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Generation X: Stepping Up to the Leadership Plate

How to leverage the mind-share of retiring Baby Boomers to advance your career

Jan 31, 2007

by Deborah Gilburg

The United States is on the brink of a generational transition the likes of which has not been seen before. The largest generation in history to retire—some 77.5 million people, according to the AARP—will begin vacating the workplace in the next five years. And over the next 15 years, our workplaces will continue to shift to a new generation of leaders. That's right: The reign of the seemingly omnipresent Baby Boom generation is in its final season, raising many questions about what this means for organizations and institutions throughout the nation.



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So what, you might ask? What does this have to do with me? Well, if you are in your 30s or early 40s (so-called Generation X), have a mid-level position in your organization and see yourself needing a job for the next 20 to 30 years, this has *everything* to do with you.

The problem posed by the upcoming generational changing of the guard is that the generation in line to succeed the Boomers, the Gen X-ers, has not been equipped with the leadership skills and knowledge needed to assume the responsibility being passed on to it. Due to generational differences, the Baby Boomers have not been good about sharing their knowledge and experience, and Generation X has not been good about tapping into it.

Currently between the ages of about 45 and 64, Baby Boomers inhabit the most powerful leadership positions throughout the United States—the average age of all CEOs is 56, and 65 percent of all national leaders are Baby Boomers, including the president. (By contrast, 2005 data indicates only 7 percent of national leadership is Gen X.) As such, they retain much of the experiential, technical, institutional and political knowledge in the workplace. They have the industry connections, networks and inside scoop to get things done. They've experienced successes and learned from their failures. They are community builders and can galvanize a force of their own at the drop of a hat. And they have vision. Those are the characteristics that Gen X-ers need to learn in order to assume the leadership mantle in the future.

Generation X is also a cohort of employees who share some common traits. Born between 1961 and 1981, Gen X-ers tend to be a transient workforce, averaging a three- to five-year life span in any one organization. Gen X-ers are technologically savvy, pragmatic and competent; they are efficient at managing themselves to get the job done. They tend to be free agents, frequently distrusting corporate motives. And most have received very little training, development or mentoring in the workplace, and hence are adept at learning on the fly. Additionally, as a generation they have notably different values from the Baby Boomers. For example, many believe family time is so important that they are less willing to sell their souls to the 24/7 devil and often put work/life balance over income and career advancement. This means opportunities for flextime, part-time work and telecommuting are very appealing to them. These are generational traits that older leaders would do well to understand and incorporate into planning for their organizations' future.

Bridging the Gap

The term "generation gap" came to prominence in describing the disparity between kids of the first



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Integrating Innovation Teams
recently announced study by the government



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postwar generation and their parents, sometimes called the G.I. Generation. But another gap inevitably exists on the other side of the Boomer generation. This gap, created by differing sensibilities and economic realities, has put passing the leadership torch from Boomers to Gen X-ers low on the priority list. For the past 20 years, Boomer-led organizations have been highly focused on cost cutting and downsizing, often to the detriment of emerging leader training and mentoring programs. Furthermore, Boomer culture tends to emphasize competitiveness, self-importance and youthfulness—qualities that may make it hard for Boomers to grasp their responsibility to mentor and prepare their successors. In fact, some organizations are choosing to invest in short-term solutions, such as retirement postponement incentives that keep knowledge-rich Boomers in the workplace longer, rather than in long-term training and development initiatives for future leaders.

Given the lack of consideration or preparation for the future that most organizations have demonstrated to date, it is quite likely that Gen X-ers are going to find themselves suddenly in the driver's seat and expected to steer organizations through complex, chaotic and uncertain terrain, prepared or not. How can this next generation of leaders take charge and seek out the knowledge that they will need to lead well? How can they step up and prepare for their future? Here's my advice to fellow Gen X-ers:

Stop hoping for things to change. It is unlikely the status quo will change. As has been the lifelong truth for those who grew up as latchkey kids, Gen X-ers must continue to figure out what to do to take care of themselves. In short, if you are just waiting in the shadow of the Baby Boomers, push aside the apathy for which Gen X is known and use the coping skills you grew up with to effect positive change.

Perform a frank assessment of your strengths and limitations. Self-knowledge is the most important tool that good leaders possess. When you are aware of your strong points and have insight about your shortcomings, you can chart a path for yourself to advance and succeed. Resist the compulsion to be overly self-critical; you are simply taking an inventory of your abilities and what you need to learn. Consider how your values, such as a desire for work/life balance, can be leadership strengths, and how a lack of political savvy may be a limitation. Successful leaders need to understand how to inspire people to work toward meaningful goals, and these skills can be learned if you are willing to do the work.

Find the value in Baby Boomers. No matter what you think of Boomers' leadership, values or pursuits, the reality is they have amassed a lifetime of experience and knowledge. While some knowledge hoarders exist, most Boomers are simply unaware that they aren't sharing it, or that you don't have it. Look for potential teachers, coaches or mentors who demonstrate qualities you admire or possess knowledge you desire. Seek them out and enlist their help. You may need to convince them why they should help you. To that end, sincere flattery can go a long way. So can free labor. Tell them you admire their work and ask them about their methods, or offer to take notes for them at a board meeting in exchange for a chance to attend and observe. Most importantly, focus not on where you differ but on what they have to offer. By taking charge of the process and developing relationships, you can harness the insights gleaned from their experience and help them better understand you and your goals.

