Have You Bridged the Generation Gap? (Part 1)

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Do you remember the Generation Gap of the 1960s? I believe that, devoid of bell-bottoms and flower power, it is back, and the two factions in this latter-day generational rift are the Millennials and the Baby Boomers.

The issue at hand might not be as blatant as it was in the days of the Johnson Administration, but it is probably more dramatic, and carries with it farther-ranging implications. The population that reached maturity since the turning of the millennium will be doing business in a very different way—and to user groups that speak a very different language.

The fact is that the up-and-coming generation is a growing presence in the workplace and a powerful force of change in the way our offices, our apartments and our very businesses function. (If you have any doubt about the changes being wrought by the next generation of users, architecture firm Gensler came out last year with a study on the implications of the new generation in office design that uncovers some very real and exciting new trends. Click here http://www.gensler.com/work/2013/7/22/genslers-2013-workplace-survey-balance-in-any-environment.html to read more.)

But this up-and-coming generation is also impacting every aspect of how our businesses are structured, from hiring and training practices to how we as business leaders sustain our teams and our organizations from a competitive standpoint.

So here’s the question: As a business leader, do you recognize the changes taking place around you? Are you a preservationist or are you a leader of that change? Let me share a scenario from my own experience.

I recently had a Gen Y employee reporting to a Baby Boomer supervisor. The employee is uber-productive, and if I could clone her I would. She’s a great citizen of the company and a simply phenomenal worker. She is not a clock-watcher, works flexible hours and, as most people her age, is very comfortable using technology. But, her Baby-Boomer supervisor held onto a measure of success that was far different from that of his Gen Y subordinate. His focus was on what time she got to work, when she was at her desk and how late she stayed. He could not get past his own generational bias of how productivity is defined.

Now, the upshot of this particular scenario is this: She ultimately moved from that manager’s department . . . because she was promoted . . . twice.

The essential problem here is that these two workers spoke different languages of success and commitment. He could no more see why her methodologies worked than she could understand why he focused on what seemed to her trivialities. But it is the younger worker who most closely embraces the way business is going to be done tomorrow.

As Gen Y infiltrates the businesses we own and manage—and increasingly, as they become the predominant users of office space and housing of all types—our generation is challenged to respond in a positive way to this watershed transition, and do so in all aspects of our business lives, from dealing with
our space users to how we hire and promote. We are challenged to let go of the tried-and-true methodologies that may have worked in the past; that may even be the foundation of our success. We are challenged to adopt a new language of business for a new user type. As just one example, let’s take succession planning. When we speak of succession planning, we are typically referring to a terminal career event, Joe or Samantha retiring. But I see succession planning as more of a process, and it speaks directly to this generational issue. Simply put, succession planning addresses how we are going to work tomorrow, regardless of who is at the helm, running a department, division or a company.

How we did things last year becomes increasingly irrelevant as we look ahead. As forward thinkers, succession planning is a process of sustaining growth and evolving best practices, especially in the face of that new generation that speaks that very different language. (By the way, this very important issue will be a major topic of conversation at IREM’s upcoming National Leadership Conference in Orlando this October.)

The successful executive today must have a very clear understanding of the rapidly changing business environment in which we all work. There are some tried-and-true practices that will always remain so. But there are those that are suddenly and for some of us, surprisingly obsolete; holding our businesses back from achieving all we can. As leaders, we have to be able to discern the difference between the two. And we must be nimble in embracing new methodologies as our future success dictates.

So I ask the question again: Are you a preservationist, or a change leader?

(This is the first of a two-part article. In the next installment we will treat changes in training and education.)

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