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Succession Planning and the Emerging Generations: Five Trends You Need to Know



By Robert W. Wendover

How will you prepare for succession within your organization? As I work with and survey the members of those in their thirties and early forties, it is becoming abundantly clear that they will apply their own values and attitudes to the roles they assume. While this is not surprising, it's helpful to take a look at the ways in which this will happen. What follows are five characteristics that I have discovered in my on-going research. Consider how these will apply to you and your firm.

First, they're skeptical. Those coming of age in the economic, social, and political chaos of the 1970s discovered that many of the institutions their Baby Boomer parents had taught them to believe in were not necessarily valid benchmarks. For this reason they have always been more likely to question established rules and authority than to follow them. This characteristic, of course, made its way into the workplace and has evolved into a sense of dubiety about management. When their supervisors have said, "Follow me, I know what I'm doing," they've been likely to think, "I'll believe when I see it."

As they assume increasing responsibility within your organization, they will be more likely to challenge the status quo and question the veracity of practices that have been in place for years. This is not to say that they simply will stir the pot for fun. Be assured that they will come with well prepared arguments and research. But they will be comfortable taking leaders to task if they detect inconsistency or what they perceive as out-dated practices. Consider the ramifications of this as you implement succession planning and prepare to transition organizational responsibilities.

Second, they bring better formal training to the workplace than any generation in US history. The uncertainty in their youth encouraged them to become self-reliant and well prepared for life's unexpected changes. In the past decade, for instance, we have seen hundreds of thousands of these emerging professionals complete a master's degree in business administration, providing them with far better formal training than most veteran leaders. This, coupled with their never-ending desire to collect skills, licenses, certifications, experiences and titles, tends to position them for the future responsibilities they seek.

That said, you should be circumspect when selecting these individuals for leadership roles. On one hand, they may bring their training in strategic thinking and resourcefulness to the table. On the other, they may lack the discernment that comes with having spent years in the trenches. It's your job to ferret out these differences.

Third, they see technology as a solution. While veteran leaders have grown used to digital gadgetry, this generation relies on technology much more. They tend to view this approach as more expedient, especially in the face of today's pressures to do more with less.

As these same individuals assume leadership roles, they are bound to change the way many tasks are handled, from strategic planning to communicating vision. Why, sit around a table when you can attend the meeting from your place on Sanibel Island? Why spend three hours analyzing the numbers when computer modeling will do it for you? Why fly to a customer's site when your Avatar (yes, Avatar) can make the presentation in your place? How will these attitudes about technology impact your succession planning process and implementation?

Fourth, they embrace globalization wholeheartedly. As author Thomas Friedman observed in *The World is Flat*, the globe's economies are merging at a pace few recognized even five years ago. While veteran leaders may still view this phenomenon with a bit of wonder, many in this emerging generation have been contemplating it for years. They are comfortable reaching out to potential partners and prospects overseas and will be the first cohort of leaders to place a true emphasis on training the US workforce for commerce that takes diversity for granted. As they assume increasingly responsible roles throughout organizations, they will embrace the value of language training, cultural integration and the economic tenets of other nations.

Fifth, they look at a job as a contract rather than as a calling. The career-oriented emphasis of the Baby Boom generation has never been shared by those presently in their 30s. While this generation is ready to throw their all into a challenging, growth-oriented position, they are not looking to climb the traditional succession ladder embraced by their parents. They tend not to become too socially engaged in the workplace for fear of losing their objectivity when a better opportunity comes along. When these individuals feel they've outgrown the position, when they conclude that their upward mobility is slowing, when they simply feel restless, they may leave for another

position. This is nothing personal. It's business. But the impact of this practice can have a monumental effect on the succession planning process.

Young managers within your organization, for instance, may leave for a competitor after having completed all the training and development you have invested in them. At the same time, you may recruit managers from your competitors who have participated in the same kind of program within those organizations. So it is conceivable that over time you may be training your competitors' future leaders and they yours.

As this generation assumes responsibility for leadership, they are sure to relax some of the traditional work rules, many of which were developed more than a half-century ago. Only time will tell whether these changes will enhance productivity and boost the bottom line.

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February 2012