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Leadership and Generation X

– Deborah Gilburg, CIO

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I received so much feedback from CIO.com readers on my last column, "[Generation X: Stepping Up to the Leadership Plate](#)," that I decided to delve back into the controversial topic of leadership and Generation X. As a reminder, and for those of you who haven't read that column, I maintain that X-ers as a generation have not been equipped with key leadership skills and knowledge needed to assume vital leadership responsibilities being passed on to them by retiring Baby Boomers. Due to generational differences, Baby Boomers have not been good about sharing their knowledge, experience and networks, and Generation X has not been good about tapping into them.

Some readers' comments questioned my thesis and my generalizations about Gen X-ers and Baby Boomers, so in this column I want to explain the basis for my characterizations of these generations. I'll start by giving you some background on the social forces shaping Generation X in particular, and how certain traits common to many Gen X-ers (such as their self-sufficiency and distrust of institutions) have interfered with their ability as a generation to impact the Boomer-dominated culture, especially in the workplace. My hope is to increase your awareness of what makes Generation X tick (and what holds them back) so that Boomers, who don't know much about X-ers, can more effectively manage them, and so that X-ers can tap into their collective strengths and shared values to better prepare themselves for the leadership roles they will soon inherit.



Personal and Sociological Perspectives

I base my characterizations of Generation X in part on my own life: I was born in 1964 and therefore consider myself a Gen X-er. Before joining the Gilburg Leadership Institute, I worked as an attorney for state government, and prior to my stint in the public sector, I, like many Gen X-ers, bummed around in my 20s—bartending, waitressing, working here and there, holding down multiple jobs, trying to figure out where and how I could engage with the world. My awareness of generational differences started to emerge as I spent my days going from one informational interview to another, and my nights serving martinis to self-absorbed Boomer yuppies who were unsympathetic to the fact that I had a college degree (and later a law degree) and a mountain of debt, and was struggling to find a job that would suit my education and experience.

Does that scenario sound familiar to anyone?

Many X-ers share a similar story—one that illustrates their ability to endure the hardships associated with entering a less-than-welcoming Baby Boomer-dominated workplace by virtue of their self-reliance. This is the hallmark of Generation X: self-sufficient, self-directed and self-made, yet disconnected from the potential of its collective impact as a generation. It is this generation's sense of isolation and disconnection from a larger whole that confines its collective leadership potential. In order to lead and effect change, Gen X-ers cannot work alone. They must build relationships with those who share their values and goals, inspire and motivate others to follow, and develop the networks that enable them to solve larger problems, influence the status quo and collaboratively prepare for the future. These are critical tasks for leaders, and the modular nature of so many Gen X-ers has to date held them back from having a bigger and more united impact on the world around them.

Rest assured that I don't base my descriptions of Boomers and X-ers solely on personal experience. A number of research studies, articles and books describe the socio-economic trends that influence generational traits, and I draw from that body of work to flesh out the experiences and attributes common to many members of Generation X. (For those of you who like to see citations, you can view the Gilburg Leadership Institute's white paper, "[Building a Leadership Legacy.](#)")

Most notable is the research conducted on generational dynamics and differences by historians William Strauss and Neil Howe. Strauss and Howe's seminal book, *Generations: A History of America's Future 1584 to 2069*, examines the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions of American history and their impact on the formation of distinct generational "personas." According to the authors, generational personas are formed by a number of factors including the cultural norms for child-rearing at the time, the perceptions of the world as the generation starts to come of age, and the common experiences the generation encounters as it enters the adult world. Strauss and Howe maintain that each generational persona falls into one of four generational archetypes that repeat in a cyclical pattern, roughly every 80 years, and are influenced by and influence the times in which they live. The four generational archetypes are Prophet, Nomad, Hero and Artist; Baby Boom and Gen X personas match up with Prophet and Nomad archetypes, respectively.

