

Motivating Generation X: Give Them a Chance... and a Challenge

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

Much has been written about the disenfranchised new generation of workers in the workplace. Going by various monikers such as “Generation X,” “TwentySomethings,” and “The 13th Generation” (that is, the 13th generation since the founding of the United States), managing this group of employees can pose quite a challenge.

They’ve been told that they will not have a better standard of living than their parents that, in fact, many of them will still be living at home until late in their twenties. They’ve been told they are the least skilled workers to enter the workplace in ages with MTV attention spans that last 15 minutes, tops. They’ve been told they will not have careers, but rather, they’ll be lucky to have steady work-or even full-time, hourly work for that matter. They’ve been told they are unambitious slackers, and it’s just as well since their managers aren’t going anywhere anytime soon anyway.

Granted, some of these generalizations have a foundation in truth. The nature of work is drastically changing in the U.S. with the extensive degree of downsizing and merging.

Full-time jobs are being eliminated at record speeds and companies are increasingly turning to contracted, part-time workers when they do seek to rehire. Their preparation for what jobs that do exist is scant. According to demographers Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, co-authors of 13th Gen:

“Just as they (Generation X) started graduating from college, the Nation at Risk report marked the end of the reform era that had spanned their entire school careers. As the cutting edge of educational philosophy suddenly swung back the other way, the college classes of the middle ‘80s became the target of a searing academic whiplash. Ever since elementary school, they had constantly been told that there weren’t any standards, that they were doing well, and that they

had to listen to their feelings. Now after all those years, they heard that there had indeed been standards, that they had failed to meet them, and that no one much cared how they felt about that failure.”

Still there appears to be more reason to rejoice than fret about this new breed of workers, provided managers take into account cer-



tain learnings. Following are several such insights for managing this new generation of workers:

Provide the Larger Context for Work.

When they're not worried about getting a job, workers in this generation would like to have a job that gives their life meaning. Says one 26-year-old account executive for a communications firm: "We're more interested in contributing to society—whether it's via working for a company or a non-profit, or volunteering our time—than any past demographic of workers." Often this meaning can be best provided by their manager, who can explain the mission and purpose of the company and how the employee's job fits into the overall goals of the organization. If this context is not provided, Generation Xers will revert to looking at work merely as a means of survival, a means to an end, as only a way to make money. If not engaged on the job, they'll seek excitement when the work day is over—and be eager to get out the door each day to that part of their life.

Gear Work to Action, Not Talk. This generation has a low tolerance for talking about work and would rather "just do it." They prefer action over talk, facts over meanings, results over process, and accountability over excuses. They pride themselves on speed and being able to do multiple tasks at the same time. They hate meetings, philosophizing and political maneuvering in the office. They are attracted to work that directly rewards initiative such as sales or incentive work.

Focus on Results, Not Rules. They know how to get the job done. This generation takes special pride in what they picked up on their own and in their ability to succeed in life despite less-than-desirable circumstances in their life at home, school or work. They prosper at opportunities in which they can apply themselves, to new tasks and fixing problems never before experienced—not in systemati-

cally following predetermined work procedures. Make it clear what results you are after and then leave them alone to do the job as they see fit. This requires a manager to have a great deal of trust and respect in the person and to set the expectation (and practice) of open communication in which any employee can ask if he or she needs information, help, support or resources to get the job done

Take Time and Listen, Don't Lecture.

They may not want to be micro-managed, but they have a strong craving for their manager's approval. This need for approval comes in part from having possibly the lowest collective self-esteem of any living generation. Take time to listen to them. As Roy Moody, president of Roy Moody & Associates says, "The greatest motivational act one person can do for another is to listen." Yet many managers can't imagine that a young employee might have an idea or thought that has not already occurred to them. That's disappointing because in many ways this generation is more attuned to the times. They are more "here and now" and market savvy than the future-oriented mindset of many of their managers. Claire Raines, co-author of *Twenty-Somethings: Managing and Motivating Today's New Work Force*, says "A big, big motivator for (this generation) is time spent with their boss. They feel they didn't have enough time with their parents while they were growing up, and they transfer that need to the workplace. They're really motivated by spending time with their superiors, whether it's having a cup of coffee or being invited to lunch or a meeting."

