

# Leadership for a New Age

## Diverse talents of a multigenerational workforce must be harnessed to keep up with organizational productivity.

By Jennifer J. Salopek

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the presence of four distinct generations in the workforce simultaneously and the ways in which their view and values are changing the way we do business.

This multigenerational workforce has major implications for organizations and, in particular, for managers and leaders who must harness the diverse talents of these groups to operate productively. According to Laura Bernstein, CEO and president of VisionPoint in Des Moines, Iowa, the various characteristics of these workers combine to create the ideal employee.

"Imagine an employee who brings enthusiasm and energy, shares fresh ideas and new approaches, displays wisdom that typically comes with years of experience, demonstrates unflinching loyalty to the organization, and refuses to take 'no' for an answer when pitching a breakthrough idea," she writes. "Realistically, the chance of finding all these characteristics in a single employee is practically zero. However, these same desirable characteristics, and many more, can be found in today's multigenerational workforce."

### Harness the potential

The Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is part of the Office for Personnel Management's Center for Leadership Capacity Services, provides leadership development training for senior-level civil servants. Peter Ronayne, dean of the faculty at the institute, and one of his graduate students began designing a multigenerational leadership course, "From Vets to the 'Net,'" five years ago after observing the impact that generational differences had on their own small organization. The institute employs about 30 staff and faculty, and "represents a microcosm of the effects that demo-

graphic shifts are having on the federal government overall," says Ronayne.

As he began to investigate the issue, Ronayne admits that he was skeptical at first. "I was more of the opinion that differences came from a life-stage point of view," he says. "However, as I did my research, I began to realize that the generational approach has a lot of validity. I'm a convert."

Many organizations, however, have yet to recognize the value of generational awareness—and typically wait for failure to occur before taking action.

"I am not seeing organizations recognize that things have to look different. This knowledge acquisition and understanding will become increasingly necessary in the next five years," says Bernstein. "This is not only a supply and demand issue. This understanding is necessary for organizations to stay strategically in front of their competition. By harnessing the potential of each generation, companies will get much more than they have to give up."

"We are most often engaged by traditionalists and baby boomers who are attempting to lead dysfunctional teams, whose organizations are experiencing high turnover and low morale. They often discover that generational differences are the root of the problems," say Giselle Kovary and Adwoa Buahene, managing partners of N-Gen, a consulting firm in Toronto.

### Walk the talk

It is crucial for leaders to understand each generation's characteristics, values, and motivations; to adopt new competencies to harness the best of each; to facilitate cooperation; and to explore new ways of thinking that incorporate the critical differences among generations.

And, according to Ronayne, it's helpful to review the trends driving corporate

changes that make multigenerational understanding necessary now. "We've talked about generation gaps at work in the past," says Ronayne. "However, organizations are flatter now, and there is much less space between the mailroom and the boardroom. This, plus the rise of teaming to get work done, presents workers of different generations with more frequent opportunities to interact."

To gain a firm understanding of the workforce diversity, organizational leaders must follow a few simple rules.

**Acknowledge generational differences.** An excellent overview of the generations and their characteristics can be found in Paul Harris' article, "Boomer vs. Echo-Boomer: The Work War?" in the May 2005 issue of *T+D*. Traditionalists, baby boomers, Generation Xers, and millennials have varying views on what Bernstein terms "key workplace dimensions" such as work style, leadership, communication, recognition, family, loyalty, and technology.

**Define your role.** For leaders, understanding the differences in how generations approach authority, leadership, and loyalty can be especially important. In their book *First, Break All the Rules*, Gallup Organization researchers Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman reveal that employees do not leave companies. They leave managers. Tailoring your management style to conform to the personality of your staff helps to ensure that they don't leave you.

**Work smarter.** As Kovary and Buahene advise, the manager's job isn't getting any easier. "The one-size-fits-all approach is outmoded, and the mandate for leaders is to gain greater traction by working smarter. By becoming more transparent, more responsive, and more collaborative managers—and their companies—will become more productive and enjoy higher employee retention rates."

**Reorganize and refocus your teams.** "Most leaders, in government especially, are baby boomers," says Ronayne. "Teaming as a leadership competency is very central to the way work is done. This is a boomer-driven phenomenon, as they

were the first generation of young Americans to be observed for sociability and a group dynamic." Ronayne also notes that many boomers inherited a bureaucratic approach from traditionalists that have been slow to change. "Age is just another aspect of diversity. We encourage our clients to consciously cross-populate their teams. More diversity equals greater creativity and innovation."

**Hone your people skills.** "There is new pressure on managers to be more than functional experts," says Bernstein. Younger workers in particular expect more feedback, more coaching, and more communication. "Leaders' competencies are not necessarily changing, but their methods are. Xers and millennials seek communication that is direct and constructive."

**Walk the talk.** While traditionalists and boomers placed their loyalties with the organization and its mission, younger employees are loyal to their managers and to their own sense of integrity. "Leaders must demonstrate character by acting consistently with the values, vision, and mission of the organization. This means doing things right even when nobody is looking," Bernstein says.

### **Reframe retention and loyalty**

The concept of an "ideal employee" who devotes an entire career to a single organization is long past. "We must reframe our ideas of retention and loyalty," say Kovary and Buahene. "To younger employees, five years in one job seems like a life sentence. To retain them, organizations must focus on engagement, learning, and involvement."

Ronayne notes that recruitment and retention are urgent issues for the federal government, where Generation Xers are already underrepresented in the workforce and a "retirement tsunami" of older employees is pending.

Ronayne advocates a program of "nonlinear retention," whereby leaders provide employees with excellent work experience and learning opportunities, even if they stay only two to three years. The hope is that they will return at some point in the future as their spiraling career pattern brings them back through the revolving door.

Variety and responsibility can be the key to creating excellent work experiences. Ronayne cites a program in the General Accounting Office known as virtual promotion, in which employees rotate through all areas of the operation. "They are constantly given new challenges and opportunities, and this experience provides them with a corporate perspective," he notes.

Buahene and Kovary report that some of their more innovative clients introduced "intrapreneurship" programs, which are designed to appeal to Generation Xers who value independent work and making a difference. In these programs, a senior leader identifies a second-tier project, one that holds promise for the organization but requires a substantial time commitment. The leader assigns the most talented young employees to work with a multidisciplinary team that will present the business case for the project to the CEO.

"This is so exciting for employees," Buahene says. "It gives them access and exposure to company leadership, as well as real experience in problem solving and skill development."

### **Manage multigenerational learning**

Workplace learning and performance professionals play a vital role in helping organizations train their leaders to manage a multigenerational workforce.

"This is a very exciting time for learning and development, as younger employees demand the move to action-based learning that is increasingly embedded in the job. Further, WLP professionals can be creative as they leverage their knowledge of learning styles and layer it with generational awareness, becoming a strategic partner in creating workplace performance," Kovary says.

Our profession can act as a bridge between leaders and employees, helping younger workers to understand what feedback means and how to act on it, and helping managers give feedback that is meaningful to workers.

WLP professionals also must help organizations adjust their definitions of leadership and their defined competencies. Many employers think that younger

employees have unrealistic expectations and overvalue their own skills and experience. Many managers are unprepared to address those challenges. By helping to define strong competency models, WLP practitioners can help take much of the guesswork out of managing.

Trainers must also reevaluate their own methods, notes Bernstein. "Younger employees simply do not relate to our examples and case studies. We need to get new stories."

There are 70 million baby boomers in the workforce and only 55 million Generation Xers to replace them. The cost of losing an employee is estimated at 50 to 300 percent of that person's salary. The need to retain older workers while attracting younger ones is urgent.

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