Succession Planning and the Emerging Generations

Nine Trends You Need to Know

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Robert W. Wendover

How will our nation’s emerging generation of managers and leaders impact the way that you prepare for succession within your organization? As I work with and survey those in the so-called Generation X, it has become abundantly clear that they apply their own values and attitudes to the roles they assume. While this is not surprising in itself, it is instructive to examine how these attitudes and values will manifest themselves in fulfilling these roles. Here are nine characteristics that I have observed:

First, they’re skeptical.

Those coming of age in the economic, social, and political chaos of the 1980s discovered that many of the institutions their Baby Boomer parents had taught them to believe in were not necessarily valid benchmarks. They were supposed to believe that working hard provided job security, yet thousands of their parents were laid off anyway. They were taught that the nation’s economic system was invincible, but they grew up with gas lines, double-digit interest rates and record inflation. They were supposed to trust the government, but they came of age with Watergate and a host of other political scandals. Their parents taught them that marriage was forever and then peaked the divorce rate in the 1980s. For these reasons and others, they became more likely to question established rules and authority than to follow them. This characteristic, of course, made its way into the workplace and has evolved into a sense of dubiety about management. When their supervisor says, “Follow me. I know what I’m doing,” for instance, they’re likely to think, “I’ll believe when I see it.”

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comfortable taking senior leaders to task if they detect inconsistency or what they perceive as out-dated practices. Consider the ramifications of this as you implement succession planning and prepare to transition organizational responsibilities.

Second, they bring better formal training to the workplace than any generation in US history.

The uncertainty for many in their youth encouraged them to become self-reliant and well prepared for unexpected life changes or unforeseen opportunities. In the past twenty years, for instance, we have seen hundreds of thousands of these individuals complete a master’s degree in business administration, providing them with far better formalized training than most veteran leaders. This, coupled with their never-ending desire to collect skills, licenses, certifications, experiences and titles, tends to position them for the future responsibilities they seek.

That said, one must be circumspect when selecting these individuals for leadership roles. While they can appear directed and enthusiastic, their resumes and bravado can sometimes mask a deficit of experience or expertise. On one hand, they may bring their training in strategic thinking and resourcefulness to the table. On the other, they may lack the discernment that comes with having spent years in the trenches. It’s your job to ferret out these differences.

Third, they are invested in technology as a solution.

While veteran leaders have grown used to the electronic gadgetry of everyday life, this generation, and the one after it, uses technology to its fullest.

Having entered the workforce during the proliferation of computer-based solutions and convenience, the keyboard, mouse, and touch screen are the first places to which they turn in search of resources and answers. I see abundant evidence that many are more comfortable communicating via e-mail, text and cloud-based applications than picking

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up the phone. They also tend to view this as more expedient, especially in the face of the workforce veteran who wants to share “one more story.”

As these same individuals assume leadership roles, they are changing the way many tasks are handled, from strategic planning to communicating vision. Why, sit around a table when you can attend the meeting from your place on Sanibel Island? Why spend three hours analyzing the numbers when computer modeling will do it for you? Why fly to Paris to communicate the corporate vision when your Avatar (yes, Avatar) can make the presentation in your place? How will these attitudes about technology impact your succession planning process and implementation?

Fourth, they embrace globalization wholeheartedly.

As author Thomas Friedman observed in The World is Flat, the globe’s economies are merging at a pace few recognized even five years ago. While veteran leaders may still view this phenomenon with a bit of wonder, many in this emerging generation of professionals have been contemplating it for years. They are comfortable reaching out to potential partners and prospects overseas and will be the first cohort of leaders to place a true emphasis on training the US workforce for commerce that takes diversity for granted. As they assume increasingly responsible roles throughout organizations, they embrace the value of language training, cultural integration and the economic tenets of other nations.

What do you do when the best person for the job turns down what you think is a golden opportunity?

Consider how these values and expectations might impact your view of the organization’s future and its strategy. Consider as well, the nationality of those who assume these roles. Those operating globally are finding in-country managers more effective and more affordable than ex-patriots. Will you find your organization’s succession planning efforts taking on an international flavor over time?
Fifth, they look at a job as a contract rather than as a calling.

