

GEN Busting

By Pete Tokar

TERMINATING TENSION ON THE TEAM

GEN Busters: Terminating Tension on the Team was recently presented as an elective workshop at the IEDC's 2012 Annual Conference. Workshop participants discovered critical generational factors that are increasingly wreaking havoc in many workplaces and were challenged to employ effective strategies designed to minimize generational tension among coworkers representing the four distinct generations at play in the contemporary American workforce. The article provides a brief orientation on generational phenomena that are increasingly evident in workplaces across America and on the productivity generated by effective generational understanding and cooperation.

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Super Storm Sandy wreaked havoc up and down the Jersey/New York seaboard in late October, 2012. Residents and business owners were warned it was coming, evacuations were ordered, but many decided to ride it out; and what a ride they experienced. This perfect storm caused millions of dollars in damages, plunged thousands into darkness due to massive power outages, and most tragically of all, claimed the lives of over 110 Americans, some as far inland as West Virginia. Lesson learned? When a super storm is coming your way, you had better take it seriously.

A SUPER STORM IS COMING YOUR WAY

An alarming number of U.S. business owners, CEOs, managers, and workers are either conducting business in an information vacuum or are neglecting to make adequate preparations for a generational super storm that is bearing down on every U.S. business, large or small. Many have already begun to feel the outer bands of this super storm, but far too many businesses have no idea about the potential havoc this storm can wreak upon their organizations. Fortune 500 companies are investing millions of dollars to prepare for this storm, but many other businesses have either not been adequately warned or even more importantly, have decided to ride it out.

GEN Busting is all about busting the generational barriers that are generating this perfect storm. GEN Busting starts with a comprehensive under-

standing of the generational factors that are at play in most every organization.

Have you ever looked around at those you work with and asked this question, *“What is wrong with these people?”* Next time you peruse your workplace, a better question to ask might be, *“What are these people thinking?”* Now you’re getting closer to the real issue. However, the best question to ask would be, *“Why does he/she respond that way?”*

It has never been more important in the workplace to understand whom you are talking to and whom you are working with. For the first time in the history of the American workforce, four distinct generations are struggling to work side-by-side. Although the birth years for the generations vary from study to study, generally speaking they are:

- Traditionalists: Born 1927-1945
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946-1964
- Gen X: Born 1965-1980
- Millennials/Gen Y: Born 1981-2006

Each of these generations brings very unique and competing moral, social, and professional values into the workplace.

These competing values provide the perfect conditions for a generational super storm, which is exactly what many businesses are experiencing in increasing frequency and severity. As the hot air and cold air values collide, tension on the team can reach extremely derisive and unproductive levels. When generational tension on a team gets out of control, operational costs go up, operational effectiveness goes down, and often, even safety is compromised. *Understanding and effectively leading the four generations will increasingly become one of management’s most critical demands.*

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MEET THE TRADITIONALISTS

The youngest Traditionalists (having been born between 1927-1945) are currently 67 years old. Many ask, “*Why are they still a workforce consideration?*” First, because of astounding advances in the medical community, we are all living longer. Experiencing longer life and better health, many Traditionalists have enthusiastically returned to the workforce. Second, many Traditionalists have been driven back into the workforce because of the recent U.S. economic implosion. Overnight, pensions disappeared, investments crashed, and previously comfortable retirements came to a sudden halt. These combined factors resulted in Traditionalists returning to the workforce in significant numbers, making this generation the longest working generation in history.

Work Is Survival

The Traditionalists are the children of the Great Depression. They either personally experienced the soup lines or were raised by parents who had. They place a highly emotional value on employment. The Traditionalists are also the GI generation, the generation who witnessed how world war could devastate civilizations. Even if they and their family personally survived the impact of the Great Depression, they witnessed the economic devastation of other countries torn by war. For a Traditionalist, having a job is not a luxury, it translates to survival itself.

Loyal and Dependable

Because work is survival, Traditionalists have historically gone all in for the companies they have worked for. They are institutionally loyal, highly dependable, and consequently disdaining toward those who do not appreciate having employment and those who are openly critical of the company and its leadership. Traditionalists understand the value of a chain-of-command and are highly suspicious of those who jump the chain in the workplace – a practice that some other generations see no problem with at all. It is the Traditionalist’s high level of loyalty, dependability, and extensive experience that is opening so many employment doors for these silver haired professionals.