Employ the power of the collective. Many Gen X-ers have made remarkable contributions to their family, community, industry or country. Their collective impact as a generation, however, has been woefully low, and its members continue to live with policies, priorities and directives of an older generation that do not address many of their shared concerns. By exploring the common ground that exists among fellow Gen X-ers—in your workplace or your communities—you can start to change policies to better serve your common goals. For example, if you want flextime in your company, find out who else might benefit, and generate a critical mass to help sway decision-makers. Or start an emerging leader organization to lobby for the training and mentoring you will need to lead your organization successfully.

Gen X-ers are often described as cynical and indifferent, and let's be honest, many have been. Speaking as a Gen X-er myself, I know we have a lot to learn, but as a generation we have the endurance to tackle life's hardships, the technical know-how to manage the realities of a global workforce, and most importantly, a deep commitment to the future of our kids. It's our time to step up.

Deborah Gilburg is a principal of Gilburg Leadership Institute, a leadership development firm specializing in generational dynamics and organizational succession planning. For more information, visit <http://www.gilburgleadership.com/>.

Readers Viewpoint

Author's Response

Posted: FEB 09, 2007 07:21:00 AM

It is terrific that so many of you are commenting on my column. While I would love to address each of your comments specifically, for now I'd like to touch on some of the common themes that have come up in this feedback forum and provide some more detailed information that I think responds to what a lot of you are saying.

First of all, I want to be clear that I am not saying that Gen Xers can't be great leaders: They can be - and are - great leaders! The point I'm trying to make is that too few of us are stepping up to the leadership plate, either due to limited opportunities (so many Boomers in the workplace), a lack of commitment to organizations that don't address our needs, or other more personal reasons that only you may know. Part of the reason so few of us are stepping up is because we're not getting the training,

mentoring or organizational support we need. As a leadership development professional, I can tell you that most organizations are not preparing for the generational shift, and the lack of attention paid to developing Xer talent has left us pretty much to our own devices. Those of us who have successfully stepped into leadership roles have figured out how to do so on our own. And as a generation, we are good at that. There are many workplace statistics that back up my points, and I've listed some resources and references at the end of this comment.

Lastly, I'd like to address my characterizations of the Boomer and X generations, which some of you have questioned. I have based my portrayals of Boomers and Xers on a model called Generational Dynamics that offers some relevant (albeit broad) perspectives on the sociology of generations and how a repetitive cycle becomes the baseline for social evolution. Generational Dynamics is very theoretical, but it's also useful. While there is a lot of data out there about current generational differences (marketers are always interested), I do rely to some degree upon the assumptions from this model because of its ability to do what it has done here in this comment forum: spark a conversation, raise questions and bring unacknowledged assumptions or experiences to the fore. In addition to the individuals who have commented here, I have received a number of emails sent to me personally! I realize that because individuals differ, it is important not to take the model too far. In the end, it is only as good as the insights it offers that help each of us as individuals get a new perspective on what we want and how to get it. (And as one readers suggested, perspective may in fact be what is needed, not skills!)

Please keep the discussion going, skepticism and all! If you are in a leadership role, what practices have been successful? What issues still challenge you? If you want to develop yourself further, what areas are you interested in? If you have ideas, perspectives, or deeper questions you want to hear more about, email me and I'll work to provide you and CIO.com with what is stimulating, relevant and insightful for your career development.

Resources:

Books & White Papers

Generations, William Straus & Neil Howe

Fourth Turning, W. Strauss & N. Howe

Lost Knowledge, David DeLong

www.gilburgleadership.com/resources/Building_a_Leadership_Legacy.pdf (our white paper on the Xer/Boomer topic)

Research & Statistics

www.lifecourse.com (see News & Research)

www.rainmakerthinking.com (see research reports, "Generational Shift")

Deborah Gilburg
principal
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The Party's Over

Posted: FEB 08, 2007 09:54:45 AM

If I had to explain our experience as 'Xers to a BB'er, I would say that their life has been a series of doors where upon passing they are greeted by a host who says, "Great to see you! The party's just starting! Here, have a beer!" This is the benefit of being the trend in everything you do, whether in investing, home buying, careers, etc.

By comparison being an X'er means you're always a decade late to the trend. Our equivalent greeting is "Great to see you! The party's over now, there's puke all over the bathroom, here's the mop!"

Here in the U.S. the Boomers have left us a huge mess with everything from the deficit, the war, illegals aliens, etc, and now - well, here's our mop again.

We will be expected to cheerfully bankrupt ourselves (and our children) paying for their retirement. Our "retirement" will be a mercy bullet when we finally die in the harness.

My advice is - when your organization suddenly discovers they need you, demand exorbitant rates, guarantees of payment (preferably in advance), and don't be ashamed to be ruthless and put a cordless drill on the screw...now that the wheel has turned. They would do the same.

Dhavid Bhatchelder
Design Engineer
Highly Regarded Computers

Pragmatist is a complimentary term..

Posted: FEB 08, 2007 07:18:56 AM

Of course I am "heartland GenX", I am also Australian and a rare GenX commodity that still holds his (Shock) Christian faith and have held management positions in large schools (over many Boomers) from a young working age.

It is a cheap shot to say that as a generation, " Their collective impact as a generation, however, has been woefully low". Our generation in the Western World is generally less than 35% of the size of the