The career-oriented emphasis of the Baby Boom generation has never been shared by this generation. They have seen too many examples of long-tenures resulting in layoffs and the constant parade of business “transitions” related in the media. While this generation is ready to throw their all into a challenging, growth-oriented position, they are not looking to climb the traditional succession ladder embraced by their parents. They tend not to become too socially engaged in the workplace for fear of losing their objectivity when a better opportunity comes along. Asking them to eat, sleep and breathe the corporate mantra may appeal to some, but just the same they will remain detached.

When these individuals feel they’ve outgrown the position, when they conclude that their upward mobility is slowing, when they simply feel restless, they may leave for another position. This is nothing personal. It’s business. But the impact of this practice can have a monumental effect on the succession planning process.

Young managers within your organization, for instance, may leave for a competitor after having completed all the training and development you have invested in them. At the same time, you may recruit managers from your competitors who have participated in the same kind of program within those organizations. So it is conceivable that over time you are training your competitors’ future leaders and they yours.

Sixth, they view work as one slice of a more abundant life. It is a fairly safe generalization that Baby Boomers live to work and this generation works to live.

We’ve seen this manifest itself in young managers who turn down advancement opportunities that interfere with family obligations, involve too much travel, or place them in stressful positions for which they do not perceive a long-term advantage. The managers I’ve surveyed have not found these to be emotional decisions, but rather objective calculations involving consultation with family and friends. But the operative question remains – “What do you do when the best person for the job turns down what you think is a golden opportunity?”

Seventh, they are comfortable with conflict and uncertainty.

This generation learned long ago that if you don’t ask, you don’t get. Having grown up watching others manipulate outcomes to their advantage, they are comfortable doing the same. For this reason alone they tend to be better negotiators in their own interests. This, coupled with the power of the electronic networking and surveying that they conduct daily with friends, allows them to come to the bargaining table well-prepared if offered an opportunity or asked to take a new assignment. How prepared will you be to negotiate with them?

Eighth, they bring a different approach about right and wrong to the job.

This is certainly not to say that they are unethical. But this generation entered the workforce with the advent of large corporate
scandals and has watched these multiply in both number and gravity yet result in minor consequences. This, coupled with the impact that round-the-clock media portrays of conflicting interpretations of what is appropriate arguably, makes some of these individuals less likely to take a stand based on one particular set of standards. As the customs, laws and practices of other nations intermingle with traditional US values, the development and enforcement of consistent corporate tenets will continue to evolve. Even now for instance, it can be a challenge for some to argue the justification of US anti-bribery laws when payoffs are a way of life in economies of some business partners. How can you, going forward, walk the balance of selecting and developing emerging professionals, yet successfully maintain the principles upon which the organization was built?

Ninth, they look for the stimulation in work at all times.

This was the first generation to experience Sesame Street and the evolving world of entertainment in education. After having Big Bird teach them their A-B-Cs, they extrapolated that all learning should be fun. Upon entering the world of work, they demanded the same kind of stimulation. This resulted in dancing paperclips in word processing programs, Solitaire on every hard drive in the world, and the e-mailing of jokes, pictures and music clips 24/7/365. This is not to say they don’t work hard. But why work hard without listening to music, surfing the Web and playing games all at the same time? After all, it’s all about the outcome and not the task, isn’t it?

As this generation assumes responsibility for leadership, they are relaxing some of the traditional work rules, many of which were developed more than a half-century ago. Only time will tell whether these changes will enhance productivity and boost the bottom line. But as you prepare them to take on in senior positions, it will be critical to understand their beliefs about the balance of these factors.

The next decade will witness a sea change in the way organizations are led as Baby Boomers transition out of management roles and this cohort of leaders assumes those responsibilities. How well will you embrace these professionals and encourage their success?

About the Author

Robert W. Wendover has been researching and writing about workforce trends for more than 25 years. He currently serves as Principal of Common Sense Enterprises. He is the award-winning author of ten books including Smart Hiring, Two Minute Motivation and Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World. He is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. He has served as a special advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) and on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix for more than ten years.

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