Recognize and Appreciate Whenever Possible. Although all employees have a need to be appreciated, for this group the need is particularly acute. "Unlike yuppies, younger people are not driven from within. They need reinforcement. They prefer short-term tasks with observable results," says Penny Erikson, 40, of the Young & Rubicam ad agency. Says

Cathy Sigismonti, a 28-year-old marketing analyst: “Tell me that I did a good job. Let me know.” Adds John Doyle, a 31-year-old programmer: “We want recognition because when we were growing up the family unit wasn’t very strong. It can be financial or something else. At a company event, it could be just pointing someone out and saying their name.” Andy Moore, a 26-year-old circulation and marketing manager for a national magazine, puts it this way: “When management shows through actions rather than words, that you’re a valuable employee, that your input is valued no matter what level you work at, it’s very motivating.” Make sure you recognize and reward the results you get in a timely, specific way.

Encourage Skill Development, Not Loyalty. This generation constantly wants to learn new skills, both to keep the job exciting and challenging as well as to increase their marketability. In the words of Liesel Walsh, a consultant with Big Picture Marketing in Charleston, MA, and a TwentySomething herself: “Manage me by teaching me things.” Adds Raines, “Young workers today see themselves as marketable commodities, as an item for sale. So if managers can help them to see how an assignment we give them today makes them more marketable, how it builds their resume, that really motivates them.” Says Robert Lukefahr, one of the founders of Third Millennium, a political group that represents Generation X: “Training is one of the best motivators. The opportunity to increase their portfolio of skills through training, either formal or informal, ranks high on their list of motivators.” Being highly individualistic, their loyalty is to themselves and their profession, not to a company that cannot guarantee them a career anyway.

Promote New Responsibilities, Not Promotions. In that job promotions are harder to come by during times of downsizing, new

responsibilities or job rotations are the next best thing to providing the needed change of pace that keeps this generation engaged. Says Margaret Regan, a principal with New York-based Towers Perrin who consults with companies about this generation of workers: “To these workers, promotions don’t necessarily mean movement up the corporate ladder. Often the movement can be lateral, to a new position that will offer new challenges and build new skills. When Xers get bored with a job, they’ll want to move on to the next, either within your company or outside it. They like job swapping, they think it’s great fun.”

Make Work Fun, Not Routine. This generation wants to have fun—at work, if at all possible—otherwise they’ll focus on that activity when they’re not on the job. This is part of a balanced life they decided was missing from their parents’ lives as well as that of their workaholic managers. So loosen up and try some new activities to help keep things exciting. Says Raines, “Fostering a spirit of fun in the workplace by giving employees an occasional afternoon off for sporting activities or arranging humorous office events and competitions will improve the morale of (Generation X) and increase their productivity.” Better yet, elicit the help of one or more of your youngest employees to come up with activities that can make work fun. This can range from each person taking turns in bringing innovative refreshments to staff meetings (scones and tea, milk and cookies, Baskin Robbins ice cream, etc.) to planning team outings to celebrate project milestones.

All in all, the challenge of managing Generation X is to challenge them—to engage them with new tasks, problems and skills—and recognize and reward them for results. Michael Gose of Pepperdine University conducted a study comparing Generation X with their parent’s generation of Baby Boomers. Of 43 measures of aptitude and achievement, the

Generation X respondents scored higher in “skills in negotiation,” “defenses to prevent extreme dependency on parents or authorities,” “skill interacting with adults on an equitable basis,” and “information about.. where to go for business, consumer, or personal wants and needs.” He concluded that the students of this generation are “more aware of what’s going on, how institutions work, how to manage social relations, how to cope with adults, and how to get things done in the community.” In short, they are survivors, used to confronting problems and unfavorable circumstances on their own, sorting out the best solution and acting upon it.

Every day managers have an opportunity to encourage and foster employee initiative and excitement with this type of employee—or to hinder and erode it. For example, I worked with one company that had a national chain of stores that sold automotive parts. One store manager told me about a young new hire that came to him one day and very excitedly asked that the manager follow him to the back store room. When they got there the young man announced “Look at this!” gesturing to an inventory of freshly stacked oil cans. At that point the manager has two choices. He could say something like: “What do you expect, a medal?” thereby sending the message that it is not considered very cool to do a good job and to take pride in such a boring, rote task—and possibly demotivating the person from ever caring about the job he does for the store—or he could say something like: “I’ve never seen

oil cans so neatly stacked in all my life. You sure must take pride in your work. I could really use someone with that type of work ethic, in fact, tomorrow I’d like to start showing you how to take inventory.” Fortunately, the store manager chose the latter.

Every company I know wants to have employees who are flexible and action oriented, independent and self-directed, technically competent and comfortable with the constantly changing nature of work today. In 1989 the U.S. Department of Labor commissioned a task force to determine the skills that American businesses desire of high school graduates. Among the most important were: “work in changing settings with people of different cultures,” “learn new skills,” “identify and suggest new ways to get the job done,” and “work without supervision.” If you look closely, you’ll see what they wanted is what’s available now in Generation X employees.

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