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It's an evolving workplace as generation X and Y move in on aging baby boomers

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Question:

Not too long ago, I read an article about the intergenerational workforce. I immediately connected that with what I see I going in our company. As a baby boomer who will retire by 2010, I look around and see more and more people who look like they could be my kids. Funny thing is, it seems like yesterday I was starting my career and reporting to the "older guy." Now, I am the older guy. Time flies, I guess. Anyway, I'd appreciate your thoughts on what we can do to do a better job of bringing the different age groups together.

Answer:

How much space do I have? How much time do you have? Your question is at the heart of one of our country's most significant workplace trends — the "passing of the torch" from the baby boomers (people born from 1946-1964) to Generation X (i.e., people born between 1965-1981) and Generation Y, (i.e., people born after 1981 — also known as the Millennial Generation). The fact that this large age cohort is nearing retirement age is driving many HR initiatives today — succession planning, harnessing human capital and assessing talent come to mind quickly.

There isn't an organizational client with whom ODC works that isn't affected by this trend in some way, shape or form. It cuts across employment sectors. It affects both small and large organizations. In short, it is one of today's realities — the large baby boomer age cohort is aging and organizations are scrambling to prepare for their exit.

Yet, that is nothing new. In previous eras, older employees left the workforce as younger employees entered. What is new, though, is the unprecedented size of the baby boomer group - they significantly outnumber the generations that follow them, generations X and Y.

Boomers are aging

The 2000 U.S. Census told us about that in very clear terms. According to the data, the current median age in the U.S. is 35.3 years. As the baby boomers have begun to reach age 45, the ranks of the 45-54 age group have swelled — it grew 49% during the 1990s.

In light of our health care concerns, it is worth noting, too, that people over age 85 showed the highest growth rate of all — they now constitute 12% of the population. That number will, of course, increase dramatically as the baby boomers grow older.

In Wisconsin, the largest age cohorts, in order, are:

- People aged 35-44;
- People aged 45-54;
- People aged 25-34.

As a percentage of its workforce, Wisconsin has one of the highest rates of aging baby boomers in the U.S.

Unless we make plans today to address the baby boomers' inevitable departure, we might face employee shortfalls tomorrow that will impact our ability to effectively compete in the global marketplace.

So, I guess some tough love is in order. Here goes. Let's stop complaining about young people, their perceived lack of work ethic, their tastes in clothing, music, films and books, etc. The fact of the matter is, if we step back and think about it, the older generation was probably saying the same things about us when we entered the workforce.

Complaining about generational differences isn't going to solve anything. Extending an invitation, a helping hand, etc. is the preferred route to take if you really want to "do something about those young people."

An evolving workplace

So, for starters, let's start by recognizing that the workplace is evolving.

In the past, it was:

- Security from institutions;
- Promotions based on longevity;
- Loyalty to the organization;
- Wait to be told what to do;
- Respect based on position/title.

Now, it is:

- Security from within;
- Promotions based on performance;
- Loyalty to the team or work unit, then the organization;
- Challenge authority;
- Respect must be earned.

Next, let's recognize that to reach across generations, you must understand where they are coming from. Understanding and appreciation are the bedrocks of creating a harmonious intergenerational workforce. So, to help you along those lines, let me offer the following general observations. While not specifically applicable to everyone with whom you have contact, you may find that they apply reasonably well to many people within a particular age cohort:

Boomers at work

At work, baby boomers:

- Generally dislike taking direction from younger people;
- Prefer to do it the way it's always been done;
- Like traditional methods and can be intimidated by technology;
- Resist new ways of doing things;
- Are drawn by a desire for power, status and prestige.

Managing boomers

Therefore, to effectively manage baby boomers:

- Make it known that their experience is valued;
- Understand they work best in a humane, caring work environment;
- Point out where they can succeed or make a mark;
- Because "getting ahead" is important to them, show them how they can be a star;
- Stress that there is still a lot of learning to do;
- Respect them for what they have contributed and their life experience;
- Focus on accountability, goals and duty to contribute to the company's success.

Gen-Xers at work

At work, Generation X employees:

- Having grown up in a world of downsizings and layoffs, find security in themselves;
- Believe in immediate feedback;
- Want and need continuous and consistent recognition for their efforts;
- Can be fiercely loyal if they are invested — "What's in it for me?"

- Want to "get it done" and be respected for their efforts.

Managing Gen-Xers

To effectively manage Generation X employees:

- Open communication and offer access to all levels of the organization;
- Encourage ongoing learning and growth;
- Help them see the "big picture;"
- Recognize their good performance anywhere, anyway, anytime.

Generation Y at work

At work, Generation Y (aka the Millennial Generation) employees:

- Excel with technology;
- Love the concepts of virtual business and telecommuting;
- Expect profitable, casual business careers;
- Expect success, defined by high pay and lots of perks, early in their careers;
- Are energetic and sometimes unfocused, so they need direction in smaller steps.

Managing Generation Y

Therefore, to effectively manage Generation Y employees:

- Involve them in "partnerships;"
- Harness their energy and keep up with their pace;
- Challenge them professionally;
- Coach and mentor them, don't manage;
- Be rigorous and direct with feedback;
- Solicit their ideas;
- Give them small but challenging goals to reach, building toward greater levels of responsibility;
- Create a team-oriented work environment;
- Provide state-of-the-art resources;
- Be flexible and encourage a work-life balance.

Let me close by noting that John Jay Chapman wrote, "Every generation is a secret society and has incommunicable enthusiasms, tastes and interests which are a mystery both to its predecessors and to posterity."

So, my advice to you is to stop complaining about "those young people."

As you rightly noted, time does indeed "fly." Before too long, these young people who leave you shaking your head are going to be sitting in your chair. They are going to be managing and leading your company.

And, along the way, they will get married, have kids, etc. Then, at some point, they, too, will be looking around and seeing a bunch of fresh-faced people coming on-board. They, too, will ask themselves, "What is it with these young people, anyway?"

And, so it goes.



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