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# Generational Shift: How Emerging Managers Will Alter The Management Landscape

by ROBERT W. WENDOVER

Josh has been with the ABC Reps firm for the past eight years. A business graduate of the local university, he enjoys his work with the firm and is forever taking seminars to enhance his skills and overall knowledge of the industry he serves. At the same time, he'll be the first one to tell you that while he still finds the job somewhat challenging, it has become repetitive. "Besides," he adds, "the leadership here is kind of stuck in the '70s."



**T**odd, one of Josh's colleagues, shares some of his concerns. Since completing his MBA last year, Todd has been networking with every senior manager he can gain access to. Recognizing that close to 50 percent of the organization's leadership will be eligible for retirement in five years, he has planned an "all-out campaign" to position himself for future opportunities. While some have found his tactics inappropriate, he is unapologetic. "After all," he says, "I'm 31 and time's a-wasting."

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## The Coming Transition

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As manufacturers, distributors

and independent manufacturers' representative firms begin their slow — but steady — transition from a Baby Boomer workforce to one dominated by the so-called Generation X, the style of leadership will change dramatically. Boomers grew up in a world of expanding possibilities, tremendous economic growth and the Camelot of John F. Kennedy. Xers, on the other hand, were born into layoffs, inflation, recession, Watergate and the societal chaos of the 1960s. While Boomers are optimistic, Xers are skeptical. While Boomers embrace the egalitarianism of teams, Xers focus on personal branding and individual contribution. Is it any wonder, then, that present-day leadership practices

will change with the emergence of these new professionals?

While some managers have dismissed the impact of this revolution, it has become increasingly clear that the leadership styles of this new generation will forever alter the management landscape. The question is how prepared are you and your colleagues to meet this challenge?

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### What to Anticipate

While this transition will be gradual, one can see some of the characteristics emerging even now. After all, the leading edge of Generation X is in its late 30s. So how can you anticipate and embrace these shifts in philosophy? First, by identifying the trends that will impact your organization. Here is some of what to expect:

- Shorter tenure in which to develop leaders. A recent survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 83 percent of current graduates say they expect to be in their first job out of school in fewer than three years. So much for the long tenure that exists in industry today. While present-day managers and leaders were nurtured over a decade or more, this luxury will be lost as the result of worker impatience, a shortage of skilled professionals, and the fluidity of organizational change. Where many of today's current leaders spent the first decade of their career building skills and experience, it is reasonable to assume that many new leaders will not remain in the organization for a decade. According to one survey, Xers are the least likely of the four generations to identify what they do for a living as a part of a career. Consequently, ties to a particular

industry will not be as strong in coming years, opening new avenues for the emerging leader who finds himself less than stimulated by the business over time.

- The influence of technology on management. Generation X has grown up with a keyboard attached to their fingers. When searching for solutions, they are just as likely to hop on the Web for answers as they are to ask a colleague. Is it safe to assume, therefore, that they will apply this strategy to leadership as well as technical challenges? Perhaps. Why hold an all-hands meeting when you can send an e-mail? Why communicate the organizational vision at a resort when you can video-conference? Why send out glossy annual reports when you can post financial results on the Web?

- Contract vs. a "calling" mentality. Members of Generation X tend to view their jobs as contractual relationships. Boomers, on the other hand, have tended to view their jobs as callings. Ask a Boomer "What do you do?" in cocktail conversation and he/she will most likely respond with a job title or occupation. Ask an Xer the same question and he/she will ask for clarification. "What do you do?" might mean family, hobbies, charity work and, oh yes, the job. One of the reasons why Boomer layoffs have been so devastating to some is that they have not only

lost their livelihood but also their sense of identity. Xers have learned from this phenomenon and are careful about investing too much of their emotions into one job. This detachment has served them well in the current state of organizational restructuring.

