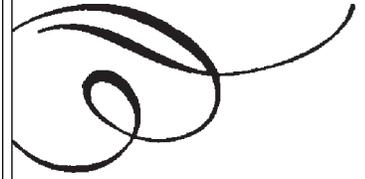# MANAGEMENT BASICS:

MANAGING GENERATION X

by Carolyn Wiethoff

Today's workforce is dominated by two generations: "Baby Boomers" ("Boomers"), born between 1946 and 1964, and "Generation X" ("Gen Xers" or "Baby Busters"), born roughly between 1965 and 1979. A third generation is beginning to enter the workforce: Generation Y ("Nexters" or "The Internet Generation" or "The Echo Boomers"), the eldest of whom just turned 24 (Rodriguez, Green & Ree, 2003). As is somewhat typical of intergenerational groups, there have been substantive misunderstandings between Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers. Gen Xers have been called everything from slackers to disloyal, from dumb to just plain bad (O'Bannon, 2001). Gen Yers, often called the "MTV Generation," are portrayed with tattoos and multiple body piercings in most media outlets (Paul, 2001). On the other hand, Gen Xers categorize Boomers as managers that ignore ideas from employees, provide inconsistent or no feedback or recognition when it is due, and adopt "do it because I said so" management (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000). The failure to recognize and acknowledge differences between Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers can result in miscommunication, misunderstandings, and harsh feelings, creating dysfunctional supervisor-employee relationships. The purpose of this article is to provide insight into Generation X and Generation Y in order to help Boomers understand their younger colleagues.

I should note that sweeping generalizations of any generation tend to be incorrect. But so too is the notion that there is nothing different or noteworthy about today's young adults. For purposes of clarity I will speak in generalizations, citing general findings in the literature about Generations X and Y. However, as we all well know, there are exceptions to every rule – not everyone from the Boomer, Xer, or Nexter generations is fully represented by these generalities.

The Boomer generation began at the end of World War II. Boomers were raised in prosperous, optimistic times and, for the most part, were doted on as children. They were typically raised in a nuclear family where the "father knows best" lifestyle was enacted…or if family life differed from this ideal, it was not made public.

Adolescent Boomers were idealistic rebels, questioning the status quo. As they began their professional careers, Boomers were driven and dedicated. Boomers equate work with self-worth, contribution to society, and personal fulfillment. Their competitive nature drove them to aspire for higher monetary compensation and titles (Cordeniz, 2002).

Generation X's childhood was dramatically different. Between 1965 and 1977, the divorce rate in America doubled. Over 40% of Xers come from broken families, and 12% of elementary school children and 30% of middle school children grew up as "latchkey kids," responsible for their own welfare after school until their parents returned from work (Zill & Robinson, 1995). Gen Xers are accustomed to great diversity in family situations, relationships, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender roles, religion, and political affiliation. Their school activities are focused less on individual performance and more on team-based learning.

Gen Xers grew up in the information age, and they are quite comfortable with technology. Politically, they grew up as America's global power was declining. In the business world, Generation X saw a record number of corporate bankruptcies, Wall Street scandals, and massive corporate downsizing. As they watched their parents struggle with these realities, they began to lose faith in organizations and institutions.

As a result of this upbringing, Generation X brings a new set of values to the workplace. Numerous studies reveal that monetary rewards are not as influential for Xers as they were/are for Boomers (Mayfield & Keating, 2003). Gen Xers want to – and like to – work, but not at the expense of their families. As a group, Xers tend not to follow traditional professional rules, possibly overlooking many organizational or social boundaries. They may, for example, speak to and seek out people in top management positions, sidestepping established hierarchies. Additionally, Xers want to participate in non-traditional, diverse, multi-tasking and fun work teams where individuals act as equals – regardless of their age, experience, race, or gender (Zemke et al., 2000).

Similarly, Gen Yers have had a significantly different upbringing than members of the Baby Boom generation. They do not remember the Cold War. "You sound like a broken record" means nothing to them. MTV is their favorite television channel, and this plus ever-popular video games have created a propensity for Gen Yers to learn in a visual style. This generation is fully comfortable with loud graphics, rapid editing, moving cameras, and loud music (Paul, 2001).

Because of widely publicized violent events at school, such as the Columbine shootings in 1999, Gen Yers are simultaneously watchful of their personal safety, but also wary of the news media. Whereas for Boomers and Gen Xers, threats came from beyond the shores of the United States in terms of Communism or nuclear annihilation, today fears are more local. Consequently, Gen Yers tend to be highly risk-averse (Stapinski, 1999).

Although their years of work experience are still relatively small, members of Generation Y similarly report being motivated by non-monetary rewards. Instead, they gravitate toward positions that provide training, a positive culture, and the ability to "be themselves" while at work. Generation Y workers also have a healthy respect for family, and report that time with family is a priority in their lives (Gardyn, 2000). Consequently, they value flexibility in work hours (or even the ability to do some work from home), as this helps them maintain a solid work/life balance. Interestingly, although Gen Yers are exceptionally comfortable with and tolerant of personal diversity on all levels, many of them report being somewhat more conservative in their interpersonal relationships – their dating, mating, and child-rearing habits look more like their grandparents' than those seen on Melrose Place (Stapinski, 1999).

To effectively manage Xers and Yers, managers need to tap into their creativity by fostering a climate that welcomes them and values their contributions. Xers' and Nexters' familiarity and comfort with information technology can add value to any library setting, and giving them autonomy to complete technology-related projects can engender trust and good will. Perhaps the most important thing to do for Xers, however, is provide feedback. Consider the FAST feedback model, in which managers provide employees with feedback that is Frequent, Accurate, Specific, and Timely. Both of these generations value direct feedback, and providing them with this input can ease their discomfort in the work environment. Also, recognize that family and outside interests will likely be more important than work to many Xers and Yers. It has been said that, while Boomers are a group that lives to work. Xers and Yers work to live (Tulgan, 2000). Rather than monetary incentives, managers may find that time

off and/or flexible work hours are highly motivating to these younger workers.

Despite their bad reputation, Gen Xers do bring a variety of positive attributes to their employers. They are:

- Open and comfortable with change
- Comfortable with technology
- Responsible
- Financially fit, understanding the value of money
- Not intimidated by authority
- Innovative
- Able to overcome adversity
- Team-oriented
- Diversity seekers
- Balanced in personal and professional priorities
- Able to overcome unnecessary politics (Augustine, 2001)

Perhaps the best possible advice to managers is to appreciate these qualities, and find ways to allow Xers to "work to their strengths" for the overall benefit of the organization.

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