

CHAPTER 8

CREATING A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WORKPLACE

Fast, Functional, and Multi-Generational

Age diversity among employees will be a thorny issue for the foreseeable future. No matter what business you're in, you know that to keep your workplace moving forward you need an infusion of youth, fresh ideas, technological skills, and physical energy. But if you're a Baby Boomer, this can come at a great cost of time, energy, and patience. You may even wonder if dealing with these Generation Xers and New Millennials is actually worth the effort. Sometimes you even think you'll be able to get by without hiring additional young people—and then you can just shut your doors when the last of your peer group employees retire!

On the other hand, you've probably seen *some* motivation, potential, and even exceptional skills in your young employees, but this positive behavior is sporadic and unpredictable. You'd like to know how to get consistently high performance from all your employees. Perhaps you've already tried everything you can think of, and you need new ideas to refresh your way of thinking.

For others the following may be true: You've examined your workforce, realized there is no one climbing the ladder to take over once your generation has retired, and you have no choice but to prepare and train the next generation of workers. Their facial piercings conjure images of falling face first into a fishing tackle box, and you know they're going to be a challenge. So what can you learn about them before you begin this arduous task?

Here are the four steps you must take to bring your workplace up to speed for the twenty-first century. Take your time thinking over each one before you begin to adapt it to your particular circumstances.

Step One: Identify the problem areas.

Ask yourself these questions when thinking about your employees:

- Where am I seeing the problems?
- Where do I expect problems?
- Is there resentment over special treatment of the senior members (including me) in my workplace?
- Do I have a hard time getting my employees to come to work on time or at all?
- Is there a general lack of motivation in job completion?
- Are all employees treating the customers well?

Then ask yourself:

- Can I determine who on my staff is struggling more than others?
- Is turnover especially bad in one department, in a specific division, or under one specific manager?
- Is there one type of job within the organization that is experiencing more trouble than another?

Next ask:

- Are some of your managers *not* struggling with this problem, but instead effectively leading employees of all ages? You might want to consider talking to them about how they work their staffs and then observing them closely while they work so that you can learn what they do and how they do it. They may be onto something that would be valuable to learn.

Step Two: Rate your success in hiring the best talent.

You know the kind of employees you're looking for, whether they are office workers who have mastered high-tech concepts and equipment, or skilled industrial laborers. Whatever the position, there is no doubt that talented *and* dedicated new hires are hard to find today.

However, there are also, without a doubt, a good number of well-trained, tech-oriented Gen Xers in the workplace. Many of them are looking to move on, since changing jobs is the most likely way to secure a raise, even if it's a lateral move. Chances are you're targeting the best and brightest of this group and are fighting lots of competition to win them over. Even in tough economic times, there's stiff competition for talented employees.

There are some manufacturing communities, especially in industrialized nations, that struggle to find competent employees (and in some cases, any employees) who want to work in a factory environment. Industrial towns struggle to retain enough young workers to supply the factories with a continuous supply of inexpensive labor.

So ask yourself where you're having hiring challenges. Is there a particular position within the company that is becoming harder and harder to fill? Are there generational factors affecting your hiring processes that you need to consider?

Step Three: Now that you've got them, learn how to keep your Gen X and New Millennial employees.

The workplace has changed dramatically in several ways, making it even more difficult for Boomer managers to hold on to good workers.

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the average mid-twenties employee leaves his or her job every 1.3 years.
- Kids today are taking longer to “grow up” than they ever have before. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, half of today’s college graduates return home to live with their parents instead of striking out on their own with a new job and a cheap apartment. They’re marrying later and having children later. They’re choosing careers later than previous generations. It is feasible to say that today’s youth have been able to extend their adolescence by as much as five to eight years, making decisions at the age of twenty-seven that the Boomers were forced to make in their early twenties. Are Boomers managing employees who are younger than their years? Compared to the Boomers’ own experience, absolutely.

The good news is that if you can keep employees on the job for four years, their turnover numbers drop dramatically because it becomes an inconvenience and a burden for them to change jobs. They’ve finally figured out the politics, they know how they can do their job effectively, and they have ambitions within the company. The bad news, at least so far, is that the odds are against being able to retain Gen X and New Millennial employees for that long.