Love the “Box”

Traditionalists invented the “box” that every other generation is trying to think out of. Traditionalists do not normally deal well with constant change or conflict. They live by and follow the rules and expect others in the workplace to do the same. “*Let’s just slow down a little and think this through. The box is tested and safe; let’s not be quick to break it down.*”

Conservative by Nature

Traditionalists have witnessed dramatic social and cultural changes during their lifetime. Many grew up and raised their families in a day when everyone went to some kind of church on Sunday and when historic Judeo-Christian values ruled the day. They lived in a day when it was a scandal for a Catholic to marry a Protestant let alone someone marrying out of their ethnic race. Cohabitating couples were shacking up and they would naturally assume that anyone sporting a tattoo had previously served in the Navy. Over time, most Traditionalists have learned to live with all these cultural changes, but when flaunted or pushed upon them, the warrior in the Traditionalist can still come out.

MEET THE BABY BOOMERS

World War II officially ended in August 1945, shortly after Hitler’s vaunted Third Reich was crushed and the first atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. Thousands of soldiers, sailors, and Marines returned home from the war and tapped into the surplus pool of women desiring husbands. All this resulted in a “baby boom” of 78 million babies who would soon dramatically shake up the American workforce.

These Baby Boomers were blessed to have been born at the height of America’s international prestige, military power, and economic strength. Post-war incentives allowed their parents to realize the American Dream in staggering numbers, and these post-war parents were determined to lavish upon their children a lifestyle unimagined by their own Great Depression parents. However, all this attention would ultimately result in a very aggressive generation entering the American workforce.

“Box” Busters

Boomers entered the workforce with an insatiable thirst to bust out of the box created by their Traditionalist parents – vocationally, socially, and culturally. Their determination to challenge the status-quo led to the great social unrest that characterized the 1960s and 70s. Anti-establishment was the mantra of the day. Long hair, bell-bottom trousers and paisley shirts, peace-symbol medallions, political activism, and free love became the outward manifestations of Boomers’ box-busting determination. As they entered the workforce, this same determination followed them, resulting in an unprecedented struggle between conservative management and a liberal

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employee pool. However, as Boomers became more entrenched in the workforce, they began to discover new challenges that significantly mellowed them out.

Faced Steep Competition

As greater numbers of the Boomers' 78 million strong generation entered the workforce, coupled with the 63 million strong Traditionalists who were already entrenched, Boomers began to face steep competition in securing and keeping jobs. They quickly learned that the surest way to outlive the competition was to out-work them. Subsequently, Boomers pretty much created the 60+ hour work week. Checking in at work on days off and vacation days became a common phenomenon. There were always colleagues looking to knock their co-workers off the ladder, so Boomers had to stay a step ahead and ever so alert. Lesson to be learned? One doesn't work with a Boomer, one competes with a Boomer.

Work Is Fulfillment

Since Boomers have spent so many hours on the job, for many, work is the central focus of their lifestyle. A sense of who they are is often deeply connected to the degree of achievement they've reached in their career. Put a couple of Boomers into a networking situation and within 2-3 minutes of any introductory conversation you are sure to hear the question asked, "So tell me, what do you do?" The answer to this question will subsequently determine how long the remaining conversation will last and what kind of long-term connection will be established.

Success on the job means everything to a Boomer. Walk into the office of most Boomers and what do you immediately see? You see the 'I love me' wall of conquest. The walls of a Boomer's office will be adorned with a variety of performance plaques, pictures standing next to prominent celebrities or professionals, trophies, and a cadre of other symbols documenting a long and successful career.

