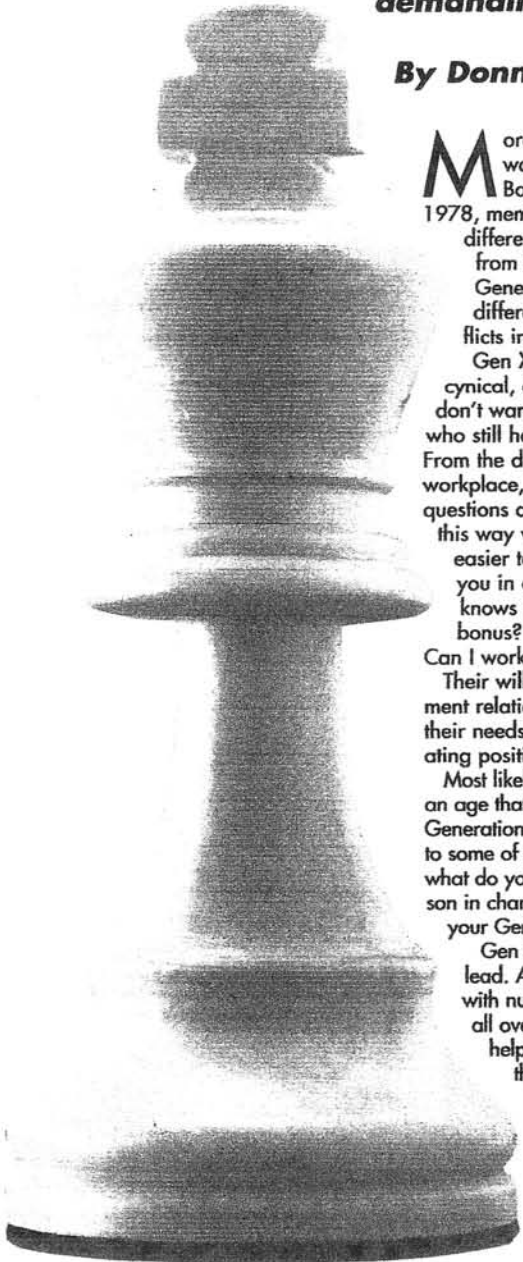


Developing a Successful Strategy for Managing Gen Xers

As a resident, you're most likely already a member of Generation X. But that doesn't mean you inherently know how to effectively lead your colleagues from the same era. Gen Xers are a special breed, and leading them takes a special touch. Here's how to understand and persuade co-workers from this highly demanding segment of the workforce.

By Donna Suter



More than 45% of today's workforce is under age 39. Born between 1963 and 1978, members of Generation X have different attitudes and priorities from the Boomer and Generation Jones segments — differences that can cause conflicts in the workplace.

Gen Xers have been labeled as cynical, disloyal employees who don't want to pay their dues but who still have plenty of demands. From the day they arrived in the workplace, Xers are asking such questions as: Why are we doing it this way when it would be much easier to do it that way? Why are you in charge when so and so knows more? How do I get a bonus? When do I get vacation? Can I work flextime?

Their willingness to leave employment relationships that fail to meet their needs gives them strong negotiating positions — and they know it.

Most likely, as a resident, you're of an age that makes you a member of Generation X. You probably can relate to some of these characteristics. But what do you do when you're the person in charge and need to manage your Gen X colleagues?

Gen Xers are a tough bunch to lead. As a consultant, I've worked with numerous physician practices all over the country and have helped other doctors overcome this management challenge.

The following information will hopefully provide you with enough advice to tackle this management challenge on your own.

Be a Leader Who Understands

Some believe leaders are born. Others believe leaders are "called"; still others contend they're "made." I believe leadership can be developed. In medicine, leaders must be task-oriented, relational people. Paradoxically, the successful leader is a manager who must emphasize productivity, time, manpower and the use of resources while he or she "strokes" people, resolves conflict and seeks harmony.

Communication between management and Gen X workers isn't perfect. Even under the best of circumstances, doctors frequently fail to get across their own ideas or fall short of understanding what others are trying to tell them. And, there's always a price to pay — small or large. Think back to your most recent misunderstanding. What did it cost you to correct?

You may shrug and say misunderstandings are inevitable — that you just have to learn to live with them and write off the cost.

Misunderstandings are not inevitable. It's possible to communicate in such a way to eliminate misunderstandings. And this means you save in four ways:

1. Practices save money.
2. Managers and doctors save time.
3. People save relationships.
4. Individuals can save self-esteem.

