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Gen X will change work culture

Ray Williams

A **massive** number of managers and executives, members of the Baby Boom generation, will retire in the next five years. This promises to leave a huge vacuum in leadership, particularly for companies without succession plans. Generation Xers are poised to take their place. A key question for senior executives to consider is whether the leadership style and values of Generation Xers are the same as those of the Baby Boomers.

Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1960, grew up watching the *Ed Sullivan Show*, ate TV dinners and gave the peace sign. The Baby Boom generation has dominated the economy, our lifestyles and leadership styles. Leadership for them has been characterized by workaholic tendencies and materialism. Baby Boomers have had few careers or a single career path, are impressed by authority, are optimistic and are driven to achieve.

Generation X, born between 1960 and 1980, grew up with pet rocks, platform shoes and watched *The Simpsons*. They question authority, seek bigger meaning in life and work, are technologically savvy, live in the present, are skeptical, see career as a key to happiness, are open to multi-careers, consider challenge and variety as being more important than job security and constantly aim to achieve work-life balance.

A study Personnel Decisions International (PDI) in the U.S., shows companies face a substantial employee skills shift and knowledge void. As Baby Boomer leadership

exits, Generation X managers will bring a new, distinct skill set to the workplace. The study surveyed the competencies of 24,000 mid-level managers in 20 skill areas. It found Baby Boomers received higher ratings from managers in 10 out of 18 competencies, particularly in their ability to coach and develop people and to manage execution. Generation X managers received higher ratings in self-development, work commitment and analyzing issues.

Studies by Bruce Tuigan (*Managing Generation X*), Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*), and Australian company HCMG Global Pty. Ltd., show the Generation X manager is typically mature beyond their years, very adaptable and flexible, and team oriented. They have high expectations of employees and don't buy into power structures; rather, they prefer the project-based approach to work. Generation X managers need positive validation for their work or they will not hesitate to quit their jobs. They hate being micro-managed and want independence in their work, which may explain why so many of this generation have turned to entrepreneurship.

Generation X managers' assets are their adaptability, technological literacy, independence and creativity. Generation X leaders thrive on change, are fair, competent and straightforward—sometimes brutally honest—are results oriented, and see leadership as nothing magical. However, these managers do have liabilities, including impatience (particularly with

authority), occasional cynicism and poor people skills. Messages that motivate Generation X managers emphasize independence, reward for merit not years, minimizing rules and bureaucracy and emphasize informality and common sense.

In communicating with Generation X leaders, employees need to get to the point, avoid clichés, focus on outcomes and have fun.

As the workplace faces radical changes, the new wave of leaders in organizations will largely come from Generation X. And their values, leadership style and approach to work are significantly different from their predecessors, which will have a subtle but important impact on the workplace.



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