

Tips for artfully bridging the generation gap

By JEFF BUCKSTEIN

Toronto

The generation gap is alive and well and occasionally creating friction in the workplace as one age cohort misunderstands or misinterprets what another is trying to do, according to Giselle Kovary, a managing partner with n-gen People Performance Inc. of Toronto.

"We bring generational baggage with us when we come to work every day, and that's where we find different pressure points, which are not always easy to deal with if you're leading a team," Kovary told an audience at the Certified General Accountants Association of Ontario's recent annual conference in Toronto.

For instance, members of Generation X, who are now between 28 and 43 years old, sometimes clash with the huge Baby Boomer cohort just ahead of them (ages 44 to 62) who constitute the bulk of senior management positions in many organizations. "Gen X is a smaller cohort that has lived under the bulge of the baby boomers their entire lives, saying 'give me some space to grow,' and that's often a friction point in organizations," said Kovary.

For instance, she noted, Gen

Xers expect flexibility. To them, the notion of work-life balance is "not a nice-to-have, but a must-have." Nor are they afraid to speak their minds. They are "completely unimpressed with authority for authority's sake." Somebody in a managerial position will typically garner respect from a member of Generation X only if they demonstrate competence and the ability to provide members of their team with new skills and knowledge to help them advance.

While Baby Boomers themselves were never shy about challenging authority, they nevertheless had to conform to certain corporate practices when they were younger, and are therefore not keen on having their own authority challenged now, said Kovary.

When Baby Boomers entered the workplace more than a generation ago, she explained, the people running those companies were the Traditionalist generation (who are now 63 and older) – organizational-minded men and women, many of whom stayed with one firm for their entire career. Organizations were then generally very structured and hierarchical and advancement through the ranks often meant sacrifice in one's personal life, such as having to work evenings and week-

ends, or delaying vacation to accommodate a work-related project.

"There's a lot of emotion tied up with authority. Baby boomers say, 'I had to shape myself in the image of my manager. Nobody asked me what I liked or wanted. Now it's my turn to start giving out some orders. I don't like being challenged,'" said Kovary.

GenXers who feel they are no longer learning or developing in a position will sometimes simply get up and leave, even if they don't immediately have another job to go to.

"Often we assume that GenXers are not being loyal or they're jumping ship, because we don't understand where their desire is coming from," said Kovary, who is herself a member of that generation. One of the early life-defining events they witnessed growing up was to see their relatives and neighbours become victims of corporate downsizing. This left them determined to keep growing and developing new skills in the workplace to ensure they always had the tools to look after themselves if they were let go, she explained.

GenXers are often "skeptical of managerial and organizational motives," and as a result have felt



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the need to "become very flexible and adaptable," she added.

There is also sometimes friction between senior managers and the newest generation entering the workforce – Generation Y, or the Millennials born between 1981 and 2000.

"We need to recognize the realities, lifestyles and experiences that GenYs have had and how that has shaped their expectations coming into the workforce," stressed Kovary. "They're very, very different."

For example, she noted, the youngest cohort has grown up with

and been surrounded by the comforts of 24/7 technology all their lives – such as ATM banking, and online information sources for school and other research, which they could do anywhere, anytime. Consequently, they live "incredibly fluid lifestyles," which leads some to question why they need to be in the office during standard working hours when they could go home and work online – perhaps even in the middle of the night if they want to.

This runs counter to the culture of many organizations overseen by Baby Boomers and Traditionalists which emphasizes work structure, including a daily physical presence in the office.

Moreover, the comment is often made that GenYs are lazy, feel entitled and have a poor work ethic. But as with GenXers, it is necessary to look at where GenYs come from in order to understand their perceptions and expectations, noted Kovary. They came of age when there was a huge focus on building up self-esteem, both at home and at school.

"We haven't always set GenYs up for success to enter into a work world where there are no do-overs;

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