Managers, Employees Can Work through Generation Gaps



By Leigh Branham

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Managers born before 1965 (Boomers and Traditionalists) have had to learn to deal with workers born after them (Gen-Xers and Millennials). When Boomers managers were first starting their careers, there were only two generations in the workforce. Now there are four, with another one on the way.

Because there are 20 million fewer Generation X-ers than baby boomers, retaining 30- to 45-year-old workers has become a crucial priority for most companies, especially since boomers have begun to retire.

Differences between Boomers and X-ers have been thoroughly documented for decades, but frustrations continue. Boomer managers still complain that X-ers (and Millennials) are slackers who won't pay their dues and insist on doing things their own way. Many X-ers see Boomers as inflexible, technologically backward, overly political, and as one-dimensional workaholics who need to lighten up.

The different generations have all earned the right to see things as they do because of different life experiences. Boomers grew up amid social calm and prosperity and were willing to patiently climb the career ladder, because they knew there were other boomers who could take their jobs. X-ers grew up amid uncertainty. They watched Nixon resign, the Challenger explode, and their parents lose their jobs after years of paying their dues.

When Boomer managers say "you may get promoted in three years if you are patient and work hard," a top-performing X-er or Millennial may think, "the heck with that.. .I'll just take the job with that other company that's willing to challenge me now and let me grow at my own rate."

That is why companies such as Enterprise Rent-A-Car, which give young workers the challenge and responsibility they desire, are retaining more than their share of Millennials and X-ers.

One 26-year-old computer software whiz flatly turned down an attractive offer after learning that he would have to slowly earn vacation days over a two-year period. Like many Millennial, he wanted time for leisure pursuits—in his case, rock-climbing trips. "Having a life outside of work" is a recurring theme

with Millennials and X-ers that many Boomer-dominated companies have been slow to accept, and their policies reflect it.

But it takes more than just perks, policies and pay to keep good workers. Mostly, it's about the manager-employee relationship. Smart companies know they must make sure their Boomer managers understand a few keys to retaining younger generations:

- Don't mention ladder-climbing or dues-paying. Look for ways to challenge them now, focusing on just-in-time training and short-term missions. Ask them about their dream jobs, then work with them in trying to create them.
- Allow them to reinvent themselves within the organization by learning new skills, moving cross-functionally, finding a new mentor, working flexible hours or from a different location.
- Make the work environment fun and informal. Introduce them to others and encourage workplace friendships.
- Invite them to talk about what it will take to keep them in the organization, then negotiate a "personal retention plan" that meets their needs for growth, flexibility and balance. This means letting go of the "treat-everyone-the-same" dictum by which most boomer managers have lived.
- When they say they want to leave, give them the option of continuing to contribute as a parttimer, flex-timer, telecommuter, periodic temp or consultant.

If following these guidelines seems to suggest that a manager must bend over backward instead of meeting an X-er or Millennial halfway, then understand that there is a new reality—all four generations must be willing to give a little.

After all, it is supposed to be partnership, not a war.



Leigh Branham is CEO and Founder of Keeping the People, Inc., the author of three influential business books, and a prominent business educator who travels and speaks internationally. Through presentations, training workshops, employee engagement surveying, and exit interviewing, Leigh helps employers achieve better business outcomes by increasing employee engagement and building healthier and more attractive workplace cultures.

E-mail Leigh Branham at LB@keepingthepeople.com or visit www.keepingthepeople.com.