

If I Pass the Baton, Who Will Grab It? Creating Bench Strength in Public Management

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A Baby Boomer who is a city manager in Northern California was frustrated and perplexed. "I've got a talented Gen X assistant city manager I've been mentoring for several years," he says. "She's smart, organized, politically savvy . . . just the right profile to take over my job when I retire. But when I recently told her she was the top candidate to inherit my role her response was, 'Thanks but no thanks. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy!'"

It took the stunned city manager a while to realize that the position he fought so hard to achieve and worked so hard to succeed in held little appeal for the next generation. Too many public managers are hearing similar responses from the next generation of talent, and for many, it's a surprising situation.

After years of budget cuts and hiring freezes, the impending retirements of millions of Baby Boomers will create huge opportunities to hire the next generation of leaders, giving them important responsibilities and authority. Yet, too often, Generation Xers are doing anything but leaping at the chance to advance. In fact, some are running kicking and screaming from jobs many boomers deemed highly desirable.

Demographic Challenges

Public management now faces a war for talent many leaders never expected. First of all, the profession is being challenged by demographics. As 80 million Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) move into their retirement years, they are followed by a much smaller population of Generation Xers—just 46 million people born between 1965 and 1981. That means the pool of workers available for grooming as managers is much smaller than it has been for decades. While the next generation following the Gen Xers (Millennials, born 1982 to 2000) are larger in number at 76 million, they are just beginning to enter the workforce and won't be available in this large number for some time to come.

The good news is that with fresh tools available, like Web-based recruiting sites, it's going to be easier to reach out and touch a new generation of employees looking for an opportunity to make a difference. But to do that successfully, it will be vitally important to understand the value propositions of those to whom we wish to appeal.

To complicate matters, Generation Xers are harder to lure into public management. This is a highly independent and entrepreneurial generation. They are skeptical of large institutions and uncomfortable with layers of bureaucracy. By the age of 20, Generation Xers had already watched 23,000 hours of television. And in the media, they saw every major American institution called into question, from the presidency to the military, to organized religion, to corporate America, and yes, even state and local governments.

Too many Xers think if you can name the institution, they can name the crime. It will be tough to convince this cohort that they can have meaningful careers as public servants because the first question on their minds will be, "Can I really accomplish anything?" followed by questions like, "Can I be true to my values?"

Another aspect of the hiring challenge is that Generation Xers have so many choices. The 1990s saw the emergence of Xers into the U.S. workforce in parallel with both a decade-long economic boom and the tech boom. So this generation has had a plethora of options, ranging from working at a high-tech start-up out of someone's garage to joining private industry with a great title and big signing bonus.

Too often the option of working in the public sector wasn't even on the table. For one thing, many local governments weren't actively hiring; in fact, many were downsizing. For another, the Baby Boomers held most of the managerial jobs. And because boomers were relatively young and capable, there wasn't much room for the Gen Xers working in their shadows to move up.

A January/February 2003 article in this magazine entitled "What Can Be Done? Attracting Young Adults to Careers in Local Government," by author Michele Frisby, included a chart outlining the age distribution of appointed managers. In 1971, when boomers were emerging into the public workforce, 26 percent of appointed managers were under the age of 30.

By the year 2000, appointed managers under 30 numbered only 2 percent! Clearly, when Xers complain they can't advance fast enough, they aren't just imagining it. But too many older managers have pigeonholed Xers as greedy, impatient, and even disloyal because of their desire to keep their careers in motion.

With workers on the leading edge of the baby boom turning 60 and public pension plans rewarding senior managers for retiring on time or even early, we are about to experience a massive workforce shift. As boomers retire en masse, will the next generations be around in sufficient numbers to succeed them? The answer is yes, but only if managers of all generations in the public sector pull together to create the right environment for this transition.

Attracting the Younger Generations

One of the first steps in attracting the younger generations to public service will be to consider perceptions. Too often, local governments have been seen as

slow moving and low tech. They are viewed as being too bureaucratic to get anything done, with a daily schedule of meetings about meetings about meetings that seems almost strangling to an outsider or to someone accustomed to lean and flat organizations.

