

# Leading the New Generations

By **ROBERT W. WENDOVER**, Director  
Center for Generational Studies, Aurora, CO

*Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles addressing inter-generational issues in the workplace.*

How does a “fifty-something” manage a “twenty-something”? For that matter, how does a “thirty-something” manage a “sixty-something”? And what on earth do we do with those teenagers sporting the orange hair and body piercings?

People in other generations don't think right. They don't act right. They don't have the right values. Why don't they all act like normal people? It can't possibly be us. It's got to be them!

Those working today can be loosely divided into four generations. The oldest of these groups is the Matures. This a term coined by Daniel Yankelovich Associates, in their book *Rocking the Ages*. It refers to anyone born prior to 1946.

The second oldest group is the Baby Boomers. This group was born between 1946 and 1964. Landon Jones coined the term “Baby Boom” in his book *Great Expectations* published in 1980. In his book, Jones described the monumental effect that Boomers have had on virtually every American institution throughout their lives such as media, education, politics and consumerism.

Music is a perfect example. Wherever one goes, “oldies” stations abound, playing to the hearts and memories of Baby Boomers. Of course, this all depends on your perspective. I was conducting a program on this subject and someone about 25 years old raised her hand and told me I had my terms confused, that that music was no longer oldies, it was called “Geezer Rock”. When I asked what oldies were now, she said, “You know, the songs from 1985, 1986, 1989 and so on.” It all depends upon our perspective. The third group is Generation X. Xers were born between 1965 and 1980. This is a term that was popularized in a novel named *Generation X* written by Douglas Coupland in 1991. In his book, Coupland describes a rather angry, disenfranchised, arrogant society of young people. The Boomers, in their wisdom, decided that Generation X was an apt name for the offspring they had produced.

As you might imagine, Xers don't like the label. But *Swing Magazine*, a publication that targeted this age group surveyed its readers asking, “if not Generation X, what would you like to be called?” Ten percent of the respondents said Generation X was okay with them. The remainder of

the responses were so diverse, that none were statistically significant. This means one of two things; either that they are, in fact, angry, disenfranchised and arrogant, or they don't want to be labeled. My research shows that it is definitely the latter.

The youngest of the generations is the Millennials. This is a term included in a survey conducted by ABC News that asked what listeners thought the newest generation should be called. The first of this group was born in 1981 and the last around 1991.

Sociologists break generational groups down into what they call cohorts. These cohorts are members of a generation who are linked through shared life experiences in their formative years. The key words here are "shared life experiences".

As each new cohort matures, it is influenced by what sociologists call generational markers. These markers are events, which have an impact on all members of the generation in one-way or another. The Matures had World War II, for instance. The Boomers had the assassination of JFK. The Xers had the resignation of Richard Nixon and the Millennials had the Oklahoma City bombing. But cohorts are not just shaped by one common life experience. They are also influenced by a host of events that, over time, shape their collective values and attitudes.

Let's look at each of the generations and how their values and priorities relate.

First, the Matures. Besides World War II, Matures experienced the Korean conflict, Franklin Delano

Roosevelt's New Deal and, of course, the Great Depression. Even if the youngest of the Matures didn't experience these things directly they heard endless stories. All of these stories seemed to get "better" with each telling. Collectively, these stories had a tremendous impact on Matures view the world.

In addition to these generational markers, it was the environment in which these stories were told. Matures, for the most part, grew up in extended families. All the relatives lived on the same block, or in the same apartment building ... mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They heard a consistent message about values from all these people. They also heard it in the media...*Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, and so on.

The themes that came out of all this were clear ... hard work, sacrifice for the common good, the good guys and the bad guys, respect for authority, loyalty to the organization. And it is these themes that have shaped the way matures look at work and their expectations about how others should work.

The Baby Boomers are the offspring of the Matures. But the Boomers grew up in different times. Their formative years were shaped by tremendous economic expansion after World War II, the popularity of rock-n roll, the proliferation of television and the transition to suburbia. Where Matures were born into extended families, their children, the Boomers, were born in to nuclear families where Mom and Dad were present, but the rest of the relatives might be

miles away. Instead of being surrounded by family, Boomers were surrounded by television and their neighbors in suburbia who may, or may not, have shared the same values.

But with America's preeminence after World War II, coupled with economic expansion, Boomers grew up with a sense that their security was taken care of. That left room for exploration of other things...like sex, drugs, rock-n-roll, the civil rights movement and other causes.

A lot of this was evident in the media Boomers grew up on. Where the Matures had Bing Crosby, the Boomers had the Grateful Dead. Where Matures had *Father Knows Best*, the Boomers had *Three's Company*. Where the Matures had *Marvel Comics*, the Boomers had *Mad Magazine*. Its no wonder that Matures wondered what had happened.

Several things got in the way of this good life however ... layoffs, the cost of living, consumer debt, divorce, Watergate, all natural in any society, but very unsettling to a generation who grew up thinking the world was their oyster.

To some, it seemed that the entire Baby Boom ran amuck in the 1960s. But the vast majority have returned to values like loyalty and hard work that they learned from their parents. They just wanted to explore their own ways of doing things and try their own systems. As responsibility has increased with age, they, as all generations, have returned to their root values.