Many Are Technophobic

Although you'll find Boomers with the latest iPhone in hand and a full inbox of emails, many are still technophobic. Technology is developing far too rapidly for many Boomers, if not most, to keep up with. Boomer bosses and co-workers will often demonstrate a resistant attitude toward employing new technologies. *What's wrong with our current website? FaceWHAT? Do I do what . . . tweet?*

Love Paper, Meetings, and Presentations

In their highly competitive work environment, Boomers were constantly searching for ways to distinguish themselves from their competitor co-workers. One technological advance of their early days was the Xerox copier. Prior to the copy machine, Boomers had to make copies on a mimeograph machine. Enter the Xerox machine. Now Boomers could easily make very neat, professional looking copies of reports and other business documents. These great looking documents could be used in company meetings to demonstrate how proficient and creative the Boomer presenter was, thus demonstrating his/her worth to the company while simultaneously outshining other less creative co-workers.

Frequent business meetings also provided Boomers with a vehicle by which to evaluate and keep tabs on their competitors. Meetings also provided Boomers with additional opportunities to propose ever increasing ways to break out of the Traditionalist's box. Boomers were quick to create and embrace a *let's have a meeting* about mentality that still exists in many quarters today, much to the chagrin of their Xer and Millennial successors.

MEET GEN X

Gen X was welcomed into the workplace by cat-calls of "slacker" or some other derivative of apathetic. Right from the start, Xers faced a steep uphill climb. Acceptance by the now well established Traditionalists and

Boomers was slim or more often nonexistent. Xers did not find themselves professionally limited by a glass ceiling but a well-enforced concrete ceiling. Many Xers still complain that they are stuck in the middle with Trads and Boomers long overstaying their professional welcome in the workplace, stifling upper movement by Xers, and more currently by a new generation

coming into the workforce who seem to be getting all the attention and their way.

Upon entering the workforce, Xers negatively stood out in the eyes of their Traditionalist and Boomer bosses because they were so different. Although the Boomers had challenged the "box," they ultimately fell in line with most Traditionalists' business practices, often out-working their Traditionalist forerunners. *Xers, on the other hand, came into the workforce with a whole new set of workplace values and rules.*

A Product of Their Times

It can be argued that all generations are a product of their times, but this is especially true of Gen X. While Traditionalists became the greatest generation for saving the world from Nazi tyranny and forging the strongest economy in international history, and Boomers enjoyed being raised at the zenith of American international prestige and influence, Gen X grew up in far less auspicious times. Their most formative years were characterized by declining international influence (Vietnam), political intrigue (Watergate), an era of economic instability (soaring interest rates/gas lines), rapid technological advancement (PCs) and in an environment of pronounced isolation (latch-key kids). This resulted in a generational cynicism toward values mutually embraced by Trads and Boomers.

To continue your GEN Busting journey, consider the following action steps.

GENBUSTING STRATEGY CHECKLIST

WHERE TO START	
1. __	MAKE A COMMITMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Build a multi-generational friendly workplace.
2. __	TAKE AN ORGANIZATIONAL PULSE <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ascertain your organization's generational exposure.
3. __	TRAIN YOUR LEADERSHIP <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Provide extensive generational training for your top and middle-management leadership team.
4. __	DEVELOP YOUR STRATEGY <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Subsequent to providing training, build groups that can develop your company's strategy for building a multi-generational friendly workplace. Be sure to ensure "buy-in" from your entire workplace team by including them in the strategy development.
5. __	TEST DRIVE YOUR STRATEGY AND TWEAK <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Announce a "test-drive" to be conducted over a predetermined period of time, conduct an evaluation by reviewing the results of your test-drive, and then tweak your strategy utilizing the lessons you've learned.
6. __	IMPLEMENT YOUR REVISED STRATEGY <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Once you have fully reviewed your strategy, implement the new initiatives learned from the test-drive and implement your final strategy company wide.
7. __	SEEK FEEDBACK REGULARLY <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Embrace the fact that your organization will need to frequently review how well your GenBusting strategy is working. Enjoy the journey of continuing to tweak your strategy to fit your evolving workplace.

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Embrace Limited Corporate Loyalty

Between Xers' absentee parenting experience, driven up by a skyrocketing divorce rate, and Corporate America's betrayal of their Boomer parents (massive layoffs), Xers elected early on not to go all in for the company. Although Xers are hard workers, they view work as just one compartment of their life, not as fulfillment or survival. Since they do not intend nor expect to work for one company their entire career, Xers are always on the prowl for a better opportunity. Xers often work longer for companies more for co-worker relationships than because of corporate loyalty.