There are of course exceptions to and variations from Strauss and Howe's big-picture model at the micro or individual level. My intention is not to restrict Gen X-ers to a stereotype, but to share a perspective on generational attributes that has enlightened many Gen X-ers and empowered their leadership trajectory. As you read this column, I invite you to ask the question, What about this theory on generations might be true for me, and how can that insight inform my personal and professional choices? With that question in mind, let's dig deeper into the social factors that have shaped the Gen X persona.

The Persona of Generation X

Born between 1961 and 1981, Gen X-ers came of age in the 1970s and 1980s when the prevailing message of the day was grow up fast. They were children of working moms and parents with the highest divorce rate in history. X-er children were deemed "latch-key kids" for the adult-centric child-rearing practices that left many youngsters largely unsupervised by today's standards. Left on their own to face the proliferation of day-care centers, kidnappings, child abuse, drugs and AIDS, many learned at an early age to take care of themselves. These early experiences, coupled with the cultural and economic currents many Gen X-ers would later encounter, shaped their self-reliant impulses.

As a generation, rarely have X-ers been viewed by the public in a positive light. In 1983, the widely heralded U.S. Department of Education report, "A Nation at Risk," labeled X-ers as educationally inferior to prior generations. The mainstream media picked this up and labeled them a damaged generation. The media also criticized young adult X-ers for their perceived failure to measure up to adult expectations, calling them a "nowhere generation," a "high-expectation, low-sweat generation," and eventually "slackers." The reduction of federal student aid in the 1980s left leading-edge X-ers graduating from college in greater debt than any previous generation as they entered a marketplace that didn't want them. The economic realities of the 1990s forced many college-educated X-ers to

take "McJobs"—low-level, low-paying positions that undervalued their talents and degrees, leaving the young-adult population exceedingly poorer than in prior generations.

As Gen X-ers entered the workplace, organizations started trimming down and cutting costs. One result of the do-more-with-less management strategies that have dominated the past 20 years is the marginalization of employee mentoring, leadership training and succession planning by all sectors. Subject to the upheavals of corporate downsizing, restructuring and mergers, and lacking any formal mentoring or training, X-ers were again left to their own devices. Many learned to rely upon their finely honed survival skills and their comfort with the fast-paced, changing landscape of the information age to help them succeed.

The marketplace conditions experienced by many Gen X-ers have helped to fashion a self-adept workforce, but one that tends to be skeptical of corporate promises and grand policy visions. Independent, pragmatic and technologically resourceful, X-ers have become some of the most sought-after employees in the workplace. Despite their competence, however, many tend to avoid the long-term allegiances and political relationships required to climb the corporate ladder. Indeed, studies indicate that most Gen X-ers would rather own their own businesses than become corporate CEOs, and would rather be an entrepreneur than hold a top job in government by a ratio of four to one. Data provided on [Strauss and Howe's website](#) indicates that today only 10 percent of national leadership positions (in state and federal government) are held by Gen X-ers—half as many as were held by Baby Boomers at the same stage in life.

Financial challenges continue to plague many adult Gen X-ers. With housing costs rising faster than inflation and entry-level wages, the opportunities for young professionals to become homeowners, particularly in career-building metropolitan areas, have declined significantly since the 1990s. Indeed, the housing debt of Generation X is 62 percent higher than it was for Baby Boomers at the same stage in life, according to economist Tamara Draut, author of the book [Strapped](#). Even so, X-ers are a charitable generation, although they prefer to support local charities over larger, more traditional philanthropic organizations. Many Gen X-ers exemplify the slogan "think globally, act locally" by demonstrating small acts of kindness without caring about recognition.

Unlike the communal Baby Boomers, X-ers tend to be modular people, dealing with each situation on its own terms, in their own way. Consequently, they have demonstrated little collective mission or power. Holding few illusions that they will be cared for by the institutions in their lives, such as pension programs (which have largely been abandoned) and Social Security and Medicaid benefits (which have been sapped), X-ers endeavor to create autonomous, grounded and satisfying ways to take care of themselves and their families. Responding to the cultural climate, they tend to seek private solutions to public issues, relying upon their own inventiveness rather than their capacity to motivate and organize others. This may account for the inconsistent and often low voting turnout attributed to Generation X. Nevertheless, as a generation they are proving to be deeply dedicated to their children and are showing a growing involvement in the day-to-day issues that impact their communities and schools.

