

Strategies to Effectively Manage Multigenerational Teams—Part 3

Here's a roadmap for working with baby boomers.

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This article is the third of three parts.

Baby boomers are defined as those born between the end of World War II and 1964 (approximately). In general, they tend to have the following characteristics:

- They have a strong work ethic and are not afraid to put in a full day's work.
- They are independent and somewhat self-assured.
- They are competitive in their

focus. But they also are motivated more intrinsically than extrinsically, with rewards more for accomplishment within themselves than externally.

- They are goal setters and welcome milestones along the way. Reinforcement of their efforts is welcome; hence, annual reviews have been important.
- They are resourceful. Their parents grew up in the Great Depression, and they work to optimize their skills and resources.
- They are focused on the task at hand, taking their time to accomplish a task and do it well.

- They love to work in teams—a good sense of community is critical to their well-being.
- They like structure.

Given this set of characteristics, the question then is: how are these folks best managed? Again, to generalize, there are three categories of boomers:

- Those who are leaders or managers: They have risen through the ranks to the upper level or were trained and have the educational level to occupy that leadership position.

Continued on page 52



Multigenerational Teams (from page 51)

- Those who are well suited for their role, whether professional or non-professional: They love what they do, are pleased to contribute to their mission, and hope to continue for as long as possible. They work hard as part of their team and are willing to contribute in any way possible.

- Those who are just waiting their turn to retire: They are going through the motions of coming to work and doing no more than required. This category may include your manager, professionals, or non-professionals...in other words the level in the organization is not as important as the approach to the job.

According to Gallup, more than one-third of baby boomers are engaged or fully engaged in their role as employees.¹ Engagement is a major focus for any age group, but it is important to not forget that boomers also contribute substantially to the success of the business.

How does an organization work with this group of “knowledge workers”—a phrase used by Peter Drucker in place of the term employees?² Boomers have a great deal of experience in their chosen career path, the knowledge and skills required to perform their tasks successfully, and an awareness of the organization’s culture. These keys have been acquired through the years. Any one of these represents an “asset” to the organization, not in accounting terms, but in respect to the investment made over time that both the knowledge worker and the organization have put in.

Some larger organizations use a layoff or a “reduction in force” approach, which is designed to save numbers and dollars in favor of fewer numbers of younger, cheaper workers. The big question is: Does this cause a short-term problem in the loss of the knowledge and skills of the older workers, and can this “asset” be replaced by the younger work force? Is there a cost benefit to this strategy? Or are there better ways to approach the overall goal?

If you choose to retain the boomer, how do you best utilize his or her contribution?

Managers of all ages and levels should develop their coaching skills. This requires a recognition of where each employee is in their work world. Do you know whether the boomer is engaged or not?

Engaged boomers are willing to continue in their daily work effort. The need may be not to further develop their base skill but to focus on their acceptance of and willingness to become more involved with advances in technology. They also must be open to changes in how things are

of the boomer. For example, software updates require formal training. With the boomer, face-to-face or slower-paced approaches may be more successful than with the younger generation, who may be able to grasp the changes on their own using their own devices.

A coach is one who recognizes the employee’s skills and seeks to find ways to improve on this baseline, not necessarily to teach a new skill. Think of the baseball coach: he does not go out on the field to change the way things are done, but, rather, between innings offers suggestions or demonstrates what has

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done. They should be encouraged to seek better ways to improve their skill set. It is essential to adapt to the new way of doing things. Employees should be asked rather than told, however, how to better integrate new ways of doing things. They may need to be informed that “the way we’ve always done it” is no longer acceptable. As noted in the characteristics listed earlier, they are open to new ways and are resourceful. Take advantage of this!

With this group, basic needs have been met, meaning safety and security are not the motivators. Rather, the need for belonging, teamwork, esteem, and recognition is the key to working with the boomer. The involved, contributing boomer becomes a valuable asset.

The manager should reflect on the boomers’ roles. A definition of management is to work with and through people to achieve the desired results. A manager must recognize that these employees’ overall philosophy has been with them for a long time, and that each employee is different. The boomers’ needs are different from those of others and the approach to them will be different.

Formal training of knowledge workers is a valid approach, but it may apply only to certain aspects

happened and how to improve the team’s performance. The hope is that the next time something similar happens, the performance will improve and the outcome will be beneficial to the team’s objectives.

The engaged knowledge worker affords a great opportunity to help develop the younger work force through a mentorship program. This may be either formal or informal. A formal program may include a written plan or contract where the mentor and mentee identify what needs to be done related to the job, skills, knowledge, and cultural aspects of the organization. Sharing the knowledge and skills with younger workers is a significant benefit to the organization. This should be perceived not as a threat to the mentor but, rather, a recognition of their contribution to the organization’s long-term success. The coach should ensure this is the correct process and outcome.

The not-engaged boomer raises the big question. In many cases, these employees have been part of the organization for a number of years with a two-way loyalty...meaning that the organization has retained the employee, even when he or she has continued to not meet performance standards. These employees

Continued on page 54

Multigenerational Teams (from page 52)

may historically have been average contributors but are no longer able to meet expectations. Do you lay them off with dignity, or simply terminate them for poor performance? Either way must be considered based upon the documentation of their track record. The key, though, is that a tough decision will need to be made, sooner rather than later.

Now for the hard part. What should happen or be done with the senior physicians (maybe owner, godfather, visionary) who may actually be traditionalists or senior boomers? They have brought value to the organization, but they can no longer keep up with the workload or lack the skills necessary to perform procedures. They may fall into any one of the three aforementioned categories. In other words, they may continue to contribute or they may not recognize or accept that they

no longer contribute effectively to the organization. Their contribution may be of value (e.g., knowledge of the market or a talent for strategic thinking rather than professional skills).

Does the employment agreement force retirement at a certain age, or is there no provision for this eventual event? With no such provision, the younger workers are left facing a major dilemma. It is also time for the boomer to recognize his or her limitations—never an easy thing.

The basic points are to recognize the value of the boomer's knowledge and skills, develop coaching skills among the current managers and leaders, establish a mentorship program, and recognize that there is an eventual change in the contribution to be made by each individual. The legacy that remains in the organization should be recognized in some manner, while at the same time this legacy

should help create future assets, contributing to the long-term success of the organization. **PM**

References

¹ Nelson B. How to get the best out of baby boomers. Gallup. February 5, 2019. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/246443/best-baby-boomers.aspx>.

² Knowledge and knowledge workers. The Economist. August 24, 2012. <https://www.economist.com/schumpeter/2012/08/24/knowledge-and-knowledge-workers>.



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