

BOOKS

When Xers and Ys meet traditionalists

Book details reality of workplace generation gaps

By SEAN PEARCE

Special to Toronto Business Times

In the 2004 film *In Good Company*, Topher Grace, best recognized as Eric Forman from TV's *That '70s Show*, played a character who becomes boss above a much more experienced man, twice his age, played by Dennis Quaid. Hilarity, drama and Scarlett Johansson ensued. It all sounds like typical Hollywood fare but, in reality, the drama is being played out for real in workplaces across North America.

Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary are the co-founders of the Toronto-based n-gen People Performance Inc. They have also written a book titled *Loyalty Unplugged: How to Get, Keep and Grow all Four Generations*, that seeks to tackle the challenges facing modern business organizations, many of whom may now have employees whose ages span as many as four very different generations. These generations are not only different ages and from different eras, but they have different attitudes to working, too. Buahene explained the scenario presented in *In Good Company* is less Hollywood fiction and more a growing reality.

"It is a very common phenomenon, or more increasingly so a common phenomenon, in the sense that there are a lot of younger folks coming out that are either the subject matter experts or the knowledge holders," Buahene said. "If a younger person holds that (qualification) they will choose that candidate regardless of the fact that they might be younger than most of the team they will be managing."

This situation presents challenges on both sides, Buahene said. And, according to Kovary, it's a reality that people need to get used to. Public and private sector organizations alike are starting to look at younger, less experienced, more educated candidates.

"You're finding this phenomenon because (companies) are moving to competency-based recognition and/or they're having the challenge of filling senior level positions," Kovary said. "They've got shrinking labour pools and an aging workforce and, as we move into that increasingly, there's going to be a need to move people more quickly in their careers into, perhaps, more senior positions than we've had 10 or 15 years ago."

Buahene said that reactions can be strong to the introduction of a younger supervisor or manager to lead a more experienced team. Those belonging to the traditionalist generation, which includes people born between 1922 and 1945, and the baby boomer generation, which is comprised of people born after the Second World War between the years 1945 and 1964, might not take kindly to a new team leader with less experience and more education trying to tell them about their business.

According to Buahene, the traditionalists and the baby boomers started working in a time when advancement was secured through "fighting in the trenches" and "clawing one's way up the ladder," not through education alone.

"They feel a bit rejected by the organization often times, so that's the emotional

response, and the rational response is a lack of understanding or belief that anyone could possibly be competent enough (to manage) in a shorter time frame," Buahene said.

"There's this belief that experience equals expertise, or time equals expertise, and often younger employees have proven it's not how long you do something, but how well you do something."

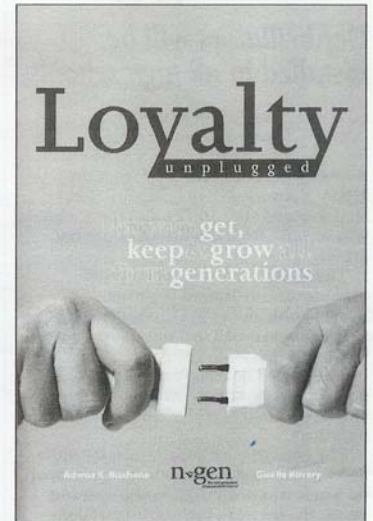
Buahene is quick to point out, however, that prejudice can go both ways. Just as traditionalists or baby boomers might discount the value of a diploma qualifying someone for the job, members of generation X, which includes people born between 1965 and 1980, and generation Y, which encompasses those born from 1981 to 2000, might misjudge the importance of experience when compared to training at a post-secondary institution.

"Gen Xers are inclined to discount that which has gone before by saying, 'If it's been done before and it hasn't been retained, it couldn't have been done well,'" Buahene said. "Gen Xers and gen Ys, in part, really need to find ways to value the expertise the experienced worker brings to the table and the lessons that they have learned."

Buahene also mentions that no generation seems to make better managers than another. They just have different ways of doing things. Of course, these varying styles can lead to some confusion and even confrontation.

Another possibly contentious issue, Kovary said, is the fact that generation Xers and Ys often feel the need to speak their minds about a situation. Traditionalists and baby boomers, on the other hand, may not take kindly to the unsolicited feedback and look at an outspoken employee as a troublemaker instead of enthusiastic. Conversely, the more experienced groups might not speak up to correct a generation X or Y team leader who is about to take the company on a large misstep.

Another danger in the work environment is the way in which the different generations view their work. According to Kovary, many traditionalists and baby boomers tie their identities very strongly to their careers. Long hours are expected and tardiness or sick days are seen as



Loyalty Unplugged details the unique identities of four generations that translate into different loyalties in the workplace.

mortal sins – sticking it out is the only way to the top.

Generation Xers and Ys, however, see work as a chance to contribute and add value to life, but it's a means to an end. Kovary said that many in the latter group will try to schedule their work around their life, not vice versa.

Many generation Xers or generation Ys would rather make a sideways career move that better fits their lifestyle rather than an upward one that offers more pay, but less free time.

Kovary said that the heart of the matter is that no company can afford to have a workforce that refuses to work together. It's vitally important that people of all generations treat one another with respect and try to understand the needs and expectations of each other. Simply put, the generations see many things differently, and that includes work, she said.

"It's not about holding hands and singing Kumbaya," Kovary said. "If you'd like to do that as a team feel free, but as a business you need to do this and there's a great impact on your performance and productivity if you work together as a team."

It is written...

According to *Loyalty Unplugged*, there are four identities in today's workplace:

- **Traditionalists:** 1922 - 1945, they make up 16% of the Canadian population and are loyal to the organization and respect authority. They follow the rules.
- **Baby boomers:** 1946 - 1964, 30% of the population; they are loyal to the team and challenge authority. They challenge the rules.
- **Gen Xers:** 1965 - 1980, 21% of the population; they are loyal to the manager and are unimpressed with authority. They change the rules.
- **Gen Ys:** 1981 - 2000, 26% of the population; they are loyal to colleagues and respect authority who demonstrate competence. They create the rules.