Problem Solving Approaches: It Can Depend on the Generation

by

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One of the major differences I have noticed between Baby Boomers and Generation X is their approach to problem solving. Boomers are more likely to believe in the system, at least initially, while Xers bring their inherent skepticism to the table.

This was brought home to me recently during an interview with the president of a local union. We were discussing how the generations differ in their perception of labor contracts and work rules.

"I have shop stewards in their fifties," she said, "who will call me for interpretations of the agreement and generally accept whatever I tell them. I'm the President, therefore I must know what I'm talking about.

"I will also," she said, "have rank-and-file members in their twenties who will call me about a rule interpretation. But instead of asking me what I think the rule means, they will tell me what they think the rule means and ask if they are correct.

"Sometimes, when I confirm their interpretation, they will refer me to another section of the agreement and point out what appears to be a direct contradiction to what I just confirmed. Then they'll ask me to explain the difference. They take more time to read the contract than we ever thought of 20 years ago."

Consider the rules and procedures you implement within the work place. Xers are used to problem solving and looking for ways to use resources to their best advantage. Unless you clearly explain the spirit of the rule, and have their investment, be ready for some of them to interpret it in a way on which you had not counted.

Then we come to the Millennials, or Generation Y, as the press sometimes refers to them. The Millennials have, once again, grown up in a different society than their predecessors, Generation X. Because of the expansive economy, the explosion of technology and America's focus on convenience, they have developed a different set of expectations about the world of work.

While Generation X grew up in tumultuous times and learned to fend for themselves, Millennials have matured in a world where shortcuts, manipulation of rules and situational ethics seem to reign. Teachers tell me of countless efforts on the part of some parents, for instance, who ask them to re-evaluate their child's unsatisfactory work rather than letting the grade stand. These youngsters witness the fudging of rules and expectations within organizations when adults attempt to use the system to their advantage. They watch organizations, large and small, lobby within governments to push legislation that will produce the outcome the organization desires.

The media is filled with glorified efforts to beat the system, whether it's an employer being bested by a savvy employee or parents succumbing to the wiles of their offspring. Nothing seems sacred, the government, the schools, religious organizations and a host of other societal institutions. While some parties argue that kids do not imitate what they see on television, I watch my children do it everyday.

As one might imagine, the minds of Millennials are filled with confusing

messages about right and wrong, good and bad, along with the tremendous pressures to succeed that are publicized daily. Dot-com billionaires in their teens, young movie stars, and boundaryless advertising all combine to send a message to do what feels right at the time. On top of all this, they've learned that jobs are a dime-a-dozen because of low unemployment. Why can't they work on their own terms?

As this generation leaves school and enters the world of work, this all lands in the laps of businesses nationwide. Increasingly, I'm hearing from retailers and other front-line employers who tell stories of parents calling to explain their child's absence from the job, or to simply make sure "everything's going okay." At the same time, these managers relate frustrations of young workers being unable to make quick decisions when the situation is less than clear. "They may have straight A's in school," said one, "but they don't seem to have the street smarts we've taken for granted in Generation X."

What's the solution? While the jury is still out, here are some quick suggestions to address some of the challenges these new workers present:

1) Be extremely clear in your delegation of tasks. Provide straightforward steps for decision-making when dealing with the variety of situations likely to come their way.

2) Provide proper support. While we would like to think that new employees will use their common sense, their version of common sense maybe different than ours. Maintain closer supervision until they are comfortable working on their own.

3) Speak from the corporate values. When a manager explains what the company defines as good performance, there is little room for employee manipulation. Managers who make supervisory decisions based on personal beliefs will increasingly find themselves challenged by younger employees who do not share the same values.

4) Have the courage to correct behavior. Managers are sometimes dissuaded from taking action for fear of litigation. But failing to act clearly when rules and practices are violated communicates a message to everyone that organizational policies are inconsistent. Take action, document and follow through.

As those in the work force continue to change, we must remain in touch with their values and priorities to achieve maximum productivity.

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