

## **Gen Y: Engaging or enraging?**

*A cultural shift is occurring in the workforce as 75 million Gen Yers prepare to enter. Here's how the newbies and their elders can manage the challenges.*

**By Greg McCann and Leah Sullivan**

During a meeting in a family business about a pressing issue, a heated debate arose. Without saying a word, the youngest member of the group (a member of Generation Y) reached in his pocket and pulled out his Blackberry. The leader of the meeting, annoyed by this apparent lack of interest (and perceived disrespect), continued the discussion with the rest of the group for 20 minutes or so. Finally, he turned his attention to the young man, still typing away, and crossly asked him if he had something more important to do. The young man looked up at him, smiled, and said, "No sir; I'm finding you a solution."

Obviously, generational differences were at play in that tension-filled room. The young man's Generation Y qualities are a double-edged sword, sometimes acting to his benefit and sometimes hurting his credibility. Our intent is to help frame a mindful dialogue between Gen Y and the older generations in family businesses, as well as offer some advice to each group about integrating these young people into the workplace culture.

### **Who is Generation Y?**

The children of Baby Boomers, Gen Yers were born in the U.S. from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The oldest of this generation are just beginning to enter the workforce. They have high potential yet are challenging to manage. On the one hand, they are technologically savvy, great multitaskers, goal-oriented and well connected. On the other hand, they can be pushy, impatient, easily bored and overconfident.

In part, these traits are attributable to their upbringing. They have the highest education, the largest social networks and the best support system of any generation in history. Since they were young, they've been told that they could do anything and be anyone. They've had technology at their fingertips their entire lives. Bruce Tulgan, an expert on Generation Y, writes in his book *Everyone Gets a Trophy* that "every step of the way, Gen Yers' parents have guided, directed, supported, coached, and protected them. Gen Yers have been respected, nurtured, scheduled, measured, discussed, diagnosed, medicated, programmed, accommodated, included, awarded, and rewarded as long as they can remember." They are even more likely than their older siblings (Gen Xers) to believe they should be automatically given respect while their boss must earn it from them. Around the dinner table, this might suggest an empowered young person; around the conference table, it could suggest a less than credible employee.

A very real issue for any generation entering the workforce is the shock of balancing the optimism and energy of youth with the realities of the world. This balance seems more difficult for Gen Yers, who are facing the toughest economy since the Great Depression, than it was for preceding generations.

Many Gen Yers express that they feel as if they are at a fork in the road, engaging in the constant internal struggle between idealist and pragmatist. They want to be successful and have monetary wealth. Yet they ultimately want to be engaged and be part of something larger. They want to *do what they love*. Delayed gratification is a struggle for them. They want it all, they want it soon, and they want your support in getting it.

From the perspective of a Baby Boomer or even a Gen Xer, who has had to work through the ranks with blood, sweat and tears, this can be infuriating. Gen Yers' unrealistic expectations and sense of entitlement can leave a less than positive impression.

Challenging as this may seem, there are 75 million Gen Yers entering the workforce, and the ability to effectively harness their strengths would be advantageous for any company.

### **Advice for family business owners over 30**

As a starting point, keep an open mind and approach your relationship with Gen Y the same way you would approach someone from a different culture. Just as one would engage with locals to better understand cultural differences when traveling, an open and honest dialogue between members of different generations is a necessary starting point. Understanding that both members stand to gain a great deal from this partnership is the first step in developing a crucial symbiotic relationship. There need not be a democracy, but there should be a dialogue. Watch for the seeds of independent and innovative thinking that can be cultivated to better serve your family business over the long run.

Though only a few years separate Gen X from Gen Y, the management styles that are most effective for each generation differ dramatically. Gen Xers are more likely to be self-starters and need less constant (positive) feedback, structure and support than Gen Yers do. Gen X is more likely to dislike authority and ignore leadership; to engage and reward this generation, a manager might give them autonomy. Gen Yers, on the other hand, may be best engaged by working alongside a mentor who has earned their respect.