- Approach toward day-to-day work. On the job, Xers look for ways to position themselves for better opportunities. They seek out training, education, certifications, experiences, mentoring, and anything that will build their resume. This, they feel, will provide versatility for the future. As mentioned above, they also view jobs as contractual relationships. More than one manager has been burned by exaggerating various aspects of a position in order to attract top candidates, only to find that they pull up stakes when it is discovered that the job is not as advertised. Xers feel comfortable confronting managers on commitments not kept.

But this contract is not limited to promises made during the recruiting process. Break a promise with regard to opportunity and you may have breached the contract. Fail to provide promised training and you may have breached the contract. Delay a promotion and you may have breached the contract. When promises made to Boomers have been broken, most have sucked it up and waited patiently. Xers, be-

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ing of a different philosophy, have not been so forgiving.

While they may not leave the organization immediately, the temptation to look around is certainly there. This attitude, coupled with a predicted shortage of trained professionals over time, places them in an advantageous position.

Being naturally wary of organizational politics and bureaucracy, they also tend to be more aware of the undercurrents of change that can affect any organization. They communicate avidly with peers. The power of e-mail allows them to silently network with others on job-related issues. While some veteran managers might view this as sinister, it is simply one more illustration of how this group of emerging professionals will hold organizations more accountable for their actions over time.

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### The Power of Skepticism

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There is clear evidence that Xers view professional associations with skepticism, especially in an age where information can be obtained so readily on the Internet. Why subscribe to an association's magazine when its content can be acquired electronically? Why attend monthly chapter meetings when you see the same people every month? Why spend a week away from family attending a national convention? (Collectively, they will tell you that Boomer-inspired entertainment at these conventions such as the Beach Boys, Neil Diamond and The Association only confirms for them the questionable value of attending.) It should be pointed out, however, that they will collect every certifica-

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tion the association bestows if they perceive that it will help position them for the future.

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### Emphasis on Balance of Life

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While Xers are hard workers, they tend not to bring the job home. Home is home and work is work. Ask them to work overtime, and you may find that you are competing with other scheduled family activities they've already arranged. Ask them to come in for a special weekend meeting and they will do it reluctantly. Organizational gatherings, such as holiday parties and picnics, are viewed many times as a Boomer-initiated distraction from the business at hand. They will attend if they think that their presence will be missed, but they'd rather be rollerblading with their kids.

Some veteran leaders have concluded that this detachment is misguided and there is clear evidence that those who want to reach the upper echelons within any organization will still have to make many of the sacrifices of those before them. The difference is in philosophy. While Baby Boomers worked long hours in hopes that their sacrifices would be noticed over time, Xers expect their sacrifices to be noticed and expect clear guidance as to what those sacrifices should be. Ad-

dress impatience with a phrase like "these things take time," and it will fall on deaf ears. Xers expect a schedule. Only time will reveal the effectiveness of this new approach.

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### The Boomer Retirement Conundrum

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The wild card in this whole equation is whether the Boomers will retire on schedule. There is increasing evidence that many who planned to retire in their late 50s or early 60s may not be able to do so because they lack sufficient assets. According to some researchers, as much as one-third of the Baby Boom generation (approximately 25 million people) will have to make significant sacrifices to their standard of living upon retirement as a result of:

- Poor savings habits.
- Loss of higher paying jobs because of layoffs.
- The liquidation of home equity to pay off consumer debt.

The assumption that everyone will retire "on time" is probably flawed. What this means is that some veteran workers will remain on the job longer than expected. This will be a mixed blessing. On one hand, this delay will provide more opportunity for knowledge transfer, mentoring and leadership development. On the other, it will impact budgets by forcing compa-

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nies to continue paying the high salaries these veterans are earning.

Leaders should not, however, rest on their laurels and hope this enormous transition has been delayed. While there is no clear formula for addressing this tectonic transition, a thorough analysis of your organization's leadership and overall workforce should begin immediately. As this new generation of emerging leaders washes over the industry, it will present exciting new opportunities and significant changes in philosophy.

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