View Themselves as Entrepreneurs

Many Xers, being raised as latch-key kids, have developed strong interpersonal skills. They often lived in such parental isolation that they developed a very strong "If I don't do it for myself, no one else will" attitude. Therefore creativity has become their most prized trait. Xers' number one workplace pet-peeve is micromanagement, a Traditionalist/Boomer leadership style that has plagued them from day one. *Xers hate to be told what to do and how to do it.* Give them the ball and let them run with it. If they fumble the ball, they'll readily take both the credit and the consequences.

Technologically Savvy and Multi-taskers

Where many Traditionalists may still be trying to master their computer and many Boomers are struggling to tweet, Xers cry, "Bring it on!" Xers grew up in a speed of

light technological world; and they had plenty of time on their hands to figure out how to use it all. Xers want the latest and greatest technological tools and are often extremely frustrated by the ignorance (Traditionalists) or the technophobia (Boomers) of the decision makers in their companies. They have also learned to be expert multi-taskers. Xers' multi-tasking is often misinterpreted as disrespecting their Traditionalist and Boomer bosses but it's not; they just want to maximize time so they can get on to other things.

Resent the Rising Stars

As the next generation, the Millennials, enters the workforce, Xers quite often become their chief adversaries. Having been professionally and generationally stifled for so long, they generally resent these brash, young, over-confident kids who have started to invade the workplace. Xers often see their younger colleagues as spoiled, overprotected wannabees. However, it may very well be Xers who ultimately benefit the most from the shakeup the Millennial generation is bringing into the 21st century workforce.

MEET THE MILLENNIALS

While it is true that Traditionalists, Boomers, and Xers have been battling it out in the workplace for many years, the Millennials' entrance into the workforce has produced, and will increasingly produce, a dramatic storm surge unequal to the arrival of any previous generation.

CBS 60 Minutes news commentator Morley Safer produced a fascinating exposé he entitled, "The Millennials Are Coming: The New Generation of American Workers." Airing February 11, 2009, Safer documented the current workforce leadership's first impressions of this new generation invading the workplace. Many of the business professionals he interviewed were not impressed.

Faced with new employees who want to roll into work with their iPods and flip-flops around noon, but still want to be CEO by Friday, companies are realizing that the era of the buttoned down exec, happy to have a job, is as dead as the three-martini lunch.

Morley Safer

These young people will tell you what time their yoga class is and the day's work will be organized around the fact that they have this commitment.

Mariann Sazman
Ad Agency Exec

You now have a generation coming into the workplace that has grown up with the expectation that they will always win, and always be rewarded, even just for showing up.

Mary Crane
Business Consultant

If you are reading this article from a Millennial perspective, take heart, the business world said similar things about your Xer predecessors when they entered the workforce. Bruce Tulgan, one of the most prolific Gen X authors, insightfully declared:

Since the term "Generation X" first appeared, Xers have been described in the mainstream media as 'cynical mopes,' 'sullen and contemptuous,' 'impetuous,' 'naïve,' 'arrogant,' 'short on attention,' and 'materialistic,' not to mention numerous virtually synonymous and equally unflattering variations.

Although many of the publicly decried first impressions of Millennials entering the workforce are highly exaggerated, the emergence of the Gen Y into the workforce will constitute the most challenging transition of the workplace in many decades

With Millennials, employers have to shift how they lead and operate. At the same time, the Millennials entering the workforce today are extremely bright, creative, and, believe it or not, very hard-working. Leaders who are willing to get out of their comfort zones will discover a new pool of employees that can contribute significantly to any company and can help leaders discover new technologies and strategies that will definitely enhance the bottom line.

Disclaimer

Gen Y is so unique and so complex that there is no way this brief article can begin to touch their generational characteristics or begin to help current leaders understand them and fully prepare to lead them. This brief introduction into Gen Y's most pronounced characteristics will at least stimulate thinking and begin to fuel a desire

to learn more about them so that better leadership can be embraced, which will ultimately lead to much greater harmony among and more pronounced success by your entire team.

