

Three Major Challenges “Generation X” Leaders Face

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Generation X, typically defined as the people born between 1961 and 1981 in the United States, is facing a defining moment in time. As the oldest members of my generation start turning 50 and the youngest of this group reach our mid-30's, many of us are realizing we are not as far in our professional careers as our parents were at this age. Sadly, it doesn't appear our status will change in the near future. So what happened? Are we really the “slackers” journalists and experts have been claiming we are? It would be easy for us to try to place the blame on something like the global economic crisis. It would also be easy for the members of Generation X to claim we can't escape the shadow of the massive number of Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960) who entered the workforce before us or the overwhelming droves of Millennials (born 1982-2001) who are entering the workforce now. In fact, many of them do blame external events, uncontrollable circumstances or other groups for our perceived misfortune. However, I believe the problems we face are of our own making.

Many of my generational peers are frustrated, angry, jealous and fed-up because they feel like they are being ignored, overlooked or just simply passed over for promotions and other opportunities. They're stuck in middle-management, mid-level or supervisory positions with few positive options or pots of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow. Even though many of their mid-level positions are relatively high-paying roles, they do not provide the constant change, freedom and diversity of work we crave. This is probably why Generation X has an unprecedented number of entrepreneurs who leave the corporate world to pursue financial and professional independence on their own terms. To quote Dr. Steve Joiner, a tenured professor, Managing Director of the Institute for Conflict Management at Lipscomb University and Generational Conflict lecturer at SMU's Center for Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management, Generation X is essentially “suffering from Middle Child Syndrome” and are trying to find a way to make their mark on the world.

It should be noted that due to the recent financial meltdown, more Baby Boomers and even a few members of the Silent Generation (born 1925-1943) are holding on to their lucrative upper-management positions. Who could blame them? But, to be fair, it's not necessarily because they don't trust Generation X to lead these companies. Chances are good that many of these people lost their retirement funds in the crash or even because they fear another, possibly bigger, crisis is looming on the horizon. It's also important to point out that it is apparent that many Baby Boomers prefer to work with, mentor and promote Millennials over Generation X'ers. Perhaps this is because the Millennials are the same age as the Boomer's own kids, maybe it's because Millennials tend to actively seek out guidance from managers or because Millennials are seen as a group who likes to fully participate in corporate culture. Generation X, on the other hand, are often seen as detached or distant from the corporate culture and we prefer to learn things on our own without much assistance or guidance.

I have identified three major challenges Generation X needs to acknowledge and overcome if we ever hope to be considered for leadership roles within our chosen organizations and to regain forward momentum on our careers and future. In the following pages I will describe each of these three challenges in detail and provide some possible options my Generation X brothers and sisters can employ to, hopefully, overcome them.

Challenge #1 – Our Cynicism and Pragmatism

Generation X'ers have earned, and rightfully so, a reputation of being cynical and pragmatic. When we were children, we witnessed government institutions, previously believed to be infallible, get caught lying and stealing. We watched as our parents and grandparents dedicated their lives and all their free time to companies who just laid them off without a second thought. Generation X also grew up seeing these companies eliminate pensions, overtime, insurance coverage and other employee benefits one by one. Investigative journalism also caused us to lose our heroes. We no longer had

anyone to look up to or admire without the media trying to find all the skeletons hidden in their closet.

So is it really surprising that we have a cynical and pragmatic view of the world, companies, managers, chances for promotion, other people and the future in general? Many Generation X'ers expect layoffs, economic problems and other bad omens to occur. They see conflict as inevitable and, therefore, refuse to trust people or their intentions. In his book *Crossroads of Conflict* (2006), Kenneth Cloke shares his “Top 10” reasons why people seem to get stuck in conflict. The top reason on his list is because people let conflict define them. In the case of Generation X, we have nearly adopted that as our mantra! Many of us have entrenched ourselves in conflict- among each other, about our identity, about our future and also with other generational groups.

It's possible that we engage in conflict with other generations, especially the Baby Boomers and Millennials, simply because they're bigger than us. Generation X is the smallest generation and, the way some X'ers see it, we are completely surrounded and essentially suffocated by those two big, bad, evil generations on either side of us. They believe the Boomers and Millennials are keeping us from fulfilling our potential or even conspiring against us in the workplace. I guess they think if they scream and kick long enough someone will feel sorry for us and let us have our way. Personally, I think they've simply lost perspective. Unfortunately, they're focusing their energies and attention on what we're supposedly *not* able to do instead of what we can, or should, do.