First, make sure you have clearly defined a younger employee’s “role” in the company. Some Baby Boomers were told to figure it out on the job. They had to learn on their own what their role was in the company; it wasn’t given to them. Alternatively, if they were sufficiently competitive, and circumstances favored proactive behavior, they might have invented a new, clearly defined role that proved valuable to the company. The concept of “re-invention” was big in the Baby Boomer lexicon. One boss tells his employees, “The best jobs are the ones you make.” But today, Generation X and New Millennials want to

be *told* where they fit in, what their roles are, and why they're in their jobs. They don't want to figure it out for themselves.

I've used the word *role* deliberately, as opposed to *job description*. A job description is something you give to employees that tells them exactly what is expected of them each day. It outlines the processes and procedures clearly, so there is no misunderstanding.

A person's *role* in the company is less specific. It is a "macro" versus a "micro" designation. *Role* refers to the value of a person's job. It includes how well an employee fits in and works with other departments, or how that person's work factors in with bottom line priorities, such as sales and fulfillment. A person's role is the reason an employee works for the company, not the particular job.

Job: Front desk staff person at a hotel

Job description:

- Greet each guest with enthusiasm and make eye contact.
- Take impressions of guests' credit cards to have on file.
- Direct guests to their rooms using maps provided at the front desk.
- Resolve any billing issues to the satisfaction of both the guest and the hotel.
- Maintain a neat and organized appearance. Your personal dress uniform should be pressed and clean, and the front desk area should be uncluttered and neat.
- Answer incoming phone calls by saying, "Good morning/afternoon/evening. Thank you for calling _____. How can I assist you?"

The Role:

Jane is often the first personal contact a guest has at the hotel. This initial interaction is a significant part of determining a

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Job: Front desk staff person at a hotel (*continued*)

guest's overall satisfaction with the stay. It is the proverbial first impression, and therefore it is very important that Jane deliver top-quality customer service to each and every guest.

Additionally, Jane plays a considerable role in the guest's decision about whether to return, or not, the next time the guest needs a hotel in this area. For a hotel, repeat business is heavily reliant on guests' interaction with front desk personnel, so a lot is riding on the ability of Jane and her front desk peers to resolve customers' issues to the satisfaction of both hotel and guests.

Jane also acts as a support system for the engineering and housekeeping department by relaying customer complaints or requests about the upkeep of the room to the correct department immediately. She serves as the guests' first contact on any sort of room upkeep complaint and follows up to make sure the complaint is addressed and solved in the shortest time possible.

In short, Jane's role as a front desk clerk at this hotel is to see to it that guests have the most pleasant stay possible and to use her best judgment to make sure, to the best of her ability, each guest is accommodated. Her success within this organization will be determined by how she interacts with guests, makes them feel welcome, solves their problems, and supports the other staff members.

The difference between a job description and a role is an important distinction:

- The job description is a step-by-step, play-by-play, description of how the job is to be executed.
- The role description offers less detail but gives an overall picture of the value of the job when executed properly.
- The job description details tasks.
- The role description defines responsibilities.

In general, most employees who understand their role in the company attack their tasks with more verve and gusto. It's re-

assuring for them to understand how their work fits into the bigger picture. As I noted, the Generation Xers and New Millennials want their roles defined for them. A Boomer manager may want young employees to figure this out for themselves, but the young employees want it spelled out in detail.

Why do these new generations of employees want all this “hand-holding” and attention? It’s actually quite simple, if you look at their backgrounds: Xers and New Millennials want to know how they fit into the bigger picture because they don’t want to be insignificant cogs in the large impersonal organization.

Things to remember when discussing your employee’s role

1. The *role* is the macro view of why performing the job description is important to company.
2. The *role* is where the employee fits into the bigger picture.
3. When hiring and training your employees, be sure to discuss their roles in the company, which are more important to them than the job description.
4. Get your employees’ input into what they want their individual roles to be, especially if the job description isn’t satisfactory. Work with your employees to develop plans that will help “grow” them into their targeted roles.
5. A person understands his or her role in the company best when it is discussed face-to-face between manager and employee. Do not write out the role as you see it, hand it to the employee, and expect him or her to “get it.” It is critically important to spend time discussing the role and for you to answer any questions about it.
6. If you can’t get the employee to accept his or her role, it is best to find a new place for this individual in your company rather than force compliance with the role you’ve assigned, especially if you believe the employee has potential within the organization.

Step four: Spend time getting to know your people.

“If you don’t hear from me, assume you’re doing well.” This management cliché is probably not used as often as you might think because most Boomers know that it’s not the reality of a good boss-employee relationship. Underlying this statement is also the idea that bosses and employees don’t get to know one another—they don’t socialize or become friends. Work is work, and friendships are with other people, not co-workers and certainly not subordinates.

