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Prepare for generational reins hand-off

By **Deborah Gilburg**
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Baby Boomers — the largest generation in American history — have begun to retire from the work force. This large-scale demographic change will have wide-ranging effects, yet organizations both large and small have done surprisingly little or no planning for this generation's succession.

Likewise, few Baby Boom leaders are actually contemplating their own leadership legacy. Those who do will make a dramatic impact on their organizations, instilling rising GenX leaders with the vision and skills to allow their organizations to flourish.

But most Baby Boomers are struggling with handing over those reins, and GenXers struggle along with taking them.

How can this situation be changed? And how does it affect leadership for the long-term?

A number of trends define the experience GenXers have had in the workplace. The focus on corporate downsizing over the past 20 years has contributed to this environment. Employees are working harder and facing increasing pressure to work longer, smarter and faster.

Conversely, they receive less management guidance and support. Most organizations have abandoned traditional methods of knowledge retention and training such as mentoring, shadowing and apprenticeships.

Finally, employee training and leadership development programs are generally the first to go in most organizations undergoing cost-cutting measures.

In addition, many Baby Boom employers have had to grapple with the value differences of this younger generation. Many GenXers put a higher premium on work/life balance, demanding a more flexible work schedule.

And GenXers are a transient work force, averaging three to five years in one organization and just as many career changes. In fact, many would rather own their own businesses than become corporate CEOs or hold a top job in government.

As a result, untrained and ill-prepared, rising GenXers often don't want to take the reins, or don't know how.

How can both generations unite for the future?

Intergenerational Trust. Understanding and respecting the valuable diversity between GenXers and Baby Boomers can provide leaders with useful insight to embrace and motivate this indispensable group of successors.

Leaders who strive to create a work environment that promotes healthy communication and behavior, who invest in employee training to build future leadership capacity and who demonstrate integrity in both words and action build cultures that foster employee motivation, loyalty and longevity.

For the short-term, leaders must prepare themselves and their organizations to respond to change, which may require sacrifice. For the long-term, they must develop organizations that can thrive beyond the foreseeable future.

Successfully developing the people within an organization to meet these challenges is the making of a leadership legacy.

The Strength of Mentoring. Baby Boom leaders at all levels in an organization must start to mentor the younger people around them, particularly the GenXers.

Making a commitment to the future, however, requires a leader to move from star player to coach. Mentoring takes time, but with strategic planning, the long-term benefits can be most rewarding for the mentor as well as for the protégé.

Such benefits include transferring hard-to-capture knowledge, sharing values and beliefs, and influencing the goals and ideals of a successor by the strength of the relationship.

Leaders who make developing the next generation of leaders an executive priority will discover that true success is about growing others.

By understanding the underlying diversity between themselves and their generational successors, Baby Boom leaders will be better prepared to devise and implement a succession strategy, sending them on their way to building a lasting legacy.

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Invest Now or Never. The next phase is both critical and time sensitive. The writing is on the wall: Long-term success will belong to organizations that are willing to invest today in the strength of their people who may be in key, strategic decision-making positions 10 years from now.

The first step for leaders is taking a hard and honest look at what, if anything, has been done thus far. As a leader, consider the following questions:

? How much time have you devoted to thinking about what will happen to your organization when you leave?

? Who have you been developing to take charge when you retire? When your senior staff retires? When your frontline managers retire?

? If you have a succession plan, how personally involved are you in its implementation, or have you delegated it entirely to HR staff?

? Do you know who is being trained, and what they are learning?

? Who are you personally mentoring as the emerging leaders in your organization?

Start today by finding the answers to these kinds of questions. The current reality of your organization's efforts to plan for the future will dictate its long-term durability far into the future.

Deborah Gilburg, principal of The Gilburg Leadership Institute, is a seasoned facilitator of the Leadership Laboratory? focusing on leadership development, succession planning and executive coaching.

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