

Gen Trends

June 2007

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

The Forgotten Front Line

Employers have long spent most of their training efforts on developing those in management positions. Training for front-line workers in most industries has been limited to the rudimentary knowledge and skills necessary to do their jobs. Arguably, there are several reasons for this: (1) Managers have a greater influence on the organization than those on the front-line and therefore require more training. (2) It costs more time and money to replace those with supervisory responsibility. (3) Employers have assumed that many non-professional front-line workers will, out of a sense of duty remain on the job without additional training and development. Besides, those who do leave are easily replaced, they reason, so one must be careful about how much investment of time and training is placed in each of them.

Until a few years ago, these assumptions were proven correct. Since the beginning of the Industrial Age, generations of workers have toiled in repetitive jobs, turning out the goods and services this nation requires. After 20 or more years on the job, you were handed a gold watch and wished a happy retirement.

But in the past decade, these assumptions about front-line jobs have been challenged like never before. Workers in these positions have begun to assert their beliefs that a job should offer flexibility, opportunity for timely advancement, meaningful training, and the respect of leadership, among other attributes.

These emerging generations have come of age imbued with a mindset that no one should remain in a “menial” job for more than the time that it takes to find a stimulating occupation that meets the characteristics

they see depicted in the media and hammered home by family and friends. After all, who would be caught dead getting their hands dirty? The origins of this mindset include: (1) an emerging societal belief that “everyone should go to college to get a good job”; (2) a deficit of applicants for a number of these positions, especially where industry-specific skills are required; (3) legislation that has introduced a plethora of “rights” that seem to engender a sense of entitlement among many; (4) impatience as the result of seeing age peers depicted in the media making it big; and (5) being immersed in advertising that tells them, “you deserve the best just because you’re you.”

All of this bedevils employers, but the plain fact is that the emerging generations do not feel obligated in any way to one job or another. With consolidations and layoffs in the daily news, everyone is concluding that a job is merely a day-to-day contract. The difference is that those under 40 are more likely to leave if their needs are not being immediately met.

The upshot? Every employer needs to recognize that work/life balance, a stimulating work environment, and *defined* and *constant* opportunities for growth and advancement trump any sense of duty and obligation to the job. This “forgotten front line” demands time, money, training, follow-through on promises, and a vision of what’s in it for them. It is so easy to take them for granted, especially when everyone is expected to do more with less these days. What can you do, even today, to add a little bit of vision, training, and or stimulation for those on the front line? It could mean the difference between keeping them or losing them tomorrow. Next month, I’ll provide a column full of ideas on what others are doing to address the needs and desires of these emerging generations.

Coming soon . . .
*Crossing the
Generational Divide*

“GenTistics”

Children ages 8 to 18 spend 6.5 hours a day on television, electronic games, computers, music, and other media, with many multitasking electronically.

The Kaiser Family Foundation



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Answers to quiz 1. c 2. b 3. d 4. a

Leadership and the Emerging Generations

Don't miss the Center's newly released video program on how to anticipate the business impacts of those assuming management responsibilities in this new era.

Leadership and the Emerging Generations is based on the popular program of the same name that's been presented for hundreds of associations and corporations across the US. Discover how aspiring leaders are going to change the way we all do business. Learn how to anticipate these upcoming impacts. For more information, [CLICK HERE](#).

I Remember When . . .

1. Richard Nixon's "enemies list" included which rock star?

- a. Fabian
- b. Elvis Presley
- c. John Lennon
- d. Jimi Hendrix

2. Which president appeared on *Laugh-In* and said "Sock it to me?"

- a. Lyndon Johnson
- b. Richard Nixon
- c. George Bush, Sr.
- d. Gerald Ford

3. The character John Belushi played in the hit film *Animal House* was named:

- a. Chachi
- b. Otto
- c. Pigpen
- d. Bluto

4. Who was Steve McQueen trying to escape from in *The Great Escape*?

- a. The Germans
- b. The Martians
- c. The Russians
- d. The Sunnis

Answers on the front page

Case Study Corner

I've heard you tell people to supervise young workers according to the corporate ethics, not one's personal ethics. That's easier said than done. How would you approach it?

The essential challenge here is competing with an overwhelming variety of messaging about right and wrong in which young people are immersed from birth. I can tell my daughter, for instance, not to do something because it's wrong and she can come back to me with a rebuttal simply by searching the Web for other opinions on what's "right." This is not just about young workers however. Managers face this same practice on the job. If I, as a manager, tell someone that what he or she has done is not ethical, the response might be, "Just because you think it's unethical doesn't make it so." While someone may not say those words out loud, it's the thought that counts.

When I see someone saying or doing something that I consider less than acceptable, I stop to consider how to deal with the situation before approaching him or her. I try to place myself in the situation and think about the choices and alternatives this person might have had.

I also research and reflect on what the organization considers appropriate. There may be a history of practices that it, or the industry, has established over time that will inform my way of dealing with the situation. I then can use these practices/beliefs as a reference when it's time to approach the person in question.

Finally, I will consider the influences this individual might have felt in making the decision. If the organization is conducting a major sales push, for instance, the person might have felt pressured to promise something the company couldn't deliver. I might go back and review the original message communicated by management to see how it might have been interpreted.

From here I try to think of a solution that both closes the sale, in this example, and maintains organizational integrity at the same time. If that can't be done, then it might be time to communicate with the customer about how the original promises that were made. If the result is a lost sale, maybe this is a teaching moment for

both the person in question and the organization. If the person in question protests, this might also provide an opportunity to clarify the organizational beliefs and provide some clearer parameters on what is considered acceptable in this particular situation.

I find the most difficult part of the process is finding the right words to explain the difference between what is and isn't appropriate. One cannot simply throw the manual down on the table and say "read this."

It is generally my practice to rehearse exactly what I'm going to say and to prepare for the possible responses. My approach is never accusatory but to conduct a sort-of fact-finding mission to uncover the person's reasoning. I might begin with the request, "Help me understand why you chose to do it this way." Simply approaching the situation in this manner sends a gentle, but firm message, that you're troubled by the person's behavior. I might even find that he or she responds by saying, "I know it looks a little shady, but here's why." If there's a legitimate reason, move on. If the response appears to be a dodge, it's time to clarify your concerns using the established practices as a benchmark. If the person doesn't seem to understand what's wrong, more coaching and attention is required.

Some managers might shy away from approaching individuals about the choices they are making on the job, but that's a part of *their* job. Am I being too hard here? I don't believe so. If supervisors, are taking note of the questionable choices a person is making, chances are others around them are as well. Failing to take time to process these choices can result in several undesirable outcomes: (1) The troubling behavior continues. (2) Other employees observe it and assume it is acceptable. (3) The behavior impacts the organization's integrity. (4) Not confronting the behavior has an impact on your credibility as a manager.

Never before have managers been faced with such a complicated challenge around ethical choices and behaviors. But now, more than ever, it is critical to stay the course.