



Preparing Gen X to Lead and Millennials to Stay

BY CHUCK UNDERWOOD

THE PLACE: Washington, DC. My client: the largest healthcare organization in America, the Veterans Health Administration system of hospitals and clinics.

THE EVENT: its national leadership development institute.

THE AUDIENCE: 60 handpicked, elite leadership candidates, including Baby Boomers, Gen X'ers, and Millennials, from V.A. hospitals coast to coast.

MY TASK: train this year's class, as I had done with classes the prior 10 years, in generational workforce management and leadership strategies.

When we finished, a Gen X female candidate came up to me and said with discouragement in her voice, “I don’t think our generation even *wants* to lead.” Hmm. After that, when I asked other audiences around the country about her comment, a noteworthy percentage of X’ers agreed with it.

What happened?

For certain, there are many X’ers who do want to lead and will be excellent at it. Their generation has proven to be smart, adaptive, sensitive, no-nonsense efficient, and especially brilliant at creating new products, services, and workplace efficiencies. They’re entrepreneurial and open to new ideas.

But a phenomenon is beginning in American management: Beyond their control, the generation steadily advancing into the executive suites, and whose generational core values will dictate the direction of their organizations and the United States in the 2030s and 2040s, was not prepared by the all-important times and teachings of their formative years to “lead.” The times and teachings were beyond their control. They were kids.

For at least another decade, they will be replacing the generation in charge—the Boomers—whose formative years, also beyond their control, *did* prepare them to lead.

THE FOUNDATION OF GENERATIONAL DYNAMICS

The first 18 to 23 years of our lives, our formative years, mold in us a powerful set of core values that guide our minute-by-minute and lifelong decision making, behavior, and on-the-job performance. Those core values are burned into us by the times we witness all around us during those formative years and by the teachings we absorb from older generations of parents, educators, religious leaders, and others.

The age cohort that shares the same basic times and teachings will share the same basic core values and thus become a generation. Any time in American life when the times, the teachings, or both change in a significant and widespread way, it means young kids coming of age during those different times and teachings will form a different set of core values and thus become our next generation when they enter adulthood.

The first two decades of life are our pre-generation years—the years of the sorting process, when we’re trying on every imaginable core value to see which ones fit and which ones don’t. There is no such thing as a 16-year-old or 9-year-old or 2-year-old member of any generation.

THE FOUNDATION OF GENERATION X

Generation X, whose members were born from 1965 to 1981 and are aged 37 to 53 in 2018, came of age from the 1970s to the early 2000s. This is a unique and a very troubled period in American history. Consider:

- America’s leaders—in business, government, religion, and even sports—were regularly caught lying, cheating, and failing to deliver on their promises.
- A new breed of ruthless corporate investors, called “corporate raiders,” bought big chunks of public corporations and forced their executives to lay off U.S. workers so they would make more money themselves.
- Corporate executives—in order to please those shareholders and thus receive bigger raises and bonuses—cut costs and increased profits by launching the era of massive layoffs of X’ers’ moms and dads and the beginning of the stunning dismantlement of the Great American Middle Class. This leadership era (1990s and 2000s) of the Silent Generation male was so filled with executive and shareholder greed that, in the early 2000s, the *Wall Street Journal* published a year-end, multipage listing of more than a dozen of the year’s documented corruption cases and captured the full extent of the epidemic by headlining the story “Scandal Scorecard.”
- Their own parents were divorcing in unprecedented numbers or were absent in their lives because of their dual-career time-poorness. As Gen X came of age, the American family unit took a terrible beating.

Everywhere X’er kids looked as they were growing up and forming their generation’s powerful and lifelong core values, the people in charge were consistently letting them down. So words like “executive,” “corporation,” “politician,” and “leader” were profoundly offensive to them. Why would we ever aspire to *that*!?

Today, now deeply into adulthood, many X’ers have a career track record of preferring to work for smaller employers and private companies than for publicly owned ones. And in significant numbers, they are working on their own as sole proprietors and freelancers.

The message from many members of Gen X to the nation’s bigger employers: Yes, there are exceptions, but your predecessors in the C-suites blew it with us much more than with prior generations, whose members *did* aspire to your executive offices because the offices back then were filled with honor, loyalty to employees, and bold visions to make a positive difference instead of doing whatever it took simply to maximize shareholder ROI and executive pay.

This message also expresses, even more fiercely, the beliefs of the Millennial generation.

In sharp contrast to Generation X’s leadership preparation during their formative years, Boomer kids came of age from the 1950s to the early ’80s. This was a very different era when:

- Families, neighborhoods, communities, and the nation were strong and tight-knit, so Boomers grew up feeling safe and loved. They were patriotic and trusting in an



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America that was getting so much right and running away from the rest of the world in its quality of life for the masses, not just for the privileged few.

- Government leaders like Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy—and until Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon—captured Boomers’ imaginations with their professional integrity, compassion, and bold vision.
- Corporate executives—this was the leadership era of the G.I. Generation—placed people above profit, and G.I. investors behaved the same way.
- Boomer children, feeling empowered and engaged and idealistic and passionate, helped lead the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the environmental movement, and other revolutions.

