

## **The Multi-Generational Workplace**

*by Betsy Barbieux*

It's Memorial Day. You can overhear two dads at the pool. They've settled on the topic of work. Mikey's dad comments to Tyler's about having the day off. Tyler's dad says, "Yeah, I thought I was going to have to work today. My boss is just out to make a buck, doesn't really care about what I wanted to do today. I told him I couldn't work, I already had plans. (pause) What about you, what do you do?" Mikey's dad launches into a story about having made it through his company's downsizing, but now is required to work more hours and produce more with less support and he's surprised to have the holiday off.

In another instance, you hear a young lady exclaim, "Why won't these people work with me. Give me a break here. Just move my reservation from 8:00 to 7:30. I've got to be back at the prom at 11." The problem is several weeks ago she made dinner reservations at an upscale restaurant atop a 26-story building. Three days prior to the event she realizes the time frame won't work for them to get through with dinner and have the chauffeur-driven limousine back to the prom by 11:00, which is when the Seniors Debut Walk is scheduled. "They" are about to ruin her evening!

Let's drop in on Ned, the owner of a management company that serves several condo hotels. He's having a conversation with a former employee, a housekeeper who didn't show up for work one day, but has returned a week later for her paycheck. In a loud, demanding tone, we hear, "You WILL give me my paycheck NOW. The labor relations lady said you would and I've brought Sgt. Segal with me to make sure I get it TODAY! And my attorney says we'll sue you if you don't." Ned, who has never backed away from a threat, calmly says "I'm not sure who told you what, but your paycheck won't be available for another week." He adds, "But you won't get it then unless you turn in your apron. Did the 'labor relations lady' tell you that?" He continues, "and since you've already contacted your attorney, I'm not supposed to talk to you. So here is the name of mine, we'll just let our attorneys work it out."

Let's take a quick look at the applicant for a member services position at a large homeowners' association in Palm Beach. This is an upscale property where staff dresses in a "uniform" during season--navy blazer, tan pants or skirt, etc. The applicant, female, late 20s, is here for her third interview. Her credentials and experience are good and she speaks well. But there is an irreconcilable difference between the person described in the application whose references have all been excellent and the applicant sitting in front of you. What you see is a young lady with sleek black hair pulled back in an unstructured knot with long bangs hanging in her eyes, heavy black eyeliner and mascara, spaghetti-thin straps on her tight black, metallic tank top that falls short of the top of her pants. Her capri spandex jeans reveal too much skin when she sits and the top of a tattoo on her backside. Her high heeled sandals show off black toe nail polish. Her fingers are decorated with silver rings that match the multiple pendant necklaces around her neck and which also, you now realize for the first time, match her tongue ring.

These four scenarios represent challenges to the present day manager in dealing with Generations X and Y. Employees' manuals that customarily include traditional topics such as responsibilities and duties, compensation and benefits, disciplinary guidelines, termination procedures, holidays, and paid time off are being expanded to include specifics on incentives, manners, professionalism, customer/resident service, dress, tattoos, hair color and cuts, and body piercings.

In some offices, there are four generations of people trying to work together:

- ◆ The Baby Builders - born between 1927 and 1945

- ◆ The Baby Boomers - born between 1946 and 1964
- ◆ Generation X - born between 1965 to 1983
- ◆ Generation Y - born after 1984

(The Silent Generation - born before 1926. Age categories of generations courtesy of The Barna Group, Ltd., study on Generational Differences.)

During the early 1990s, the aggressive attitudes, expectations and behaviors of what was thought to be among just a few has become the trend of a large group of employees. "The values and norms that first appeared among Generation X are steadily supplanting more traditional workplace values and norms." (For more information, see *Generational Shift: What We Saw at the Workplace Revolution* by Bruce Tulgan and Rainmaker Thinking, Inc.®)

To say that Generation X and Y employees think, work, and dress differently than the Boomers and Builders is an understatement. But, perhaps the most challenging to a manager, is the difference in their attitudes toward authority.

The Silent Generation established the authority system. The Baby Builders submitted to that authority system. The Baby Boomers rebelled against that authority system. Generation X ignored that authority system. Generation Y thinks they are the authority system.

The Silent Generation, having come through the Industrial Revolution, established our present day workplace ethic. They helped us make the shift from a predominantly agricultural society to a manufacturing one. With manufacturing becoming the focus, retail businesses were necessary to sell product. Retail businesses needed "white collar workers" for management and sales. The Silent Generation took the work ethic of the farm into the factory and the office. Work hard, go the extra mile, treat others the way you would like to be treated. Their role models were their parents, the families at church, and the characters in classical literature.

Your Baby Builder employees as a whole work hard, go the extra mile, and treat others the way they would like to be treated. They submit to your authority, office policies, and the rules and regulations of the community. In their youth, radio and moving pictures had become popular and news about the war was shown at each movie theatre. Role models were radio and movie personalities, Eisenhower and Churchill.

Your Baby Boomer employees grew up rebelling against authority. Remember the 60s? Major reforms in education, protests of the war, the hippie movement, drugs, sex, women's rights. Everything was questioned. They reserved the right to argue. Television had been invented and was available to most families. Their world became bigger. Role models were still mostly traditional with Wally and June Cleaver sleeping in twin beds. But television brought us deviations from the norm. *My Three Sons* and *Bonanza* introduced single parenting, Elvis's pelvic gyrations would not be shown by television producers, and Ed Sullivan helped change music forever when he introduced America to the Beatles and the British invasion.

Your Generation X employees will ignore your authority. Their parents used the Dr. Spock theories on child rearing--be your child's friend, give them freedom of expression. They don't seem to hear what you say unless you let them talk and be involved in the decision making. They grew up with fast paced educational and interactive television, computer games, and video arcades. Their attention span is shorter, they require short term assignments, and immediate rewards. This is the generation where their

parents had them in every after-school activity they could find. They are used to going to more than just school and home every day. Having a 20-year career in ANY industry frightens them to death. Many have already had multiple jobs in diverse industries. Role models are computer games, The Simpsons, Married With Children, O.C., Julie Roberts, and Jon Bon Jovi. By 2040 they will outnumber the Baby Boomers by their 39.6 to Boomers' 37.1 million. (U.S. Census Bureau)

Generation Y employees are just entering the workplace. They have a hard time understanding the Boomer concept of age equals seniority, and experience equals higher pay, and privileges are predicated upon responsibility. They generally believe that what they want they should get--now. Interestingly, there is a rise in patriotism among this group. The main difference -- they believe they ARE the authority. In reality, given another 35 years, they will be. By 2040, they will number 73.4 million (U.S. Census Bureau) and will likely usher in a work place ethic like none we could ever imagine. They'll be taking care of the Baby Boomers who are still alive in the nursing homes!

The wise manager is armed with all the information available about managing multi-generational employees. Don't be left behind, frustrated, or angry by this generational shift in the workplace.

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