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Changing Generations = Changing Leadership Styles

Gone are the days of the one-size-fits-all management style. Today, managers must understand and adapt to the needs and experiences of each of the four generations that are now actively in the workforce: the Traditionalists (those born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) and Generation Yers (born between 1981 and 1999). Every generation will introduce its own idiosyncrasies to the work environment, but few have had an influence as profound as that of Generations X and Y. These two generations - who now represent the majority of the American workforce - have effectively overturned the paradigm of the American career. The job-for-life model no longer exists. The average job tenure is down to four years and it is expected to keep dropping. Those who began working in the 90's will change jobs nine times before they are 32 years old. Of course, all this job hopping poses a considerable challenge to the corporate ladder style of management that guided organizations throughout the 20th century.

To effectively manage this diverse workforce, managers must understand the dynamics within and between each generation. Additionally, as stated in *Generations Collide*, they need to adopt an "ageless thinking" attitude. This first step to understanding generations requires us to look beyond age and consider the formative experiences that have shaped generational identities.

The Traditionalists came of age during the Great Depression and two World Wars. Sacrifice and suffering were major influences of their formative years, as was hope. They put a great deal of faith in institutions such as government, religion and education. Consequently, they are known for their loyalty, resilience, persistence and their management style is modeled on the military chain of command. They expect that their experience has earned them respect, and they demand that their opinions be recognized. They also take personal responsibility for developing the talent of younger workers.

Boomers were molded by a thriving post-war economy, television, Vietnam, Watergate and human rights movements and became known as the "Me Generation." As the largest group ever to enter the workforce, they arrived on the scene with optimism, ready to shake things up and make the world a better place. They were, and continue to be, very competitive. Work became their identity and job security their priority. Often, Boomers act as a bridge between Traditionalists and the younger workforce. Boomers have a wealth of knowledge to share regarding an organization's history, which can only enhance inter-generational relationships. Additionally, Boomers are learning about work/life balance from the younger workforce.

Where Boomers and Traditionalists have placed their loyalty in their job and company, the younger generations (X and Y) are frequently loyal to themselves. Generation Xers have seen institutions from the presidency to corporate America to the family crumble and have learned not to rely on other people or organizations. They are a generation of latch-key kids, the most unsupervised generation to date, who have grown into independent, goal-oriented free-agents. They will work hard for the employer who offers opportunity for growth and a balance between work and their personal lives. They are continually looking for training and development opportunities that will enhance their marketable skills.

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As the practical, techno-savvy Generation Y came of age in the boom years of the 90's and the Internet entered the workplace, so have confident employees who appreciate diversity, easily adapt to change and expect instant information. Generation Y has been told by family members and teachers that they can make a difference, and in turn they are looking for socially responsible employers. Generation Yers are independent, entrepreneurial thinkers who thrive on challenges and are looking to make an immediate impact (and receive immediate gratification).

How do we manage this diverse group? As loyalties shift, so must our leadership skills. There are a number of concepts to include as you create and/or modify this new culture:

- Make everyone feel included – ignore age! The work must be satisfying and employees need to feel they are making a contribution.
- Let employees see where the company is going and how they fit into that movement.
- Encourage a mentoring culture where each generation can learn from the other.
- Offer coaching-style feedback.
- Provide training opportunities for all to develop marketable skills.
- Listen.

Companies have a unique opportunity in working with a diverse workforce, but they must take advantage of it now and establish a culture that responds to the needs of their employees. You can do this by capitalizing on the experiences and strengths of each generation. In doing so, you create a stronger workforce and richer culture as employees learn and benefit from one another. The time to begin is now – it will give you the competitive advantage in the future as you attract new talent to your organization.