The Leadership Challenge for Generation X

All of us have a learning edge—areas that challenge our experience, knowledge and personal preferences. As a leadership development professional, I am most excited by helping leaders discover that edge and grow past it, for that is how a leader truly earns respect, wisdom and success. Over the years, my colleagues at the Gilburg Leadership Institute and I have noted common threads among our clients' learning edges, and while it is the individual issues that matter most, we have found a great deal of consistency with the generational model and often introduce it in order to help stimulate the discovery of overlooked learning edges.

For the Baby Boomers who have cycled through our leadership programs, several personal challenges impacting leadership capability appear again and again: Many Boomers are married to their work and thus struggle with balancing their lives, are overwhelmed by the fast-paced workplace, have difficulty exercising authority in an effective manner, become easily polarized around differences (and consequently struggle with resolving conflict), and lack awareness of how their leadership

behavior impacts subordinates. We believe these issues define, in part, the leadership edge of the Baby Boom generation.

The leadership challenges for the Gen X-ers we've observed are quite different. Keenly aware of the limitations and shortcomings of the institutions in which they work, many prefer to find creative ways around organizational roadblocks to accomplish goals. Innovative and perhaps successful in the short run, these methods nonetheless leave systems unchanged, allowing similar organizational problems to emerge again and again. In addition, their maverick approaches frequently infuriate those well-networked Baby Boomers who tend to be dedicated to their organizations and have been living with their systemic failings, and thus believe others should do the same. While implementing change to improve an organization's health makes sense to many X-ers, they tend to be cynical about whether such changes will ever come to pass and often lack the validation, support and power to attempt organizational change on their own. These differences in attitude explain how conflict between Boomers and X-ers can occur in the workplace. I believe that the leadership edge for Generation X arises from its current inability as a generation to build the relationships, networks and connections necessary to influence the status quo and infuse the institutions in which they work with the values that matter to them. This is a vital activity that many Gen X-ers are neglecting.

A prime example of such a systemic flaw is the driven, [24/7 nature of our workplace](#) that researchers are finding is impacting the physical, emotional and intellectual well-being of the workforce. Many X-ers see the limits to this and strive to find private ways to manage these impacts. While there are certain sectors that have made institutional strides toward supporting a more balanced work life (the high-tech sector, for example, which also appears to have a higher proportion of Gen X leadership), the majority of corporate America remains chained to the existing model. Boomer employers are noting that younger generations want a different lifestyle, but changing institutional systems to make this possible will require that those who want it come together and exert leadership and influence to make it happen at a systemic level.

Effective leaders equate personal success with organizational success, are willing to risk taking a stand for what is important to the future success of the organization as a whole, commit to building the relationships and networks needed to gain trust and cooperation, and instill hope in others for a better way. It starts with clarity about one's own values and the integrity to live by those values, and I believe many X-ers already possess that. But leadership requires more of us. It requires that we work to instill those values into the systems and institutions that impact our lives and our kids' lives. It requires that we build networks with each other, and yes, with those Baby Boomers who are so empowered by and absorbed with their own connections. It requires us to stretch past our modular ways, engage with others who share our concerns, and learn the art and science of wielding influence to effect change.

It is my hope that we can start to become resources for each other, to connect around the commonalities in our lives. To encourage this, I pose the following questions to X-ers. If you choose, you can respond in the feedback section below:

- What are your experiences with leadership?
- How have you found ways to influence those around you?
- What do you care about? What do you want to change? To what are you most committed?
- What has helped you to be successful? What has held you back?
- What aspects of leadership do you want to know more about?

If I can, I will help highlight what has worked, explore what has not, and introduce perspectives that can help all Gen X-ers push our learning edges and expand our leadership potential.

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