Just as important to Gen Y as the job they're doing is the reason *why* they're doing it. Your ability to paint the big picture and help them feel that they are a part of something meaningful will go a long way toward enlisting and engaging them. Eric Chester notes in his book *Employing Generation Why?*:

Although they are better educated, more techno-savvy, and quicker to adapt than those who have come before them, they refuse to blindly conform to traditional standards and time-honored institutions. Instead, they boldly ask, 'Why?'

If you can understand and engage Gen Y, you will have greater access to this talent pool, retain these workers more effectively and even better understand your clients, customers and other stakeholders who are Gen Yers. Here are some steps you can take to align the strengths of your family business with the strengths and values of Gen Y.

1. Values-based leadership that thinks longer-term, is more tied to the community and is more humane can engage the idealistic side of Gen Y. To turn a seemingly less than thrilling family business into a meaningful career path, the business leader might set the scene for them and show them how their job descriptions fit into the big picture.

2. A workplace culture that is more “human” (as family businesses are apt to be) can allow better communication and be less hierarchical than a faceless corporation.

3. Mentor your Gen Yers, monitor them via performance reviews and help with career development. Honor their need for greater feedback and coach them, but don’t give them a trophy for merely meeting expectations. Here is where a mentor might help a Gen Yer understand that boardroom goals are different from classroom goals.

4. Emphasize long-term thinking and leadership development. It may be worthwhile to engage Gen Yers in a dialogue about whether they want to job jump or are considering a long-term commitment. Here is an opportunity to help a Gen Yer see a potential blind spot related to short-term thinking and an emphasis on immediate gratification.

These ideas could be implemented in the family business via some or all of the following methods:

- **Employment policy.** For example, must next-generation family members earn credibility and marketability through outside work experience before joining the family firm?

- **A mentoring program.** Be open to learning as well as teaching. Consider your Gen Y employee as a cultural translator.

- **A statement of values.** In the best family businesses, the values drive the numbers and are what cultivates meaning in the workplace.

- **The succession plan.** The senior generation and their advisers must accept that future leaders won’t echo their style of leadership.

### **Advice for Gen Y**

Navigating generational differences can be tricky, especially if you are new to the workforce. A few words of advice:

1. Assess your expectations. Determining and prioritizing your values is imperative. Equally essential is understanding that there are tradeoffs. If you want a big paycheck, you may have to sacrifice work-life balance. If you want a structured environment with a good training and mentoring program, you may have to work for a larger, more hierarchical firm that may not provide the ability to rise quickly within the organization. Realize that your career is less likely to adapt to your needs than home or school—especially in today’s economy.

2. Get feedback. Find out what others think of your behavior, particularly members of other generations. There’s often a fine line between being perceived as a “go-getter” and “impatient,” between “efficient” and “lazy,” or even between an “idea person” and a “know-it-all.” The first step in combating these negative impressions is to get honest feedback on how your behaviors are perceived. Make sure that you are achieving the intended result and that others’ perceptions of you match your own. Be mindful of the cultural differences between Gen Y and others (even Gen X). The young man in our opening example could have helped himself by merely explaining to his boss what he was doing and why.

**3.** Communicate effectively. Learn how convey your needs and concerns to your employer. If more challenging work would give you an incentive to work harder, have that conversation. If you don't understand what's expected of you, ask. Have the difficult conversations *before* a crisis develops and *before* you have damaged your reputation. This is also part of the shift from school and home to career: Your boss is not supposed to remind you, reward you, praise you or bail you out. Remember, this is where you step up, do some heavy lifting and solve problems. Your career should be rewarding, but if you aren't contributing (or if you contribute only when you feel engaged), you risk being perceived as immature—and you might soon be unemployed.

**4.** Since a family business's values are often expressed throughout the company, learn what they are and compare them to your own. If mentorship and support are important to your success, it's extremely important to ensure that your values align with your mentor's. Do your homework and be able to articulate what you want from your career as well as what you can contribute. Family businesses tend to be more concerned than mega-corporations with finding and keeping the right people.

### **Intergenerational dialogue**

The frustrations that arise from miscommunication and lack of understanding are very pertinent and very real. With an open mind, candid but respectful conversation, and some diligent perception management, we hope that you will be able to turn enraging situations into engaging interactions. We did while writing this article!

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