



Managing Generation X

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Generation X are those born between 1964 and 1989, they are our rising stars many of whom are just entering into their prime. Born as into a precarious world when a cold war between East and West threatened atomic destruction, they grew up knowing that life is tenuous. They therefore seek instant or early gratification based upon a marketable academic talent or streetwise ability.

And streetwise many of this generation are for in Europe and the US they are the daughters and sons of post World War II baby boomers. Conceived in an optimistic peacetime against a background of hitherto unknown wealth many Generation Xers are latchkey children whose parents were disconnected from their extended families and neighbourhood communities. Some witnessed the separation of their parents before the onset of their teens.

Generation Xers learned very early to be emotionally independent and self reliant.

Yet these are no street children for with one or both parents working what they lacked in parental contact they demanded to be compensated for materially. Then as now industries targeted children and young people as consumers with ample spending power. Generation Xers have been trained to collect branded products as rewards for good behaviour from an early age. The speed of technological advance and force of fashion mean that many of these rewards are hollow because they can at best last a year before being considered outdated and in need of replacement. Consumerism we shall see is significant in shaping the Xers philosophy.

We find within Generation X a wellspring of talent and creativity encased within a hard sugar-coating of destructive self-love. Many well-educated Xers came to experience their first defeat finding themselves unemployed or eventually accepted in positions that did not require a university education. Such people are frustrated, bitter, and now face a potential second defeat with middle age approaching.

Generation X as a group tend to distrust institutions. They adapt poorly to the hierarchical systems common in family business, paradoxically often preferring to create their own employment or even companies. Older style management tends to react badly to them considering them to be spoilt or arrogant. Traditional managers then react by seeking to exert more controls through micromanagement.

Completely failing to appreciate the psychology of the Generation X they offer salary incentives, or bonuses as a means to push up productivity and then blame the employee when these don't work! A major criticism of the Generation X is a lack of company loyalty. Xers are seen as people who move rapidly where the rewards are greatest.

Managing Generation X requires a revolutionary approach. Each of these employees needs to be carefully evaluated, coached and developed. Their ability to take initiatives must not simply be acknowledged, it must be positively encouraged and given possibilities for immediate implementation. A Generation Xer expects instant results and rewards. In many respects they have a mindset more in common with a company's founder, than its senior managers. In today's digital environment this attitude is precisely what business needs even though the company style will change.

A criticism of employee initiative is that an incompetent or dishonest employee might easily cause damage. When Nick Leeson a stockmarket trader, managed to conceal his losses on the Singapore Exchange his employer Britain's oldest bank was ruined. Complexity and incompetence in the hierarchy of supervision had created an environment where this could happen. When a top-heavy micromanaging culture prevails in a context where decisions must be made quickly; the decisions, the procedures, or both suffer. Digital systems flexible enough to enable

intrapreneurial flair but capable of intelligently monitoring performance will increasingly minimise costly employee error or dishonesty.

Southwest Airlines has a success record second to none, yet its founder and CEO Herb Kelleher operates from a style that he calls Management by Fooling Around.

He says: *“I would sooner have a company that is bound by love, rather than fear”*. Employees currently own 10% of the company through the issue of stock options. Those who through initiative contribute to the success of the company are known as *Heroes of the Heart*.

Some management pundits argue forcibly that Generation X can only be managed by tearing up traditional employment contracts and engaging highly qualified or experienced project workers. In this system employees are obliged to take charge of their own personal, technical and career development. The aim is to become a highly qualified knowledge worker. For small companies buying in such freelancers will be the only practical option. In such a system, the Generation Xer is a commodity to be bought and sold on the basis of ability, fashion and quality. She has become as expendable as last years brand.

Larger companies may prefer to retain their investment in employees by offering more flexible contracts, home working, sabbaticals for development and training, loan to charitable organisations, or internal transfers where initiatives and creative endeavour may find new challenges. Generation Xers can be wedded to a company if that employer acknowledges the Xers need for immediate results, and importantly it seeks to satisfy the need love rather than ephemeral rewards.

In Turkey some members of Generation X are re-evaluating life's purpose. Many of the Ag-17 Group, which continues to provide voluntary support to victims of the earthquakes of 1999, are highly skilled professionals from industry. Using the Internet they created a group that was able to respond to the first shock within 4 days. During later shocks they were able to be on the road with equipment, manpower and support within 4 hours. Yet many of these people are frustrated in their normal workplace by outmoded management practices and self-interested competitive thinking. One member of the group said: Before the earthquake, I

thought life was about a good education, a good job, a new car, a comfortable flat and furniture. Now I know that it could all disappear in a moment. It doesn't stop me buying a new car, or carpet, but I recognise that the rewards of life lie elsewhere.

Seven Ways to Bring Your Xers on-board

1) Treat individuals with the respect that you would give the boss!

Xers share the entrepreneurial mindset, but it needs to be developed.

2) Simplify the company, and share information digitally.

Xers need fast responses and the information to act. They don't like to have to manage multiple layers of managers it wastes their time and squanders their talent.

3) Create teams around projects, and keep them focussed.

Xers have short attention spans, to keep them engaged they need to feel a hub of communication, and they need rapid feedback to keep them on track.

4) Coach individuals in manager management.

Xers will develop as people, as they learn to listen and appreciate others. Every Xer will benefit from a mentor who can help them to get above office politics and the seeking of competitive power, so common in the previous generation of employees.

5) Trust your systems and your staff

For the Xer, her work is the most important in the company. Keep yourself informed, and show interest but let the Xer manage the details.

6) Encourage creativity

Use your Xers as a 'corporate brain'; send them into looking at wider areas than just their normal areas of expertise. In this way new ideas will be introduced into the company, and the Xer will learn new concepts to bring back into their daily work.

7) Acknowledge achievement both at an individual and a group level

Create projects where individuals may shine, but are more likely to do so through teamwork, than individual effort. Then reward both, in that way everybody gains.

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