Then there's the challenge of the hiring process. Prohibitive civil service exams, long waits to hear whether a resume has even been received, unresponsive personnel offices, and unclear career paths are just a few of the obstacles Gen Xers cite when asked about why they gave up and went to work somewhere else.

With tech savvy Millennials, the challenge will be even greater. The majority say the first place they go to find out about jobs is the World Wide Web. Yet far too many public institutions have out-of-date Web sites with limited use of color and unexciting messages on why anyone would want to work there. These sites are often loaded with boilerplate language on required exams and job specifications and fail to communicate the vision, values, and challenges that might draw an individual to public service.

These sites also often miss opportunities to hit the hot buttons that would encourage a Millennial to take a second look. In one study, for example, Millennials were asked to name the single most important factor they would look for in a career. Their No. 1 response: the ability to make a difference. Yet, this kind of goal is seldom addressed in recruiting materials, whether Web-based or on the printed page.

Once hired, what happens? With so many boomers in the top spots, upward mobility for the younger generations has been slow. Career pathing doesn't seem to happen as rapidly as impatient Xers might hope, and they often fall victim to a dues-paying culture where the number of years they put in appears more important than what they actually accomplish. For multi-tasking Millennials who are used to loads of variety in what they do, the "silo mentality," in which moving between departments is next to impossible, will be a significant demotivator.

But even if we understand generational differences intellectually, they can be painful to confront on the personal level. Think about the city manager described above. He loves his job and is proud to have spent decades revamping the way his city is governed, creating opportunities for change and having an impact on his community. His achievements, however, seem less significant when viewed through the eyes of his assistant, who expresses these sentiments about the manager's position: "You never go home on time, you've accrued about a million hours of vacation you never use, and you're divorced. Besides that, you're starting to lose your hair! Why would I want that? I'd like to actually spend time with my family!"

What better opportunity to paint the picture of urgency and encourage them to document and pass along the most critical knowledge? And what better chance to let the younger generations in on the secrets to their success? Remember, the brain drain won't just sap organizations of experience. When we lose top people, we lose a lifetime of contacts and affiliations.

Pretty depressing, huh? Especially the part about the hair! Boomers may feel overworked, but we always believed we looked pretty good! Seriously, when asked about their jobs, many idealistic boomers working in government today feel their sacrifices have been justified because they were able to have a significant impact on the way things get done. They are proud of their accomplishments and can see tangible results for the battles they've fought. Why is it so hard to get the next generations to grasp that side of things?

First of all, managers need to do a better job of touting local government success stories and painting a picture of what does get accomplished. It's too easy for the media to cover budget shortfalls or the latest public works snafus that make local leaders look more like Abbott and Costello than Donald Trump. Successes in government can be tricky to cover and are often thought of as "not sexy enough" by those writing the articles.

The good news is that with fresh tools available, like Web-based recruiting sites, it's going to be easier to reach out and touch a new generation of employees looking for an opportunity to make a difference. But to do that successfully, it will be vitally important to understand the value propositions of those to whom we wish to appeal.

Management Has Plenty to Offer

What is an employee value proposition? Simply put, it's the set of values that will attract an employee to come to work-and stay-with you. The challenge with value propositions is that different values appeal to different generations. For example, the Traditionalist generation (born prior to 1946) felt the fear and force of the Great Depression. A government job with an accompanying pension, benefits, and promise of lifetime employment was highly desirable.

For many boomer public employees, the pension plan has never looked better, especially when they can retire at 90 percent of pay at age 58! But for younger generations, who are looking at potentially holding down six to 10 different careers in their lifetime, a far-off pension guarantee doesn't hold the same allure. Remember, Xers are the generation that in one study said they believe they have a greater chance of seeing a UFO in their lifetime than a Social Security check. So when recruiting this skeptical workforce, playing the pension card won't be as effective.

What does work in appealing to the next generations? It's important to realize that public management has plenty to offer. Rather than completely reinventing

itself, the public sector must take stock of its best value propositions and put these front and center. How do we do this?