These Boomers are now running the majority of businesses within the United States. As a generation, they are still generally optimistic, but, like any generation, wonder what "those young people are coming to". Where Boomer values revolved around hope, prosperity, helping others, and achieving world peace, their children, the Xers, have a different take on things.

Generation X has grown up under significantly different circumstances. Where Boomers were born into America's preeminence, Xers were born into chaos--Vietnam, Watergate, corporate downsizing, AIDS, terrorism.

They have also grown up with a dose of technology that earlier generations had never before experienced. This was a mixed blessing. On one hand, *Sesame Street*, for instance, taught them their ABCs and 1-2-3s. On the other hand, it taught them impatience with anything that wasn't entertaining.

As technology has advanced, the pace of society has gotten faster and faster. We stand in front of the microwave waiting impatiently for food to cook in three minutes when it used to take 45 minutes in a conventional oven.

All of this has been reflected in Xers' values about work, and living in general. Consider the lyrics from the theme to the popular TV show, *Friends*:

*No one told you it was going to be that way.  
Your job's a joke. You're broke. Your love life's DOA.  
Its like you're always stuck in second gear.  
But I'll be there for you when the rain starts to fall.*

*I'll be there for you like I've been there before.  
I'll be there for you.*

Listen to the 'Reality Bites' sort of attitude that emanates from those words. There's a sense of cautious survival, coupled with sticking together when hopes are dashed.

This does not mean that Xers are cynical. It does mean, however, that they're cautious. The institutions that they were taught to believe in have betrayed them. Their parents have been laid off from jobs, the integrity of national leaders is being challenged constantly, personal relationships are threatened by AIDS and people are over their heads in debt.

A majority of Generation X has grown up as latchkey kids, learning to fend for themselves from age 12. While Boomers grew up hearing, "It's 10 PM. Do you know where your children are?" Xers have grown up with, "It's 6 PM. Do you know where your parents are?" Forty percent of Generation X is a product of divorce... 40%!

All of these experiences have taught the average Xer to be self-reliant and personally focused. When a Xer leaves a job at a moment's notice and the Boomer Manager says, "Where's your loyalty?" the Xer may respond, "Why should I be loyal? You could lay me off tomorrow."

Xers have a different set of attitudes about work and those who supervise them. They are the driving force behind the popularity of the cartoon Dilbert, for example, because that's how they perceive many work environments.

All of this has been coupled with a desire to live a more balanced life. Xers have no intention of paying dues by working longer hours. They want to be home for their children, an experience that many of them never had. Don't ask them to work overtime, they've got a marathon to run, or a soccer game to play, or simply an evening planned with friends. They don't live to work ... they work to live.

In a lot of ways, the Xer attitude can be summed up in the bumper sticker, "Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first!"

Finally, there are the Millennials. They are the most diverse generation in US history. One in three is considered a minority. One in four comes from a single parent family. They are the product of a society that has once again seen tremendous economic expansion and an explosion of technological convenience.

They are also growing up in a "menu-driven" society that allows them to make choices without doing the research. "If it's not on the Internet, I don't need it for my term paper."

This is resulting in a surprising lack of critical thinking skills that the rest of us take for granted. In many ways, Millennials have not been held accountable for their actions and that is now revealing itself to those employing them. I asked a high school guidance counselor here in town to sum up the attitudes of those in his school. "That's easy he said, 'I showed up for class. Why don't I get an A?'"

A lot of this of course is influenced by the media. . . *Beavis & Butthead, Renn and Stimpy and South Park.* Because many young people are not well read, their humor, for instance, tends to be more immediate since many listeners may not understand the subtleties of the human experience. Things have to be explained, rather than allowing conclusions or connections to go unsaid.

How do you cope with the differences in leading different generations? Here are three points to exercise.

**Number one:** Learn all you can about other generations. The more you know about the shared life experiences of other ages, the more you can understand their expectations, values and fears. That's right, fears. Once a person has been programmed with certain values in their formative years, most become uncomfortable changing their core beliefs about work and society in general. Telling a Mature, for instance, that he can't work overtime has the same effect as telling an Xer that she must. Both feel their rights are being violated, one because he can't earn more money and the other because she can't spend time with her friends or family.

**Number two:** Manage according to values and attitudes. There is nothing Xers like better than to be given a desired outcome, the necessary resources, and a chance to prove themselves. Delegate the outcome instead of the individual tasks.

With Millennials, the exact opposite appears to be true. The lack of critical thinking skills that many employers are observing in these individuals means that delegating by task is the tool of choice. This does not mean that they will remain this way forever, but they are different in their expectations than Xers. That requires the balance of two differing styles of management at the same time, if you don't master this balance, the alternative can be costly.

**Number three:** Provide the opportunity to grow. If there is one universal chance that people embrace, it is the chance to grow, but on their terms, and with their priorities. How well do you help your people see the big picture and where they fit in? How often do you take the time to tailor those messages to what they value? When was the last time you spent some real one-on-one time with your younger workers? Knowing that most of them have grown up as latchkey kids, it's easy to understand why they value quality time with people they respect.

If we are to lead the new generations, we must first understand their priorities. But when we take the time to discover those values, the leadership will come with ease! ■