

Caution: Mixed generations at work

Understanding how attitudes are shaped by a generation's experiences helps managers lead age-diverse workforces

BY MARIE LEGAULT

The demographics of an organization have a significant impact on how employees respond to issues in the workplace. Generational conflicts based on differences in values, views, learning, and in thinking, working, and communication styles are outcomes of a mixed-age workforce.

But generational diversity also brings creative synergy to problem-solving. It can generate new opportunities. Employees of different cohorts have the potential to bring valuable approaches to the table.

Leaders who account for generational attitudes in their planning and communication are in a better position to connect with their employees.

The generational mix

Today's organizations consist of a mix of four generations: Veterans, Boomers, Xers and Nexters. To be effective in leading an age-diverse workforce, it is impor-

tant for leaders to learn about generational differences and similarities.

Veterans (born 1922 to 1943) account for approximately 10 per cent of the labour force, according to Statistics Canada. While they are quickly exiting the workplace, veterans remain connected and influential. They display a work ethic that is founded on loyalty, dependability and a stick-to-it attitude. Their leadership style is direct and can be characterized as a command-and-control approach. They work well in teams as long as there is a strong leader to direct them and tell them exactly what to do, how to do it, and when it should be done.

To effectively lead this generation, managers of all ages should create positive working relationships by earning their trust and respecting their experience without being intimidated by it. Gain their confidence by demonstrating compassion and understanding.

Boomers (1944 to 1960) account for almost 51 per cent

of the Canadian labour force. During the next decade, it is expected that this generation will either retire or significantly change their participation in the workforce.

Since they grew up in economic prosperity, they believe that anything is possible. A large number are caught up in the pursuit of material wealth and status symbols, often resulting in the loss of a sense of balance. They enjoy teamwork and tend to be good participants. However, those born before 1950 need to prove

themselves, and this can be counter-productive to the team's goals.

Their preferred style in leadership roles is collegial and consensual. While boomers were trained to be assertive in expressing their needs, they have problems confronting and dealing with conflicts. To become a leader with the style they aspire to, they need to develop understanding, listening, communicating, motivating and delegating skills.

When interacting with

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WORKFORCE STATISTICS

Demographic breakdown of Canadian workers

- The veterans, born between 1922 and 1943, make up 10 per cent of the workforce.
- Boomers, 1944 to 1960, are the largest population of workers, accounting for 51 per cent of the labour pool.
- Xers, born between 1961 and 1980, make up 32 per cent of the workforce.
- Nexters, born after 1980, are about seven per cent of the workforce.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2002.

■ MANAGING/LEADERSHIP

Managing by age group

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boomers, it is recommended that leaders show an appreciation for their energy and hard work. Leaders should also approach them with respect for their achievements and the range of choice they are accustomed to exercising.

Involve them in an articulation of the organization's direction and the implementation of change initiatives, or challenge them to contribute to a team solving organizational problems. Offer opportunities for them to coach others as part of the change process.

As members of this generation age, it is important to support them in creating balance in their lives.

Xers (1961 to 1980) account for approximately 32 per cent of the labour force, and are considered fully deployed. Risk-takers, they possess a somewhat scepti-

cal outlook, and want simply to work to live, not the reverse. Gen Xers work best in a team environment that is fun, free of explicit rules, and preferably formed of team members of their own choosing.

For members of this generation, loyalty is not associated to companies but to teams, projects, and friends in the workplace. As leaders, they are fair and straightforward. They tend to be direct and may at times lack tact and diplomacy. Members of this generation become better managers and employees as they acquire social skills.

Xers are unimpressed with authority, and have developed, in their formative years, the ability to quickly discern lies and half-truths. Entrepreneurial by nature, they make up their own minds about things and appreciate authenticity.

Respect the experiences

that have shaped their thinking and beliefs. Tell them the truth, clearly identify boundaries and honour their sense of balance. Be clear about expectations and spend as much time as necessary orienting them to the organization's culture.

Mentorship programs are beneficial for Xers. Clearly communicate that some repetitive tasks and quality checks are part of the job, as this generation grows impatient when they feel they are marking time. Xers need to accept that practice is necessary to develop skills and experience.

At the same time, organizations have to offer learning opportunities.

Nexters (born after 1980) account for approximately seven per cent of the labour force. As children of baby boomers, they represent a sizable bulge in the demographics.

While it is too early to know how this technically savvy cohort will behave as workers, their predisposition already indicates a distinct type of workforce.

They need to see their work as a learning opportunity. They show more interest in being part of a team than in leading or owning it. This implies a desire for collective action and a greater need for supervision and structure, as they have been micro-managed by their parents and teachers.

They expect employers to give clear, concise directions as well as provide a detailed career plan, complete with a timeline for raises and advancement.

It will take time for organizations to learn how to lead this new generation effectively but here are some tips. Spend time and resources, such as mentorship programs, to orient Nexters with respect to the organization's culture. Provide structure and strong leadership, and be clear about expectations and long-term goals.

Understand differences between Xers and Nexters as their personality traits and values tend to clash. So be sensitive to the potential for conflict.

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■ GENERATIONAL VIEWS

Talk about the multi-generational work environment

TO CREATE environments where workers of all ages can flourish, companies need to rethink organizational systems and examine workplace cultures by fostering discussions about:

- what different generations and the individuals within them are looking for in work;
- what makes work rewarding;
- which environments are most productive; and
- which organizational factors attract and retain employees of various ages.

It is important for leaders to explain the evolving realities of business and help employees understand how these realities may affect attitudes and beliefs about job security, organizational loyalty, and management roles and responsibilities. The adoption of new leadership models that recognize the leadership potential in employees from different generations is essential to managing workforces.