First, the managers and recruiters who are handling the hiring should keep in mind that Generation Xers are searching for a place to call home. The financial upheavals of the dot-com bust and the post-9/11 world are fresh in the minds of many. This generation is beginning to seek a career where they can settle in for a long-term commitment to work that feels more stable.

They also are a generation in search of mentors. During the formative years of Generation X, the U.S. divorce rate tripled. Too many came home after school to an empty house or were packed off to after-school programs. Their grandparents often lived 2,000 miles away, and the neighborhood parents weren't out on the front porch dispensing valuable advice-they were at the office. For a disaffected generation, the opportunity to find stability and have access to seasoned mentors can be a big draw.

A second value proposition to consider is that Generation Xers are looking for work/life balance. A recent Harris Poll found that 80 percent of Gen X men said that having more time with their families was more important than more money or more challenging work. We certainly wouldn't have seen that type of response from Baby Boomers at a similar age.

And even if boomers craved more balance, they would not have felt comfortable asking for it. With some 80 million peers competing with them for the same jobs, boomers quickly learned to sacrifice personal needs to get ahead. With their fewer numbers, Gen Xers have had the leverage in the workplace to pressure employers to create more flexible options. In many cases, public entities have a hiring advantage-they can offer more reasonable work hours than the private sector.

In its colorful and appealing new recruiting Web site, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides a Letterman-like list of the "Top Ten Reasons to Join the IRS." One of the first reasons is time for fun, family, and friends. Not the language you'd expect from a huge government agency, and yet the IRS realizes its ability to offer balance can be a key recruiting advantage.

Time to Start Training and Mentoring

A third value proposition to be aware of in attracting the next generation of leaders is that they want to hit the ground running. They are not willing to wait around for years paying dues until someone decides to grant them responsibility. The good news is, with so many boomers approaching retirement, lots of new positions will be opening up. Now is prime time to start grooming, growing, and training younger employees to fill these spots.

Rather than see the upcoming boomer exodus as disastrous, which is how many boomers tend to view it, we need to see it as an opportunity. As one seasoned and wise public works manager put it, "When we bring in a new generation of

managers, we can bring in a new generation of management styles and techniques. There are changes we've needed to make for years, and with an influx of new people, we can get a fresh start."

The coming talent gap creates an ideal opportunity to create special training programs for high-potential employees to be groomed for their next career step. This should provide plenty of motivation for those who were worried that upward mobility in the public sector would automatically move at a snail's pace.

A fourth consideration in understanding the value propositions of the younger generations is the coming brain drain that could occur as highly-skilled Traditionalists and Baby Boomers walk out the door, along with decades of insider knowledge. Too often this is knowledge that won't ever be replaced unless we start now to capture it. While this can seem daunting, it's a prime opportunity to put the best and brightest senior people to work as coaches, teachers, role models, and mentors to the next generations.

We said earlier that Xers are a generation in search of mentors but don't underestimate how important hands-on coaching will be to the Millennial generation. Remember, they've been raised by intensely involved, communicative Baby Boomers who have included their offspring in all sorts of family decisions. As a result, the Millennials are a highly collaborative generation that reports that their best role models are their parents.

This is a far cry from the "don't trust anyone over 30" mentality of the boomers when they were teenagers. You can expect Millennials to see access to coaching from those a few notches up the ladder as an attractive recruiting value proposition. One-to-one coaching and mentoring can be a chance to let the younger generations in on the secrets to Baby Boomers' and Traditionalists' success.

Remember, the brain drain won't just sap organizations of experience. When we lose top people, we lose a lifetime of contacts and affiliations. One county manager put it this way: "If we have a problem, I can pick up the phone and call exactly the right person to solve it. When I retire, my replacement won't have those contacts because it took a lifetime to build them." That's true, unless we start the transitioning process now.

Who Are the Generations?

