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Come Together

Boomers and X-ers must join forces to tackle the twin challenges of leadership succession...and managing Gen Y.

By Deborah Gilburg

The United States is on the brink of an historic transition. The largest generation in our history—some 77.5 million people, according to the AARP—will begin exiting the workforce at an accelerating pace over the next five years. Over the next 15 years, workplaces will shift to a new generation of leaders. That's right: The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1960, are entering their final season.

This changing of the guard poses a profound management problem. Members of the generation in line to succeed the Boomers, Generation X, born between 1961 and 1981, have been poorly equipped by their organizations (and their Boomer bosses) to assume the responsibilities they will inherit. Left to rely upon their own savvy (and often preferring it that way), X-ers will be stepping into leadership roles largely without the benefit of the institutional and political knowledge possessed by the Boomers. The Boomers have not been good about sharing their knowledge and experience; Generation X has not been good about tapping into it.

This impending knowledge loss is further complicated by the biased assumptions each group has formed about the other. These assumptions generate conflict, undermine trust and inhibit cooperation between these two generations as they tackle the twin challenges of leadership succession and the need to recruit and retain incoming Generation Y.

CIOs need to consider the generational diversity within your workforce and devise ways to help their staffs bridge their differences. Today, like it or not, that's an essential part of the CIO job.

The Old Guard

Today, 65 percent of all national leaders are Boomers, including the president. By contrast, 2005 data indicates that Gen X holds only 7 percent of national leadership posts, almost one-half less than the percentage held by Boomers in the same stage of life. In the business world, the average age of top CEOs is 56, according to executive search firm Spencer Stuart; the CIO's average age is 47, according to CIO's 2008 "State of the CIO" survey (for more on CIO demographics, go to www.cio.com/article/163700).

As leaders, Boomers are passionate about changing organizations to reflect their principles and vision. They have acquired the industry connections, networks and political skills needed to wield power and make deals. But some Boomer leaders lack both tolerance for dissent and the discipline to see transitions through.

Boomers are typically unaware of the subtle differences between their generational culture and those of younger generations. With a mindset that emphasizes competitiveness and self-

actualization, Boomers typically have failed to recognize their responsibility to mentor and prepare their successors. For example, some organizations are choosing to invest in short-term solutions, such as retirement postponement incentives to keep knowledge-rich Boomers in the workplace longer rather than invest in training and development initiatives for future leaders. Yet, the valuable lessons and insights Boomers have accumulated about leadership in complex times are precisely what the self-made Gen X managers will require to round out their leadership portfolios and tackle the business challenges of the 21st century.

Here They Come, Ready or Not (Emphasis on Not)

Gen X-ers have been a transient workforce, averaging a three- to five-year life span in any one organization. X-ers typically are technologically savvy, pragmatic and competent; they are efficient at managing themselves. As veterans of an era of corporate downsizing, they tend to think of themselves as free agents, frequently distrusting corporate motives and grandiose change initiatives. Having received very little workplace training, development or mentoring, they have learned to rely on their own resourcefulness and their ability to adapt to the quickly changing landscape of the information age.

Generation X has notably different values from the Baby Boomers. For example, as the original “latch-key kid” generation, many believe family time is so important that they often give greater importance to maintaining a good work/life balance than to career advancement. This means opportunities for flex-time, part-time work and telecommuting are very appealing to them. As a generation, however, X-ers have spent their lives managing their own small sphere of influence and as a result are relatively unskilled and inexperienced at harnessing their generation’s collective power to make substantive changes to the current work culture.

Gen X-ers as a group need to understand the importance of these skills as a means to successfully confront the leadership challenges the future poses. As leaders, they will need to learn how to amplify their influence by developing the networking and political skills that have served Boomers in order to build inclusive, collaborative and innovative work environments. And they will need to find the personal motivation to invest in the organizations they will be leading.

Given that most organizations have done little to prepare X-ers for leadership, those X-ers are likely to find themselves suddenly in the driver’s seat and expected to steer organizations through complex, chaotic and uncertain terrain without many of the critical skills their Boomer bosses have not shared with them.

What CIOs Must Do

CIOs need to bridge this gap between Boomers and X-ers or run the risk that intergenerational backbiting will keep IT from delivering for the business. IT Boomer leaders who wish to avoid an “apres moi le deluge” scenario, should consider the following tactics for aligning these generations:

Ask and ye shall learn. Find ways to talk with your teams about the future. Seek to discover values that can be shared by the generations and connect your mission and goals to them.

Expanding your vision for the future to include more of what others want will foster greater participation, commitment and cooperation from your employees.

Examine assumptions about workplace norms. Consider the long-term value and practicality of holding tight to such Boomer assumptions as “24/7 availability is non-negotiable”; “face-time is necessary for advancement”; “you need to pay your dues as I did.” Assumptions like these can be seen as inarguable truths, regardless of their intrinsic value to organizations and the people who work for them. Allow for the possibility that workplace norms can shift and adapt to meet changing times.

Acknowledge generational biases. Unaddressed, these biases can spark conflicts and misunderstandings; they can be destructive to the organization. Conversely, once they’re acknowledged and aired, they can generate creative conversation and reveal compatibilities that exist alongside the differences. Amplify small successes by rewarding collaboration and intergenerational engagement.

Take a stand for collaboration. Endorse, promote and reward collaboration on a regular basis. Successful experiences will foster mutual respect between Boomer and X-er workers and a more united and innovative workplace.

Get serious about knowledge sharing. Take time to identify vital knowledge and devise ways to share it. That could include developing intentionally intergenerational teams to work collaboratively on key projects, shadowing exercises, introductions to valuable contacts and the debriefing of key decisions. Knowledge sharing should cut both ways. Encourage Boomers to share their contacts and their institutional understanding of the organization with X-ers; invite X-ers to share pragmatic insights and implementation tactics with Boomers.

Invest in younger generations. Their success is your success. Dedicate resources and training to fill their gaps in knowledge and experience. As Generation Y enters the workplace, it will require regular oversight and strong leadership to be successful. Gen X-ers will likely be the front line management for this young talent pool and to do the job well they will need the support of their Boomer bosses.

Smart CIOs can start to prepare their organizations for the future by helping their staff recognize the dynamics of generational differences in order to address blind spots, recognize important areas of compatibility and foster the intergenerational partnerships required to address the future.

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