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FINDING COMMON GROUND

A Call to Action for Leading Gen Y in the Workplace

By Randy Hain, managing partner of Bell Oaks Executive Search

Like many of my fellow business leaders, I do my best to stay current. I embrace social media, read the latest leadership books and stay abreast of trends in the marketplace. And from a workplace perspective, there is one particular conversation topic in full discourse across the country—Generation Y in Corporate America.

It should be. Over the next 15 years, we will witness the exit of almost half of our workforce, mostly from the retiring Baby Boomer generation. With so much written about Gen Y's challenges and overall lack of readiness to lead, we should be concerned ... concerned enough to do something about it.

I am a product of Generation X which, along with Boomers, holds the vast majority of senior leadership positions in our country. We are the hiring managers, mentors, coaches and role models for the generation that follows behind us. What are our assets? I would like to believe we possess wisdom, experience and a strong commitment to the future. Our liabilities? We seem to have reservations about engaging with Gen Y and understanding how they think. For an insightful look at Gen Y expectations in the workplace, read this article by Dr. Tim Elmore, founder and president of Growing Leaders, "[Working with Generation iY.](#)"

A Simple Gap Analysis

I sense that we have two "camps" looking at each other across a great divide with wariness, suspicion and frustration. The Gen X/Baby Boomer side is focused on the organizations they lead, profit & loss, revenue growth, filling open positions, developing employees, and improving work cultures among myriad other issues related to running a business. Gen Y seems to have vastly different work expectations compared to their predecessors. As Dr. Elmore writes in his article, the phrase "Pay Your Dues" is strongly disliked by this newer generation, whereas that was the working life mantra of my generation.

Gen Y covets, among other things, work/life balance, schedule flexibility, belief in the company mission, and access to and transparency of all information. There is a fundamental shift here from my entry into the workforce more than two decades ago when working 70-hour weeks, climbing the corporate ladder and the phrase "hard work will take you far" were the norms of the day.

A Road Map to Common Ground

So, where do we go from here? What is our call to action ... what is theirs? We can't move forward with arms folded and fingers pointed at each other from our respective camps; following that path will lead to disaster for our companies and the economy. We need to reach across the divide and find common ground. It will take compromise, trust and commitment *from each generation* to make this work.

The conventional employee-manager relationship is not necessarily a thing of the past, but it is no longer the standard ... or won't be for long. We need to recognize this as not just an adjustment in leadership, but a cultural shift in the workplace. While the roles of employee and manager will continue to morph, the dynamic will always be there. I have outlined five recommendations here for each group. My hope is that actions such as these will serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and true progress.

Recommendations for Gen X/Baby Boomers:

1. **Start listening, stop assuming.** We have to engage with these newest employees and listen to what they have to say. Don't assume we have them figured out because we read a book about it.
2. **Be present on college and high school campuses.** Want to make a difference in how they view the workplace? Talk with this generation and share your expectations; help them manage theirs. Don't wait until they show up for their first interview and be shocked they don't act like we did at that age.
3. **Start viewing Gen Y as a strategic business investment.** Put resources and time where it is critically needed: engaging, hiring, training, developing and retaining our future leaders. They will someday run our organizations and if they are not ready, we only have ourselves to blame.
4. **Scrap “do as I say, not as I do.”** These young people are very bright; they watch and learn. If they desire reasons for *why* we do things, tell them. What does that hurt? If we can't provide them with an authentic experience, we have little chance of coming together ... or retaining them.
5. **Smart organizations will learn to tap into their potential.** This generation grew up with advanced technology and instant access to information. They get social media. They want to make a difference and they will follow trustworthy leaders. Successful organizations of the future will find a way to harness their power.

Helpful Advice: It doesn't require a radical makeover of our beliefs, values and organizational structures to prepare Gen Y for leadership. They view the world differently, but so did we at the beginning of our careers. Remember to listen, engage and flex where appropriate and tap into the enormous potential of these young minds; but all in the framework of *what the business needs*.

Recommendations for Gen Y:

1. **Having perspective is important.** Today's leaders grew up in a very different world. Much of what research says Gen Y wants out of your careers took most of us a long time to earn. Today's leaders have perspective that differs—that is a good thing, learn from them.
2. **Be patient.** It is human nature for managers to expect you to earn their trust, to impress them with your abilities and make a long term commitment to their organizations. You may have a different timeline and plan for your career, but be patient and stay long enough to maximize the opportunities in front of you. Change is normal but is sometimes met with resistance.
3. **Look at relationships and communication differently.** The explosion of social media has heralded the arrival of the “virtual” relationship and Gen Yers are leading the charge. Gen X/Baby Boomers are more likely to value fewer, more personal relationships over an extended network of affinity-based connections. The prevalence of texting to communicate is typically not well received in most businesses. Also, LinkedIn, not Facebook, is currently the foremost social network for making business connections.
4. **Convey respect while pursuing goals.** It is appropriate to have goals and pursue them to your fullest, but cultivating positive and respectful relationships with company leadership and learning from their successes will help you achieve them.
5. **Pursue mentors and advocates.** Most business leaders will point to mentors and advocates early in their careers who played important roles in their success. There is enormous value in having experienced guides to help you navigate your career. Many leaders are willing to be a mentor, but you must win their advocacy first by showing your commitment to the relationship.

Helpful Advice: You are the new kids on the block, vast in number and the future is yours. But, today's business leaders hold the keys to that future. They have experience and insights which you need to be successful. Listen, engage and be flexible ... this advice applies to both camps.

Compromise is inevitable as we hire, train and develop this next generation of leaders. Their day will come and there will be pain, tears and hopefully laughter along the journey, just as it was for us. Let's

enthusiastically embrace this next generation of leaders, take them under our wing and teach them how business is done. I hope that in turn, Generation Y will be open, patient and accept our help. Here's to finding our common ground.

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About the Author

Randy Hain is Managing Partner and Shareholder of Bell Oaks (www.belloaks.com), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He has an established track record of leading successful searches and building teams in diverse industries and functional specializations ranging from individual contributors to C-level leadership. He has played the lead role in hiring, training and developing of one of the most successful search consultant teams in the industry, and has earned a reputation as a values-based leader who invests heavily in his colleagues, candidates, clients and the community. He may be reached at rhain@belloaks.com.