



Management and Performance Associates – March 2009

Mind the gap!

The following short quiz will help us establish our scenario. Please select the letter that best describes your generation:

- A. *The Mickey Mouse Club, Elvis Presley, typewriters, Neil Armstrong on the moon, Hula Hoop, Woodstock!*
- B. *Lacoste shirts, Star Wars, VCRs, Atari, E.T., The Love Boat, Watergate, Sony Walkmen, AIDS*
- C. *Notebooks, Playstations, Cell Phones, Piercings, iPods, WWW, Going green*

If you answered A, you're probably a "Baby Boomer" (born between 1945 and 1960).

If you answered B, you're probably part of "Generation X" (born between 1961 and 1980).

If you answered C, you're probably part of "Generation Y" (born between 1981 and 1998).

Now that we've defined the three groups that are the object of our article, you can imagine the work environment implications when someone who witnessed the birth of the black and white TV interacts with someone who sees the iPod as a natural extension of her body, and vice versa.

Of course, clashes between generations are not new. They are as old as civilization itself, and it's fair to say that current leaders should be concerned with them, as part of their work is to deal with these gaps.

If it were possible to define **Baby Boomers**, without exception, we would say that they prefer face-to-face communication. They are very dedicated to their work, and look for job security. They tend to see the younger generations as people who don't put in the same effort as they do (or as they did).

If it were possible to define **Generation X**, without exception, we would say that they challenge all attempts to define themselves. Stuck between the *Boomers* and Generation Y, they look for freedom, change jobs frequently, taking with them skills that are applicable to other tasks and they favor the balance between work and life. They are perceived as "arrogant and complainers" by generation Y and

they think that Baby Boomers are "addicted to work."

If it were possible to define **Generation Y**, without exception, we would say that they are fast, prefer to communicate through e-mail and text messaging, love diversity and their three supporting stones are: CAREER (always with open options and aspirations to be leaders), UNIQUENESS (Gen Y has been pampered, nurtured and programmed with a multitude of activities since they were toddlers, meaning they are both high-performance and high-maintenance, they also believe in their own worth) and RAPID COMMUNICATION (they create and devour *Blogs*, social websites, mobile communications and every single gadget and network that helps them amplify – immediately – their communication. And all of the above while wearing shorts and flip-flops.

Careful! It's also true that many myths have been created around this topic and most of the research has been done only in the USA. Do all Ys have the same characteristics, regardless of whether they were born in Vladivostok, Steam Boat Springs or La Paz? Generalizations over generations are just generalizations. Age does not define the person. His or her socio-cultural environment, life experience, work challenges and personal preferences . . . do.

Demographic statistics do not reflect each person's uniqueness. One thing is for sure, regardless of the group to which you belong (with its specific set of values and lifestyles) we all want to be respected, coached and developed.

Not only do we want **respect**, we also feel we deserve it. As a leader, you have a great coaching opportunity when you see a *Boomer* bothered with a Gen-Y because "my experience is not being respected," or vice versa, because "my fresh ideas are not being respected." Three simple questions will prevent you from blaming the generational gap, by helping both of them to understand the situation:

- Specifically, what's the issue?
- What is the underlying problem?
- What can you do to work together, better?

Note: Mind The Gap' is an announcement you'll hear in the London Underground subway system when a train arrives at a station. The warning about the 'gap' between a carriage and the platform originated on the Northern Line, where the gaps between the curved train platforms at Embankment Station and the train itself were particularly large.



To a greater or smaller extent, we all feel uncomfortable when facing **change**. We would prefer effective communication and good implementation. Therefore, before pointing fingers to the other generation and blaming them for the chaos we live in, as a leader:

- Effectively communicate what the change is all about, what are its consequences, and how things will look after implementation (the aligning vision).
- Establish an implementation system, so that all involved will feel useful.
- Listen to people. Everybody, regardless of their generational label, has something to say and would like to be listened to.

People don't leave their jobs for generational issues but because they don't face enough work challenges. If you want to **retain** your talented people remember:

- Everybody wants to know what their future within the organization is, therefore manage their expectations with clarity and without false promises, especially when there is no future.
- Everybody wants to develop new skills. Talk to your staff to understand their development needs and their aspirations. And listen to them...

Based upon the above, jointly create a realistic plan that encompasses lateral moves and new challenges, based on the intersection between "the next step the staff wishes to take" and "the next step the company wishes the person to take." Be clear if there is no intersection. Your only generation challenge will be to figure out who prefers this communication face-to-face or via "pod cast. . ."

Finally, remember that we all need **feedback**. It is often said that *Boomers* are offended by *feedback*, while Gen-Y-ers never get enough. It is not about the quantity, but the quality of the feedback provided. Always base your feedback on an observed fact, stating the positive or negative impact on performance. Don't use qualifiers and be timely. It will be welcome, as feedback is development.

Boomer, X o Y? It doesn't matter. We are able to effectively lead people from all generations. To do so, we need to close some gaps. Ours.

Mind the gap!

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

To know more of our training programs, please send us an e-mail to:

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