Generation	Influences	Traits
Traditionalists: Born prior to 1946 75 million	Great Depression, New Deal, World War II, GI Bill, Cold War, Pearl Harbor, Korean War, and A-Bomb.	Patriotic, loyal, desire to leave a legacy, fiscally conservative, and faith in institutions.
Baby Boomers:	Booming birthrate,	Competitive,

Born 1946-1964 80 million	economic prosperity, recession, women's and civil rights movements, expansion of suburbia, Vietnam, Watergate, anti-war protests, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.	question authority, desire to put their own stamp on institutions, sandwiched, and optimistic.
Generation Xers: 1965-1981 46 million	Sesame Street, MTV, personal computer, divorce, Title IX, AIDS, crack cocaine, and missing children on milk cartons.	Eclectic, resourceful, self reliant, skeptical of institutions, highly adaptive, and independent.
Millennials: 1982-2000 76 million	9-11/terrorism, fall of the Berlin Wall, expansion of technology and the media, mixed economy, violence, drugs, and gangs.	Globally concerned, integrated, cyber-literate, media savvy, realistic, and environmentally conscious.

Younger employees need to build their own network of valuable contacts if they are going to succeed. To make the connections that will allow them to get ahead, they will have to be willing to join such professional and networking associations as ICMA or the International Personnel Management Association, and to attend local meetings held by the chamber of commerce or Rotary. Unfortunately, many seem uninterested in sacrificing family time for time spent in meetings and on committees. Mentors can do a lot to bridge this gap by inviting high potentials to join them in attending a special program and by introducing them to people they need to know.

Associations can do more to adapt meetings to fit members' schedules. They can rotate meeting times to accommodate members with daycare and family challenges, hold meetings by phone, and complete other tasks via the Internet and e-mail. They can also create committees with shorter time horizons. A Gen Xer might be willing to serve for a few months on a program committee to plan the upcoming year, as opposed to signing on for a multi-year term.

We also recommend that associations give younger members a place at the decision-making table. Too often a committee is tearing its hair out wondering what kind of programming will attract Xers and Millennials, but when you look around the room, no one in the group is under 40!

Why All the Energy Around the Generational Divide?

- Demographers predict a coming worker shortage as Boomers retire.
- Within seven years, 30 million currently employed workers will be over age 55.
- For the first time ever, the next generation of skilled workers will be neither larger nor better educated than the previous one.
- The skilled worker gap is estimated to be 5.3 million by 2010, 14 million by 2020.
- Organizations that become "employers of choice" now will have the advantage in finding and keeping employees in the future.

Source: BridgeWorks. Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman.
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Another tip: Sell Xers on the career benefits of joining associations. The old value proposition of joining because it is one's civic duty is likely to fall on deaf ears. But a new value proposition of creating contacts that will help advance your career or of taking home valuable knowledge to help you do your job better might just click in.

Younger employees need to do their part as well. Although family and personal time is important, much can be gained by donating time to creating professional affiliations among all generations. While Xers tend to have strong networks of friends, they have often felt shut out by Baby Boomers and have not made the commitment necessary to loop the older generations into their networks. Everyone needs to be willing to invite another generation to attend a meeting or meet with a critical contact.

Become Advocates

Fifth, in recruiting and retaining younger employees, a critical value proposition for Generation X will be the ability to build robust career paths. This is a generation that wants to hit the ground running and make an impact. They want to know what's in the future and what steps they will need to take to get there.

Too many managers today are reluctant to talk with employees about career paths or hesitant to fight for new ways of moving their high potentials through the system toward promotion. Seasoned employees are going to have to stop

feeling competitive with members of the next generation and become their advocates.

In terms of career paths, the public sector has a real advantage in being able to offer younger employees the chance to work on huge projects with big budgets. A garage-based business might look fun because you can wear jeans and a tee-shirt to work. But when the total project budget is 50 bucks, ambitious employees will eventually want the opportunity to do and to create something more.

The careers Web site for the Social Security Administration scores a direct hit with this language: "At Social Security, we don't follow the newest IT trends-we make them. . . . You won't find the challenge of maintaining systems this complex and innovative anywhere else." That's smart talk coming from a large institution and a powerful message for a generation looking for big challenges.

