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Dealing With Generation Why

Many business owners and senior managers are frustrated by younger workers, and these feeling are often mutual. The young employees grew up in a much different world than their parents, and their experiences have led to beliefs and behaviors that are much different than those of their older coworkers. Bridging generation gaps is a major challenge for American business, but must be accomplished because the multi-generational workforce is here to stay.

The American workforce numbers about 150 million people, and is composed of three broad age groups.

- The oldest group – let's name them the Mature generation – is made up of workers 55 years of age and older. This group is growing in absolute numbers; it is now about 22 million and will exceed 30 million by 2020. Americans are living longer and working longer, both because they need to for financial reasons and because they want to remain active. Matures include the Baby Boomers, and have relatively high disposable income, wealth, and influence within businesses.
- Midcareer workers - ages 35 to 54 – make up the largest workforce group. This group is simultaneously raising children, caring for parents, facing increased demands at work, and trying to build wealth. Now numbering about 70 million, this segment will decline slightly between 2010 and 2020.
- The youngest group, ages 18 to 34, can be aptly described as "the young and the restless." They are also called Generation Why because they do not patiently submit to authority like Boomers did at their age. This group will account for 60 million workers by 2010, and grow slowly thereafter.

To recap, the Young account for 39% of the workforce, Midcareer 46%, and Mature 15%.

Generation Why presents the biggest challenge to managers. Compared with older workers, this group is the least satisfied with their jobs, and 80% have job tenure of 5 years or less. Frequent job changes are common among this age group, and many employers struggle to get young employees past the "three-year hump." Employers are especially frustrated when young employees quit after the company has invested several years getting them up to speed, just when the employer is about to recoup its recruiting and training investment.

The solution to this problem begins with recognizing what matters to Generation Why. Remember the term "latchkey kids" used to describe adolescents and teens whose parents both worked? Now adults, this group learned to be independent at an early age. Young workers crave variety, learning, and responsibility. They are impatient and want freedom. Treating this group like their parents turns the excitement of a new job into drudgery. Their expectations are much different than older generations, and failure to engage these workers on their terms leads to high turnover as the restless youth seek a more engaging environment. In short, they want meaningful work experiences quickly, not a year or longer down the road.

In addition to early responsibility, young workers expect opportunities to learn, lots of feedback (including frequent and constructive job performance reviews), open communications, and respect from older coworkers. Usually, a little "give" on both sides of the generation gap is appropriate. Older employees should communicate openly with the "youngsters" and allow them to participate in decision making. Younger workers should realize the value of lessons learned from experience, and temper their natural boldness with respect. Leaders who successfully bridge the generation gap with young workers find the right balance between freedom to make decisions and control to prevent mistakes because of inexperience.

Practical steps a company can take to engage and retain young talent include the following.

- ✓ *Focus on day one*, so the new hire feels not just welcome to the organization, but equipped to perform. Start with a "blank sheet of paper" and ask, "What can we do to get new employees up to speed more quickly?"

- ✓ *Explain why*, not just how. Providing the reason for how we do this helps the new hire make better independent decisions, and gives more context to help incorporate new concepts.

- ✓ *Recognize achievement of key milestones* because, after money, recognition is the major factor motivating employees.

- ✓ *Poll new hires* about their orientation experiences. Besides learning what works best, this also satisfies some of their desire to be heard.

- ✓ *Involve upper level managers* at key steps during the employee's first year on the job. This is a good opportunity for listening, teaching, and learning.

Finally, when a valued employee leaves the company, carry out one or more exit interviews that dig deep and are helpful for the employer and departing employee. It's important for a business to confront reality, especially when unwanted employee turnover occurs. Also, the departing employee will be an ambassador for the company, so parting on good terms helps maintain the company's reputation in the labor market. Moreover, the employee may want to return some day, so leave out the welcome mat for workers you would like to have back.

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