If Generation X wants to take over leadership roles, then it should be our mission to learn how to minimize our cynicism and pragmatism and enhance our positive characteristics- like tolerance for change, diversity and alternative philosophies. If my peers believe few people deserve their trust- then it's our duty to gain and earn the trust of the people around us. If they believe most people have hidden agendas, intentions or secret motives- then we should work hard to be as transparent as possible as leaders. The reality is that most people want leaders who are authentic. Jennifer J. Deal, author of

Retiring the Generation Gap (2007), published the results of a study on what leadership attributes members of each generation value the most. The top 5 results for Generation X were **Credibility, Dependability, Good Listening Skills, Trustworthiness** and **Dedication**. But the most interesting thing about the results of her study was the fact that members of the other generations seemed to value the same attributes in a leader. Leaders should always lead by example and I know the members of Generation X are capable of this. That's a philosophy that has always worked for me- I never ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do, or have done, myself. If we are, as we like to point out, so tolerant of change and truly value diversity and alternative philosophies, then we should have no problem accepting members from different age groups.

Challenge #2 – Our Ferocious Independence

Generation X is an extremely independent group. This likely comes from our so-called “latch-key kid” childhood. In many cases both parents, if there were two parents in the household, worked which left us to fend for ourselves. Despite our apparent freedom from parental supervision, many of us were assigned a good number of chores and other responsibilities. This is why I consider Generation X to be the “checklist” generation. Our parents would often put our chores or to-do lists up on the refrigerator and, so they could check on our progress, mark off the items that were completed. In most cases, they did not care about the way we got the work done, just that the chores/duties were completed to their satisfaction in the allotted time or by a certain date.

We may be a cynical and pragmatic bunch, but there is no doubt we know how to get work done...quickly and efficiently. In the book, *The End of Management* (2002), Joan Goldsmith and Kenneth Cloke state that, usually, people “...do not take pride in being told what to do by people who stand over them and monitor their work in detail...” and with Generation X, I'd say that is a gross understatement! I don't like to use such a negative word, but most of my generation *hate* being

micromanaged. We prefer independence, autonomy and despise meetings. We do like to be told exactly, and in great detail, what result you want or expect, but we don't want to be watched or hounded while we're doing the work. We want to get started on the project as quickly as possible, do the work necessary and move on to something new. Judge us on the end result...not the methods we use to accomplish it. I still think this is one of the primary reasons for the disproportionately large number, at least compared to other generations, of Generation X entrepreneurs.

This differs greatly from my experiences with how many Baby Boomers and Millennials work. Boomers will take an assignment and spend a long time planning, revising, editing and expanding the work to turn it into something even bigger than requested. Millennials, on the other hand, seem to ask for constant feedback on each part of a project before they submit the final project. Generation X'ers expect a big payoff at the end of a project and quickly move on to the next challenge. We will do exactly as you ask and turn it in when you want it. We work very hard on projects and assignments in short bursts, but not over long periods, for unspecified amounts of time or for undefined or unrealistic goals and mission statements. Also, be warned, if you don't give us extremely detailed and specific instructions- we see that as a failure on your part, not ours. If it was that important you, you would have said something before we started working.

Even though many Generation X'ers prefer a hands-off managerial approach, have a disdain for authority, dislike the normal 9-5 workday routine and hate being micromanaged, I don't think overcoming this desire for independence should be the goal for this particular challenge. Instead, I think it would be more productive to adapt it for better uses. We need to use our entrepreneurial spirit and love of independence to take some risks that could benefit our companies and employees. We need to harness our powers of creativity, resourcefulness and self-sufficiency to try our new ideas and find ways to offer new services. Generational researchers William Strauss and Neil Howe, in their book

The Fourth Turning (1997), describe Gen X'ers as risk-takers and gamblers because we have keenly observed that the “slow-and-steady, follow-the-rules and trust-in-the-future” strategies don't usually end as well as we've been led to believe.

