

Needed – A New Secret Decoder Ring



As a kid, I loved Secret Decoder Rings. They allowed me to exchange encrypted, secret messages with my friends. These days, as a Baby Boomer, I feel like I need a new Secret Decoder Ring to give me the key to unlocking the mystery of the next generations in the workplace.

Meet Generation X, born 1961-1981. How often have you heard someone say, "Gen X'ers just don't want to work hard; they're slackers, and worse yet, disloyal." Or, they won't read anything. They don't understand that we have a chain of command. They think they deserve to be promoted – but they've only been here 9 months. They don't know what an ironing board is.

Gen X'ers have something to say too, "We live with information overload: pages, voice mail, e-mail, snail mail, instant messages, and text messages." It's easier to read a one paragraph summary or, even better, a short, bulleted list of information. We thought dictators fell with the Berlin Wall in 1989. We believe that jobs and promotions should be given by merit, not by age or seniority. Oh yeah, we'd use a uniform cleaning service, but we're still paying off school loans.

Rebecca Ryan, a researcher who has surveyed over 5,000 next generation employees, reminds us that each generation sees the world differently. Gen Xer's are often ***skeptical***, a result of growing up with corporate layoffs, high divorce rates, and missing kids on milk cartons. They learned early not to talk to strangers and not to trust employers or institutions. They are ***savvy***, a result of being raised with unlimited access to information and technology. They are the first multi-tasking generation. They are highly ***self-sufficient***, as latchkey kids they made dinner, programmed the VCR, and watched their parents get pink slips. They know how to manage life and take care of themselves. Gen Xer's are ***speedy***; they shop and bank *on-line* rather than standing *in* line. They like fast and faster technology. They are full of energy and don't like wasting time or inconvenience.

Enter the Millenials, born 1982-2002. This is the "baby on board" generation whose parents catered to them – applauding when they took their first step, who went to the prom in groups, and who have "zero tolerance" for drug use and violence. They bring their own experiences and values to the workplace: teamwork, communication, and technical skills. The things that they rank as "extremely important" in research surveys include working with great team members who are smart, diverse, and easy to get along with, and having their ideas valued and implemented.

Ryan suggests that the Millenials have their own S's: ***smart***, ready for multiple careers in a lifetime, they value being smart over short term goals. They are ***spenders*** who were raised in a consumer oriented society. ***Socially conscious***, they are committed to community service

and creating a sustainable future. And they are **stressed**, averaging over 70 hours per week with school, activities, and jobs.

So let's decipher what this all means for leaders and managers. The first unencrypted message is to start thinking about life/work balance and stop thinking about work/life balance. The next generations want to "live first and work second." The second message is to take some time to understand and assess what they value and want: control over their time – time for their families and for volunteering in the community, managers who appreciate their work and value their input, training that provides updated and new skills, and opportunities to deliver results in the workplace – *immediately*.

Understanding these messages gives organizations a chance to find ways to make shifts in management styles and the workplace that meet the needs of the next generations in the workforce. As a manager who can successfully decode these messages, you may find that you have not only dedicated employees, but loyal employees. In the next issue; looking at the next generations in a 24/7 workplace.

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