Finally, in thinking about value propositions, recognize that the changeover from the Baby Boomer- and Traditionalist-dominated workplace to the next generation of leaders may require more than just retooling expectations. We may have to retool some jobs. Job descriptions that are 20 or 30 years old may need to be rewritten to reflect the complexity of today's positions.

Also, jobs currently requiring a superhuman effort to perform might need to be redesigned to be more manageable. Work assignments that are repetitive, boring, or frustrating might need retooling to allow more variety. At the very least, managers should consider cross-training employees in some of the more mind-numbing jobs to provide new challenges.

One local government-owned utility recently embarked on cross-training back-office employees in at least three different customer service jobs. Not only are most of the employees energized by the change (granted, some are intimidated), but the utility now has back-up for when a key employee is out sick or leaves.

Rewards

The generations view rewards in different ways. This can affect the strategies that are used to recruit, engage, manage, and retain them.

Generation	Factoids	Tips
Traditionalists. . . want help easing into retirement.	<p>40% of traditionalists said their company did not do a good job of making them want to stay.</p> <p>65% said they would not feel comfortable talking with</p>	<p>Recognize and tap into the loyalty of existing workers.</p> <p>Remember, traditionalists need career paths too.</p>

	<p>their manager about a different career track within the company.</p> <p>73% plan to return to work in some capacity after they retire.</p>	<p>Provide training to bring them up to speed.</p> <p>Put them to work as mentors, coaches, role models.</p>
<p>Baby Boomers. . . want robust careers and help juggling it all.</p>	<p>43% of boomers said they lack opportunities to be mentored where they work.</p> <p>30% said that not having a mentor contributes to their job dissatisfaction.</p> <p>75% said time off would be the best reward they could receive.</p>	<p>Understand that boomers want to put their own stamp on things.</p> <p>Focus on "making an impact."</p> <p>Continue to offer training and careerpathing opportunities.</p> <p>Beware of boomer burnout.</p> <p>Offer support to help them balance their busy lives.</p>
<p>Generation Xers. . . want balance and freedom.</p>	<p>Only 17% of Xers thought a lifetime career with one company was a good goal (compared to 35% of boomers and 70% of traditionalists).</p> <p>30% of Xers have left a job due to lack of training opportunities.</p> <p>80% of Xer men said time with family is more important than challenging work or a higher salary.</p>	<p>Focus on career security not job security.</p> <p>Communicate regularly about development and career path opportunities.</p> <p>Offer flexible work options.</p> <p>Create opportunities for work/life balance.</p> <p>Provide constant, unfiltered feedback.</p>
<p>Millennials. . . want</p>	<p>Millennials are globally</p>	<p>Make sure they</p>

<p>work that has meaning for them.</p>	<p>aware, cyber-literate, and techno-savvy.</p> <p>They recently ranked “making a difference” as the most important factor when looking for a job.</p> <p>They don't just accept diversity, they expect it.</p>	<p>know about you.</p> <p>Help them visualize the role they could play in your organization.</p> <p>Understand their need to collaborate.</p> <p>Focus on how they can make a difference from day one.</p>
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Source: BridgeWorks. Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman. Copyright 2005. Web site, www.generations.com; toll-free, 888/519-1187. Lancaster's and Stillman's latest book *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (HarperCollins) is available in bookstores and online.

An additional bonus is that the newly trained employees feel their skill set has become more valuable. Multitasking Millennials are gratified by the opportunity to do multiple jobs simultaneously and will see this as a chance to enhance their resumes, as well as learn more about their work skills and preferences. The point is that it's not an insult to current job holders when we admit the job has to change to work for the next generation of employees or to be more relevant within an ever-changing public system.

By recognizing the need to build bench strength in public management and understanding the values of the next generations of employees, leaders can do a lot to ease the coming war for talent.

Remember our boomer city manager with the reluctant replacement? He got over his frustration with his employee and decided to work with her to see how he could retain her in local government. While she still doesn't want to take over his job, he has uncovered other high-level positions in which he believes she can excel. She is enthusiastic about the possibilities, and he has never felt more positive about placing the future of his city in the hands of the next generation of leaders.

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