Another oft-repeated management ideal is the “open door policy.” The boss claims to allow unfettered access by keeping the door open so that employees can come by and discuss the issues important to them. Once again, this is debatable. I’ve heard plenty of stories of bosses who had an open-door policy, but everyone knew that you should never cross the threshold of that office unless you were invited.

Given the choice, Generation Xers and New Millennials prefer an open-door policy to one of non-communication. But the policy, as it now stands, requires these young employees to take the initiative in communicating with the boss, instead of the reverse. A manager saying, “Come to me when you have a problem,” is not being proactive and not trying to know his employees. Gen Xers and New Millennials are looking for an employer who is interested in them, cares about them, and wants to get to know them. There’s a difference in saying, “I’m here to listen,” and going out and getting to know your people.

When interacting with Gen X or New Millennial employees, broaden the topics of conversation and don’t focus on work to the exclusion of everything else. If your goal is to get to know your employees, let them talk about the things that are important to them, which may make you realize that work isn’t necessarily high on their lists. As a dedicated Boomer, this might seem foreign to you. However, in the long run it pays off to allow your em-

ployees to lead the conversation so you can learn about their families, hobbies, and lives.

Leadership is very much about telling people what you need from them. But they won't listen to you unless you've listened to them first. You must show them you care and that you are paying attention.

The Card Game

A high-level corporate executive recalls this story from the time when he first became a vice president in an international company while still in his late thirties. In the 1990's, management socialization was encouraged, and often bosses and assembly-line workers found themselves on the same softball or bowling teams, a decades-old tradition. However, there was also usually another "game" going on—a fairly serious poker night. Within a few months the young VP was invited to sit in when a regular player couldn't make it. The participants included the CEO, whom just about everyone feared, and several of his peers.

Unfortunately, this VP didn't really play cards. In fact, he wasn't in a position to lose even the \$100 minimum stake. Saying *no* was a bad option for several reasons. Even though he played on the softball and golf teams, he feared appearing anti-social. ("Oh it's just some fun—no work.") He did not want to look stupid or appear to be a failure in front of the Boss or his peers. The smart recourse would have been to claim a prior engagement, but the old Baby Boomer "face time" training won out. Needless to say it was a disaster. He lost double what he could afford. When asked if he would make the same decision again he still couldn't truly say he would not. This is how deep the Boomers' ingrained training goes.

Be a Leader, Not a Friend

It is always important to remember what Gen Xers and New Millennials are really looking for in a boss: role models, *not buddies*.

It's important for the boss to get to know his or her employees, but don't expect Gen Xers and New Millennials to socialize with their boss after hours, share in company gossip, or become a confidant for inappropriate material.

Today, relationships among employees and managers must remain on a professional, arms-length basis. Knowing and being interested in your employees is different from becoming their friend. Gen Xers and Millennials typically have plenty of friends, so finding role models, mentors, guides, and leaders at work is sufficient. Too often these younger generations have been disappointed by their parents, who should have served in these roles. The boss needs to be out front, pushing for his or her people to succeed. You should coddle employees only when it is appropriate and kick them in the bottom when things go wrong. This is not the role of a friend; this is the role of a leader.

It may be confusing to a Boomer manager, but Generation Xers and New Millennials don't want to be bossed, and they don't need more friends—they want to be *led*.

Does Your Character Count?

Does all of this mean that the new generations of workers will simply be mindless, bland automatons, marching to someone else's directions?

No, not even close. Character has always counted, and it always will. Unfortunately, character seems to be harder and harder to find among employers and managers. But do we all have the same definition of character, and what does it mean to the Boomer managers?

There are many different definitions of what character is. The simplest and most effective for managers is: "Do what you say and say what you do." *Very* simple. It means being reliable,

trustworthy, and always doing the right thing even though it may be uncomfortable to do so.

Generation X and the New Millennials gravitate toward bosses with strong character. They test their employers to find out if they have it. When they find it, they stick close to those leaders. As I've said many times in this book, Generation X and the New Millennials are loyal to people, not to companies. And it is the people with character that attract the young employees, retain the young employees, and keep them highly productive and hard working.

Generation Xers and New Millennials are superb studies of people. They've had a hard time finding character in people most of their lives, but they know it when they see it. Once they do, they loyally follow and trust that person with their careers.