Super Confident

It has been suggested that the Millennial generation is the most child-centric generation in history. Late Boomer and early Xer parents recognized the high degree of absentee parenting that was practiced by many early Boomers whose careers took precedence in life and family. In an attempt to avoid absentee parenting, Millennials' parents took a much greater and active interest in their children. This produced both good and bad results.

The good is that emerging Millennial young adults are entering the workforce with super confidence. They truly believe that they can contribute positively on day one of employment and fully expect to be given that very opportunity despite their formal lack of experience. And if managed efficiently, they really can produce astounding results early on in their employment.

The bad news is that many Millennials have a highly inflated super confidence that can produce counterproductive results. At a recent HR symposium, some professionals reported that they usually tore up and threw away most Millennial resumes because they were so inflated. Jeffrey Zaslow, a Wall Street columnist, insightfully declared in Morley Safer's exposé: *Parents raised their kids telling them that they were so special. However, they never told them they were special, for doing what.*

The super confidence of Millennials can be addressed and effectively utilized if led well and managed adroitly. That's what GEN Busting is all about.

Embrace Very Limited Corporate Loyalty

Like their Xer predecessors, Millennials embrace very limited corporate loyalty. However, while Xers will wait it out until a better opportunity presents itself, Yers are extremely inclined to walk whenever they feel like it, even on day one. It is not uncommon at all for employers to see a new Millennial employee leave for lunch and never come back, without any notification of their intention to terminate their employment. *Retention will become one of the greatest challenges in the future Millennial driven workforce.*

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Technologically Driven

Technology is the oxygen that Millennials breathe. Many managers have reported that they “punish” poor performing Millennials by taking away their technology. If you want real retention problems, follow this mistaken strategy. One the other hand, if you want to explore and employ new technologies in your business strategy, Millennials are your prime resource.

Hold High Expectations

Morley Safer’s observation that Millennials want to become CEO by Friday is only slightly exaggerated. Millennials view themselves as valuable free agents, open to the highest bidder and to the company that will help them advance quickly. At first blush, this can be a turn-off to employers, but it is really a strength that can be fed and positively exploited.

Who Would Hire a Millennial?

The answer to that question is simple, you. When confronted with the challenges of leading Millennial young professionals, many CEOs and managers have chosen to decline employing Millennials. *There are plenty of returning Traditionalists, experienced Boomers, and Xers looking for jobs. Why should I hire these prima donnas?* Under our current economic conditions, this option is real, but not for long. In fact, this is why so many Millennial college graduates cannot currently find jobs or have to settle for menial jobs. All this will change soon.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, beginning on January 1, 2011, 10,000 Baby Boomers per day started to turn 60 years old. This trend will continue for the next 19 years. With just this statistic in mind, do the math. There are 78 million Baby Boomers. There are only 48 million Xers. Eventually, 30 million jobs will be open, just due to the generational difference in population between Xers and Yers. As the Boomer generation continues to leave the workforce, Millennials are going to have a field day. Once our economy recovers and older workers

increasingly leave the workplace, Millennials will be able to pick and choose whom they want to work for.

Again, retention is going to become a critical factor in the workplace. It is estimated that it takes 50 percent to 150 percent of a departing employee’s base pay to hire, train, and successfully deploy a new employee. No business can maintain those kinds of employee replacement costs over a long period of time. Employers who cannot hold on to Millennial employees are going to experience a revolving door of Millennial employees that can and will close them down.

CONCLUSION

From just this brief introduction highlighting the competing generational values of Traditionalists, Boomers, Xers, and Millennials, it’s not rocket science to understand how challenging it will increasingly become to keep these individually strong-willed generations working together rather than doing everything they can to sabotage each other.

The good news is that much can be done. Each generation can learn to professionally cohabit with the other generations, without losing their valued generational identity. Each generational employee can discover how to more effectively interact with the opposing generational co-worker in the next cubicle, across the table, or in the boss’ office. Also, the strengths of each generation can be maximized in the workplace, catapulting creativity, efficiency, and productivity. ☺

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Rainer, T., & Rainer, J. (2011). *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

Sujansky, J., & Ferri-Reed, J. (2009). *Keeping the Millennials*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tulgan, B. (2009). *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage Generation Y*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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