We value personal time and fun, we are not workaholics like our parents. Gen X'ers do not like repetitive jobs and responsibilities. What we like, and often need for job satisfaction, is change and new, unique challenges and projects. Since Generation X shares a preference of flexible hours with the Millennials, we should use this commonality to create processes and systems that allow teams, who might work different hours/shifts or in different locations around the world, to finish projects faster and more efficiently. We need to embrace the use of these teams, but make sure the teams, as you've suggested, are self-managing ones. This step will require us to actively seek out new leadership positions, form new departments or even create new jobs where change and development is expected (and encouraged) and that provide us with plenty of new opportunities to learn, innovate, explore and take risks.

Challenge #3 – Our Perceived Lack of Loyalty

If you're at a cocktail party or reception and you ask a Baby Boomer the typical question about what they do, they'll likely answer with their job title or a description of their job. Their job defines them and that's how they see themselves. If you ask a member of the Silent Generation what they do, they may answer with their job title and also include a list of community and social organizations of which they are an active member. If you ask a Millennial what they do, they may blow off the question entirely or answer with a description of the great paying job or career they plan to have in a year or two. But when you ask a Gen X'er the same question, we'll probably tell you what we do for fun before we tell you about our job or career. It's not that we don't care about our jobs, it's just that we don't let the career define us. I've heard it said that our jobs are what we do during the week to pay for the fun

things we like to do on the weekends. I'd say that's an accurate observation. We're more interested in lifestyle than loyalty to companies, specific brands or even industries. We are, however, loyal to certain people.

In the book *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (1993), Neil Howe and Bill Strauss see my generation as a group with what they call a “purely instrumental” view of work. For years the members of Generation X have been described as flaky, unreliable or labeled as disinterested slackers because we have no interest in being seen by the boss in the office, working a traditional 9-5 workday and also because we can easily disconnect from our jobs, a project or the corporate culture. It's easy for us to relax and not feel guilty or have a need to check our email every five minutes even on the weekends. When work is over...it's over! We expect to be the victim of layoffs or shutdowns at some point so we have no issues changing jobs, or even changing careers, several times before we reach retirement age.

So what can Generation X do to overcome this stigma? I think the first step is to use our adaptability to learn new skills in multiple formats and fields. We should then share this knowledge to improve the skills of the people we lead in our departments or teams. All of our seemingly random experiences and skills can also come in handy if we learn to use the networks from those industries to build or develop something new or create new possibilities and options never considered before. Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, in their book *When Generations Collide* (2005), believe that one of the reasons Generation X is so focused on flexibility in their careers and at work is so that we can do a better job than our parents did at being around for school and family events for our kids and to have more time to do the things we love.

I would agree that most Gen X'ers are realists at work and at home. Unlike Millennials, who have been praised for every little accomplishment and made to believe they cannot fail at anything, or

their Boomer parents, who created that unrealistic system, we know that failure is inevitable at some point. If we fail, we are quick to try to learn from our mistakes, take responsibility and move on. The same is usually true for people who work for us. If they fail, we see it as a learning experience for them and try to either help them fix the problem or move on to the next project if it is not salvageable. We want to be given an opportunity to fail and, if we are in a leadership position, we want to give our employees or team members a chance to fail without losing their job over it.

Most Gen X'ers understand that failure is not an end- it is merely one potential outcome. If it happens, we just have to get back up, dust ourselves off and try again using a different approach. Failure is not the end of the world. And because we lack a loyalty to specific companies, brands and projects, it also allows us to quickly jump in to a new or existing project with a fresh pair of eyes and find ways to fix or, at the very least, identify potential problems or issues created or overlooked by others if they fail.

Conclusions

I believe that with the right amount of determination and focus, each of the three challenges facing Generation X leaders I described above can be turned on its head to work to our advantage...instead of against us. But it is our responsibility, as free-thinking individuals, to make these changes or adapt new attitudes on our own terms and at our own pace. If someone from a different generation were to make these same suggestions, my generational peers would likely be skeptical of their motivations. There's a good chance they'd think some of the suggestions were designed to hinder their independence since they didn't think of them first. It's also possible that my generation's lack of cohesion as a group or agreed upon identity could cause them to think the suggestions aren't relevant to their personal goals and future plans. My response to them would be that I share these suggestions merely as a foundation for positive generational change and to help them

move forward in their professional lives. I've given them plenty of the details they need to start on this project. But, like a true Gen X'er, I really don't care how they reach the end goal- I just hope that they get there before it's too late for them to make that lasting and important mark on the world.

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