch them on the road to success and accomplishment. Offer thank-you for taking initiative, for getting the project

done on time, for coming through. When skills aren't up to snuff, offer straight-talk about what changes need to be made and what they should be doing differently — coach. And when new behaviour is adopted, recognize the difference and the value the new behaviour has.

Provide meaningful work

A sense of purpose motivates Gen-X'ers; connect them to the mission, vision, values, as well as the products and services. Then involve their minds and hearts in finding solutions to the problems and challenges faced by the enterprise. Ask for their input; listen to the ideas they offer; respect what you have heard. Provide them with the information they need to be excellent problem solvers. Use them on projects that are focused and short-term.

Communicate informally

Gen-X'er's value knowledge and expertise more than position and experience; they are rarely impressed by status and title. Therefore, minimize formality and maximize the number of opportunities you have to talk informally about internal and external realities; keep them in the loop.

Different?

There is little doubt that the specific experience of the Gen-X'ers is different than the specific experience of the baby boomers. The haunting question is whether the approaches that leaders and managers should take are all that different. Doesn't everybody want to understand purpose, be connected to mission, vision, and values, be listened to, be involved, have fun, be recognized for contributions made, and have their individuality recognized? I suspect so.

"They're different. Real different. They're not like us."

I'm not so sure. And if they are different by degree, that's a different-good.

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