An effective manager is required to use persuasive leadership in mediation, persuasion, conciliation, decision-making, problem-solving and staff development. Have you mastered those skills? Tom Peters' and Robert H. Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* also shows the heavy cost managers who don't develop a "corporate capacity for innovation" pay. This type of culture is espe-

cially important when dealing with Gen Xers. Of course, when *In Search of Excellence* was first published, the oldest members of Generation X hadn't even graduated from college.

Unique Needs of Gen Xers

What are the particular needs and expectations of Xers? Bruce Tulgan, in his book *Managing Generation X*, says that four themes have emerged:

1. **Belonging.** Gen X employees want to belong to a team for which they can make a meaningful contribution.

2. **Learning.** They want to have sufficient access to information.

3. **Entrepreneurship.** They want to develop solutions to problems they identify and produce their own results.

4. **Security.** They want to have the ability to monitor the successes of their performances and the returns on their investments.

Tulgan says that when these four elements exist, morale among younger workers increases.

Think of the relationship you have with Xers as a checking account. The consequence of failing to keep a positive balance is to pay a fee and lose credibility.

In a busy practice, you'll need to correct Xers behavior, postpone listening, or in some way disappoint the people you work with. These are withdrawals in your accounts.

Misunderstandings are more insidious. They're like automatic bank drafts; you may not immediately realize the funds have been removed. Avoid unintentional overdrafts and ensure your account balance stays positive by making regular deposits.

Practice What You Preach

One of Gen Xers' complaints about managers is that they don't practice what they preach. Make sure to back up your words with the appropriate action. Gen Xers are ruthless observers. If you say you value respect, they want to know if you honestly do.

Employees who are poorly treated treat patients as they've been treated.

- Model the attitude and behavior you want from them.

- Welcome your staff members with a smile, thank them, and get to know them as people. They will translate your actions into their jobs — welcoming patients and encouraging them to come again.

One of the greatest investments you can make in Xers is listening. You must silence your thoughts, questions and preconceived notions to begin to understand what your employee is



trying to say. Listening, almost by itself, eliminates misunderstanding.

Lack of listening and speaking without tact are two good ways to lose valuable employees. There is always a better way to give sensitive information. Too often, though, we blurt our thoughts without thinking them through. Our fast mouths betray us and create misunderstanding. We realize our mistake and strive to fix it, only to compound the error. After a few ill-planned attempts, doctors and managers tend to give up and become totally task-oriented.

Top Reasons Gen Xers Quit

So what's the best way to get Generation X employees to quit? Ignore them as people and constantly operate in crisis mode. Unnecessarily stressful situations combined with lack of appreciation and meaningful rewards have been identified by Xers as three of the top five reasons they seek other employment.

Recently, I received a call from a doctor upset his lead technician was thinking about quitting. The doctor had heard that his 28-year-old technician wanted to leave because she didn't think the doctor liked her and that he wasn't as "fun" as the last doctor for whom she worked.

Just like most doctors, he didn't feel that "fun" was an appropriate attribute to have in a medical office. I agree that giggles aren't appropriate, but an atmosphere of crisis and catch-up leads to employee turnover as well as doctor burnout.

I told him that while jocularity may not be *de rigueur*, fun can be a state of mind. Never underestimate the power of a friendly smile, eye contact and a believable compliment.

There are two steps to giving a

believable compliment.

1. **State exactly what the person has done to gain your attention and approval.** Instead of simply saying "good job," offer an informative compliment. For example, you could say, "While scribing today, I noticed you kept the other technicians informed about med changes and follow-up care. Thank you." This sends a strong message that keeping people informed is something you value.

2. **Let the person know how his actions helped you, the practice or the patients.** This makes the compliment more specific. "I noticed you kept the other technicians informed about med changes and follow-up care. Although the information sometimes required the technician to stop and give the patient free samples or additional instruction, everyone kept on time. Your clear communication with them was the key. Thanks."

A Wise Investment

Gen X employees aren't disloyal and uncommitted, as many claim, but rather cautious investors in a world that has taught them to expect little. They want so many answers to so many questions from so many sources in such a hurry because their learning and communication skills were shaped by the information revolution. *Can't most problems be solved in a 60-minute television show?*

As Tulgan's observations affirm, Gen Xers' "free agent" mind-set put this generation in the vanguard of the new economy, and their attitude has permeated the entire workforce. To succeed, individuals must have the ability to seize new opportunities to add value. They must quickly acclimate to new environments. They must take charge of skill-building and stay focused on results. They must monitor feedback from the world around them — and, at least figuratively, they need to collect the tangible reward for their contributions of time, labor and creativity.

Are you prepared to lead this generation of workers toward your own success? Being a leader doesn't come cheaply. When you devalue your communication, you pay the high costs misunderstandings bring. You can save money, time, relationships and self esteem by investing wisely in Generation Xers. ■

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