



Peggy Pattison
Author, Speaker

Managing a Generation Culture Clash in Organizations

When reading “Scenes from the Culture Clash” in the January/February 2006 Fast Company Magazine and “Young, Female, and Demanding (Companies struggle to understand Gen-X’s lack of servility) in January, 2006, Inc. Magazine, I had a flash back of a friend’s experience with her, then, 7 year old child. My friend and I are both Baby Boomers (1046-64). Her child is a Gen X-er (1965-1977). Here’s my friend’s story.....

My little girl went to the telephone book while I was at work one day and phoned the piano tuner, who, in turn came out and tuned our piano. When I asked her why she did that she replied, “because it needed it.” My friend just laughed and the piano tuner billed her for his services.

I remember being appalled, at the time, that there was no consequence to the child’s behavior which showed lack of respect for authority; there was no punishment. Instead, this child’s behavior was lauded for leadership skill and initiative. At that time, I was grateful I didn’t have children; it appeared to me that my friend’s children were more her peers than her children.

I wondered what that child would be like to manage when she entered into her first full-time job. Well, I think most managers have met this child. She could have easily been the subject in the above article, “Young, Female, and Demanding.” If we have had the opportunity to manage these young workers, our success with them has been determined by our management skill!

Generation Value Differences

Remembering my friend’s story, I reflected on the fact that my parents (Traditionalists born before 1945) would have spanked me until bloody for such an act of what would have been considered “family insubordination.”

Consider now, the children of Gen X'ers, called Millennials, gen-Y, Net gen, echo boomers, and even "generation why's" because they never stop questioning the status quo. Recently, we heard the sensational news story of the young man from Miami who, without his parents knowledge or permission, went to Iraq to learn first hand what it would be like to live his life in such a dangerous world! These "generation why" children have grown up in a culture which champions, adores, and nurtures equality, freedom, and creativity from infancy.

What are the Generational Value Clashes in Organizations?

I worked my way through the ranks of organizations for over 30 years and here's my observation. Organizations are historically created and established on the basis of Traditional values, policies, and procedures. These traditional companies expect Baby Boomers, Gen-Xer's and "generation why's" to comply with company standards without challenging the status quo. Organizations are no different than families, they mirror functional and dysfunctional family interactions if unknowing management, the "parents," recklessly delivers inconsistent management practices. Younger, more challenging generations do not and will not tolerate dysfunctional organizations in the future. They feel strongly that they have options and far more entrepreneurial personalities.

Challenges to Management

Leadership of an organization must manage and communicate a clear vision of working toward a common cause (called the business mission), orchestrate clear direction for achievement, have clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, honor and respect individual uniqueness, strengths, and diversity, and management must align individual values with those of the organization. The most important challenge for management is holding each person accountable in terms of performance standards, which were clearly and democratically established.

Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers and even more so, "generation why" members expect to be heard. Directive style leaders and managers will fail badly in organizations going forward unless they change and listen. Even approachable managers and leaders will continue to be intimidated, confused and shocked by what appears to be the more aggressive younger generation.

Simply said, corporations and organizations must learn new management skills, processes, and techniques for becoming more democratic and participative managers and leaders. Employees must be heard even more in the future. High performance organizations have intuitively and knowingly understood this for a long time which is what has differentiated them from their competition.

As the labor shortage looms in our immediate future, beginning to appear in 2006 with Baby Boomers just turning 60, the issue of replacing talent, retaining talent and managing more effectively will become increasingly more important with each

passing year.

About the Author:

Peggy Pattison, former college professor of business, gained her practical expertise in performance development while leading large teams and Coaching Sr. Leaders of employees in Fortune 500 Companies through the dynamics of mergers/acquisitions, downsizings, reorganizations, and restructures. She is the author of KISS Performance Solutions,,,,,Management/Leadership Training Series.

Peggy Pattison, Author, Speaker, is currently one of America's top performance coaches. Get her FREE Report: One POWER Formula to SUCCESS at <http://www.PeggyPattison.com>.

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