

Providing a Blueprint for Generational Leadership

By Misti Burmeister

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Developing an understanding of the specific ways in which Generations X and Y view the world will provide your organization with valuable insight into how to attract, sustain and motivate the younger generations. When you speak their language and they understand your language, the stage is set for better communication, increased productivity and increased profitability. I was reminded of this when one of my client's commented, "Why do my younger employees keep talking about this whole 'balance' thing, when there's work to be done?"

There are a couple of important things to consider here.

First is the fact that each generation has different formative experiences and, therefore, place different values on different things. The fact that they are differently valued does not make one "right" and another "wrong" - they are simply different.

So, what are those differences and what can you as a manager do to best tap the talents of these generations?

Each generation has its own work ethic, different perspectives on work, preferred ways of being managed, idiosyncratic styles, and unique ways of viewing such work-world issues as quality, service and showing up for work.

Bridging the generational gap will:

- ◆ Provide an atmosphere for shared learning
- ◆ Heighten productivity
- ◆ Increase leadership capability
- ◆ Identify company and individual goals and enable action to reach them
- ◆ Boost morale
- ◆ Sustain commitment and reduce attrition rates, thereby reducing cost of recruiting and training.

Working Harder or Smarter?

By and large, the more seasoned generations believe working harder equals achievement. Often times their philosophy entails, the more hours in the office, the more work that is accomplished. The younger generations place a higher value on balance, informality and working smarter. When I first began my career at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I remember thinking to myself "do these people have a life outside of their computers - all they do is work all the time." I was confused and, frankly, scared - although I did not know exactly what I wanted to do with my future, I did know that I did not want to work crazy hours glued to a lighted screen. What I needed more than anything was to spend some time thinking about and creating my future - actually developing a plan. If my mentor would have taken the time to sit down with me and help me think through and create a plan, my anxiety would have decreased and my commitment to her and the organization would have increased significantly.

Learning on Your Own or Through Mentoring

As soon as I arrived at NIH, I began searching for someone to mentor me. Every time one of the scientists said they would mentor me, they simply gave me more work to do. They didn't

understand that I needed to know what the larger vision was for my future, how my efforts would contribute to the vision at NIH, and how the work they were giving me would help me add to my professional growth. I have now realized that this scenario is wide spread. The intentions were right but they did not have the understanding of how to effectively mentor younger generations. In addition to providing these generations with important work, it is crucial to show how their work contributes to the larger picture, which in turn enables them to explore and clearly define their career plan and the steps to get to where they want to go.

"Paying Your Dues"

The second thing to consider is that many if not most young people expect to finish college and land a well-paying job without having to prove their work ethic and abilities. Of course, it rarely happens that way. Simply put, showing enthusiasm and a desire to do a great job with small projects - even something as small as offering to take notes in meetings - shows a potential to take on bigger projects. Managers are more likely to trust such a person's level of commitment, and trust is built and nurtured over time. In general, most managers are unwilling to delegate larger projects if the employee cannot demonstrate an ability to do the small tasks really well. Allowing for time to pass, so that experiences and relationships can be built, is vital to career growth.

Taking the time to help your younger employees understand that something as small as doing an excellent job taking notes in meetings can affect their future with the company is vital to their development. As a result of mentoring your younger employees in such ways, they begin to trust you and loyalty is developed. "What you give is what you get" may be a truism, but it is no less true for being so-especially when it comes to the development of younger employees. If you take the time to help them plan for their future and see the value of their work, there is a greater chance they will work that much harder and smarter for you.

While many people might think of mentoring as "babysitting" because it can be time-intensive, mentoring does not need to be hand-holding, nor does it have to lead to frustration. You begin mentoring a young employee simply by listening and searching for ways to address the inevitable uncertainties and fears. By effectively mentoring, you take the anxiety for the future out of the picture and allow the employee to be present in their experience of your organization.

Charting a Course

For example, when you hire a younger employee, it is of tremendous benefit to both of you to map out a plan for the future - accompanied by milestones to achieve your respective goals. It's a win-win situation- you want highly productive, engaged (and engaging) employees, and your employees want to know what's possible for them and how to achieve it. If you discover that the position an employee currently occupies is not a good match for his or her abilities or future ambitions, be sure to explore how the employee sees this position leading to the future he or she desires. Ultimately, it is not about acceptance or rejection - it is about filling needs - not only your organization's needs, but that of your employee. If it leads to a change in jobs for the employee, whether inside or outside your organization, positive growth will occur for both the organization and the employee.

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