These exceptional times, when coupled with the teachings of their elders, molded in Boomer kids just about every value, attitude, and skill considered essential for their generation to one day deliver not merely good leadership but *great* leadership. And Boomer leaders, who have inherited catastrophic problems from the Silent Generation leadership era, are now charged with cleaning up the mess. They will have about 10 more years to do so, before they hand over the leadership reins and Gen X’ers take their turn at the top.

There’s an additional leadership problem: For every eight Boomers born in America, only six X’ers were born. Roughly 80 million Boomers versus 60 million X’ers means that there are not enough replacements when Boomer leaders retire.

And so, here is the mandate—and the new opportunity—for all American employers: They must train their X’er leaders and leaders-to-be not just in a generic “Leadership 101” way but, much more important, in an advanced “Gen X Leadership 501” way. Employers need to have a deep-dive workshop that is generation-specific and customized only to Gen X participants.

Employers must also provide Millennial leadership training that is generation specific. With a shortage of Gen X warm bodies, employers must identify and fast-track promising Millennials to cover the shortage. And Millennial strengths and weaknesses are quite different from those of Gen X.

The good news is that Millennials’ formative years were conducive to good future leadership.

PREPARING MILLENNIALS TO STAY

Millennials, aged 18 to 36 in 2018, bring a long list of very positive values to the workplace. They’re bright, outgoing, eager to please, curious, and comfortable with change. They’re tech-savvy, skilled team players. And they espouse idealism, social activism and responsibility, and more.

But they also bring more serious shortcomings than prior generations. And from 30 years of generational study, I find that the shortcomings have their roots in two experiences of their formative years that were beyond their control:

- Excessive adult protection and supervision, or “helicopter parenting.”

- The technology revolution, which we now recognize has damaged Millennials perhaps more than it has helped them. Their generation was the guinea pig of this revolution, the 74 million children who had to undergo the trial-and-error to find out how best to handle it, which to this day no one has done. (By the way, they know tech has hurt them, and they want help overcoming the damage.)

A report on one of the cable news networks quoted another national study finding that Millennials are still changing employers about every two years. Like most flawed television coverage of this well-documented occurrence, the anchors' chitchat on the morning news set focused on defending Millennials. (The cable news channels, like most mass news



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media, are truly desperate to lure Millennial audiences because they “missed” with Gen X, so they consistently defend them from criticism and praise them.) The anchors completely ignored the point of view of the companies that employ Millennials and the damage to the bottom line that Millennial job-hopping causes.

Yes, Millennials are job-hoppers. And Boomers, if you were born when they were, you would be too for these reasons:

- Like Gen X, Millennials came of age seeing America's proud heritage of two-way loyalty between employer and employee unilaterally slaughtered by the employers, who laid off Mom and Dad and received a year-end bonus because they did so. *Okay, two-way loyalty is dead. Employers cannot be trusted to look out for me. I get it.*
- From this, Millennials realized they must protect themselves by continually updating their résumés and seeking new jobs that pay better. *If we can't have job security, then we must do all we can to build financial security. I refuse to pledge loyalty to one employer and then get ambushed like Dad and Mom did.*
- The technology revolution harmed Millennials by, among other things, ravaging their attention spans and increasing their restlessness and boredom with the repetition of task that is part of most jobs.

The solution to these challenges is that executives, management, and supervisory personnel must undergo deep training (not simply the usual two-hour, superficial executive summary). As a result, they will:

- Understand the complex “why” behind each generation's unique core values, attitudes, preferences, needs, wants, and workplace strengths and shortcomings.
- Learn the many tips, tactics, and overall strategies to recruit, onboard, train, manage, compensate, and retain each generation of employees.
- Develop each generation of leaders with generation-specific leadership training.
- Create a permanent, comprehensive, and nimble culture of generational workforce strategies throughout the organization, a culture that can reduce churn and enhance worker loyalty and bottom-line output.

And from the field of generational study, here is the even bigger “big picture” for American management: Two generations of American kids, Gen X'ers and Millennials, have never seen the magnificent management culture that Boomers and older generations witnessed in their formative years.

Unless and until American management, coast to coast and across all industries, actually demonstrates with its decisions that employees are its greatest assets, who will give the company a great day of work if only management will stand on the same side of the fence as them and endeavor to recapture the notion of *long-term* job security, then those managers should fully expect the continuation—and worsening—of both aversion to leadership positions with larger companies and the frequency of job-hopping by all generations.

Don't blame Millennial or X'er or Boomer workers. Management created it, so management can correct it.

But will they? [AQ](#)

Chuck Underwood, one of the pioneers of generational study, also created generation-specific leadership training. He consults and speaks to American and Canadian organizations in business, government, education, and religion on a comprehensive list of generational strategies. He is the author of America's Generations In the Workplace, Marketplace, and Living Room and star of the PBS national television series America's Generations With Chuck Underwood.