Managing the Gen X Employee
By Jason Bader

So much has been written and said about how to work with the Millennial worker that we seem to have glossed over the generation that preceded them, the proud men and women of Generation X. Everyone seems to want to figure out the younger kids, but what if you are a younger manager who is charged with leading a person born in the 60s and 70s? Not many instruction manuals out there for this cohort. Since I happen to be a member of this forgotten generation, I thought I would take a few moments to share some tips for managing someone of my vintage.

The study of generations is one of my favorite managerial subjects. I am totally fascinated by the nuances of each generation in the workforce and how childhood experiences influenced the behaviors we see today. This all came from a personal breaking point in my career. Isn't it funny how the most profound lessons come from painful moments? Several years ago, I was charged with managing a location in my family business. I was in my early 30s and still trying to figure out life in general. In this location, we had a wide variety of age groups represented. As the leader of this group, I was constantly giving direction, feedback and resolving points of conflict. Unfortunately, I was not very good at it. My direction was confusing, my feedback fell on deaf ears and morale was at a low point. I was pretty unhappy at the time and began to consider my career options.

I am not sure what drove me to seek out help, but it came in the form of a generational researcher named Claire Raines. I had run across something she had written about generational communications and the need to reach employees in a manner they can relate to. It was like a two by four to the back of the head. I was doing this all wrong. I was communicating with my team in a manner that made sense to me, but completely failed to consider that others came from a different frame of reference. Her first book, *Connecting Generations*, was one of the most important discoveries of my career.

In this book, and subsequent editions, she described the influences that motivated the behavior and mannerisms of each generation in the workforce. While learning about other age groups was immensely helpful, it was the revelations about my generation that really had a galvanizing effect. She provided insight as to why I behaved and interacted in certain ways. She provided reference to events that influenced the way I communicated with my team. For the remainder of this article, I want to share some of these insights with the hopes that you will be better equipped to work with the Gen X employee.

Earn My Trust

In many previous generations, respect for authority figures was ingrained. It was almost an unwavering characteristic. Not so with the folks of my generation. We are highly skeptical and take everything with a grain of salt. Respect is not given, just because you are older than me, it is earned. I remember a manager I had when I was in my early twenties who proclaimed that he was smarter than me because he was 10 years older. Those of you in my age bracket can imagine how I reacted to his ridiculous comment. Yep, sneaky psychological sabotage at any given opportunity. Not proud of it, but I'm sure that there are a few of you who can relate.

This distain for authority didn't just magically appear. I wasn't born with it. I learned it from the world's greatest electronic babysitter – television. For right or wrong, by generation was raised on television.

Many of our influences come from things we saw on the tube. If you don't believe me, I dare you not to finish this phrase, "conjunction junction….". Getting back to my point on authority, we all watched our president resign his post rather than get fired for breaking and entering. Yes, I might be oversimplifying; but you get my point. This one moment taught a whole generation that government figures could not be trusted. This is just one of countless examples.

Don't Micromanage Me

If you ever want to drive a Gen X employee crazy, keep looking over their shoulder. We hate to have our managers hover over us and ask for constant updates on a project. Give us the goal, the tools and the timeline. Then, move on and let us get the job done. The more you meddle, the slower we become.

This preference doesn't come from a natural predisposition for anti-social behavior. We are actually really nice if you get to know us. This work characteristic comes from a shift in family dynamics when we were growing up. Contrary to previous generations, we were the first to have both parents working out of the home. For many children, this meant that they came home from school and remained unsupervised until the first parent returned from the office. Besides watching a boatload of television, we learned to get ourselves a snack and get started on our homework. This daily ritual bread a fierce independent streak in the generation. Although I can't say this for everyone in this generation, many of us are not great team players. This tendency toward self-reliance is why so many in this generation have excelled in the role of outside sales.

Don't Waste My Time

You may have noticed that people of my generation do not like to pull long hours. The name of the game is work smarter, not harder. If I can accomplish my work in 6 hours, as opposed to 8 or 10, I am heading out the door. This belief has ruffled the feathers of many older supervisors. Those of previous generations believed in the notion that "time served equals quality of work". This just isn't the mindset of the Gen X worker.

When meeting with a Gen X worker, or customer, keep it short and to the point. They do not want to get to know you. They do not care about your life story. They want to get the pertinent information and move on. Efficient work is the preferred way of conducting business. I can recall moments where I wanted to throttle vendor reps who would come into my office for an "impromptu" meeting and start asking me questions about performance in one product or another. Did they really think I had that information at the tip of my fingers? If you wanted to know, wouldn't it have been more efficient to email me your questions so that I would be better prepared for the meeting? By the way, Gen Xers hate to look stupid.

Once again, this is not because we are social curmudgeons. Rather, we are simply wanting to wrap up the day so that we can spend time with our family and friends. As children, we saw our parents working long hours and wearing the 60 plus hour work week like a badge of honor. I will freely admit that we might have tried to reverse this trend a bit too much, but it is just who we are. We are not slackers. We are a "work to live" versus "live to work" generation.

Do Your Homework

I have given you just a few examples of what makes my generation tick. There a many more nuances that will help you develop a strong working relationship with those of us in our 40s and 50s. I encourage you to seek out books like *Generations at Work* and various articles about this often-overlooked generation. Although I don't think he is the best spokesperson for my generation, you might want to seek out the documentary "Generation X" narrated by Christian Slater. I picked up several little tidbits that I can now hurl out at my next management seminar or trip to the therapist's couch, whichever comes first. Now put down the article and go home.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. He recently launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com