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BOB MASON

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# BALANCING THE GENERATIONS

A Leader's Guide to the Complex,  
Multi-Generational, 21st Century Workplace



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## Introduction

Throughout my professional life, I've had the privilege of leading thousands of people covering five generations. Through the years, I've noticed not only the differences in various age groups, which we like to neatly group into generations, but also the interesting, and sometimes contentious ways the various generations interact with each other.

As a student of leadership, I've found this generational conflict to be not only an interesting subject to study, but also a critical aspect of the leadership challenge. Whereas leaders of 50 or even 20 years ago did not spend much time worrying about how to incorporate various generations into a cohesive workplace, today's leader must juggle the significant differences of four sometimes seemingly diametrically opposed generations. Senior corporate leaders find it difficult to comprehend young people who don't understand or want to follow the rules, written and unwritten, while young leaders can't seem to understand why their seniors have so many rules in the first place.

This book first explores each generation, examining the influences that acted on them, especially in their formative years, and the significant national events that shaped that generation as a whole. To complicate matters, there is some disagreement on what periods actually define each generation. I don't wish to enter that fray, as my goal is to provide a look at the various generations and how leaders might better lead their members. In fact,

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generations are sometimes defined more by national or world events than specific dates, so I will use generally accepted periods. I understand that some may disagree, but ask that readers not become mired in those details which are not terribly significant to the mission of this book.

The naming of the generations is also somewhat imprecise and there is disagreement among writers and commentators. As with the argument for specific dates, naming of generations is not critical, so for this book I've chosen to use what I found to be the most common moniker associated with each generation. There is one exception which I'll discuss shortly.

The second part of the book is dedicated to suggestions for the leader to effectively use this information and navigate the often complex issues that accompany today's multi-generational workplace. You may be tempted to skip directly to Part II if you're in a hurry, but please take the time to read Part I because it provides the foundation for the suggestions in the second part.

In researching this subject, I concentrated on U.S. history and the American definition of terms. Especially when discussing earlier generations, it is common to find different definitions, and even time periods, among European writers reflecting the difference in experiences and, to some degree, in language. Though significant with earlier generations, this difference seems to become less so when referring to more modern times; a consequence of our completely connected world. My purpose is to provide a background of events that occurred during those specific time periods rather than to provide a comprehensive

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review of U.S. history and so the text cites only some of the more significant historical events which occurred during each of the generations.

As you read, you'll most likely think of events you feel were significant but are not mentioned. People view history through the lens of their own experience. What may be significant to one person or group of people might seem less important to others, so I may not discuss something that you feel is important; perhaps some defining moment you experienced or a national event that has changed your life. Such possible exclusions illustrate a critical point that you will see repeated throughout this book; that each person approaches life from a specific set of personal experiences, upbringing, and learning. Though it is convenient to group people into generational categories, each one of us is an individual and will not always fit when lumped into a generalized category with millions of others.

In researching this book, I often found that sometimes the commonly accepted view of different generations and the events associated with them were not always consistent with the facts. For instance, the Baby Boom generation gets much of the credit, or blame, for the unrest which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. While many Boomers certainly took part in protests and rallies, there's a little more to the story. The reality in such cases is important to understanding the generations. I also found that much of the literature about a certain generation was written by someone from that generation, sometimes seemingly with an axe to grind.

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As you read these pages, you will be tempted to apply your own experiences and memories, especially when reading about your own generation. It's completely normal to inject your own experiences, and even prejudice, into any discussion of generations; but, as I have tried to keep my own from these pages, or at least identify them, you must do the same in order to truly gain the understanding necessary to be an effective leader in a multi-generational environment. Always keep in mind that your memories of events, shaped by your own experience and upbringing, may be different than that of others.

In order to understand how to lead people of different age groups, it's important to know a little about them. It has become common to categorize people into the various generations and use those categories to define the people in that age group. Though it's a mistake to lump everyone together without considering the individual, it is helpful to understand a little about the different generations and the unique challenges each has experienced.

Generations are large periods, so researchers further break them into cohorts to describe groups based on birth years within the overall generation. Though generations do have some commonality, there can be big differences between the cohorts. For instance, later cohorts of the Silent Generation will have different memories and impressions of the depression era than those in an earlier cohort.<sup>1</sup>

The first generation we'll discuss is the GI Generation covering those born between about 1900 and 1927. There are still a few members of this generation in

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the workforce today. Even more significant is that this generation includes many very wealthy business owners. A review of the Forbes 400 list of the 400 richest people in America reveals a large percentage of GI Generation members.<sup>2</sup> There is another reason to understand this group. In many ways, each generation affects the following generation and that is especially true in this case as during their lifetime these people experienced economic boom, the great depression, and World War II. These experiences shaped a very patriotic group of people who were also quite cautious in the way they managed personal finances. Their influence can definitely be seen in the next two generations.

Labeling of generational categories is not an exact science. Different researchers and authors have developed different generational nomenclature. For this book, I will attempt to use the most common names for generations. I make one exception. What I and other authors call the GI Generation is often referred to as The Greatest Generation, a term coined by TV anchorman Tom Brokaw in his book by the same name. While the title certainly sold books, it also raised a lot of discontent among other generations. My purpose is not to pit one group against another and I feel the term GI Generation is more accurate, so that is how I will refer to that group.

People born between about 1927 and 1945 are generally classified as the Silent Generation. Stuck between the GI Generation and the Baby Boomers, this category is often forgotten. In fact, not everyone breaks out this generation, instead including them as later cohorts of the GI Generation and sometimes referring to

the whole group as Traditionalists. I address them separately because they are an important group, and had a significant, distinct role in the later Baby Boomer Generation. This generation is the only one for which I do use a specific date; 1927. That date is important because a person born then turned 18 in 1945 and the vast majority of its members were too young to serve in World War II.

Probably the best known category is the Baby Boom generation. This is the group born between 1945 and approximately 1964. Recent work by Jonathan Pontell suggests breaking the baby boom generation at about 1954 into a new category. That category, which he identifies as Generation Jones, includes those born between 1954 and 1965. While Pontell makes interesting points, I have not found sufficient reason to split this group out of the Baby Boomer Generation as I will discuss in more detail later.

Generation X comprises those born between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s. This is, demographically, the smallest group but they are having a large impact on the workplace. They are somewhat unique in that they're sandwiched between two very large generational groups.

The Millennial Generation, sometimes called Generation Y, covers the period between the end of Generation X and the early 2000s. This group is the largest generation yet and its members are beginning to become more prominent in the workplace as the youngest members attain working age.

As you read about the different generations, notice that while they are different, they also have many

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similarities. Also, note the sometimes very significant impact one generation has on another. Often, what one generation is blamed for or credited with is really the result of actions by members of a previous generation. Finally, it can't be overemphasized that each generation is composed of individuals, each with different experiences. While the various generations tend to show general homogeneity, some more than others, they are still made up of people who may or may not think like the group.

## **Chapter 6**

### **But That Isn't Me!**

### **Those Who Don't Fit**

There is a danger in grouping humans into categories. No matter how well-defined those categories are, someone will be left out or placed where they don't feel they belong. When dealing with groups as large as the generations, this isn't just a danger, it's an unavoidable fact. Many, when reading the definition of the generation they fall into by birth, agree the description might be correct but don't feel it describes them personally. There are primarily two reasons: the culture in which they were raised, and the part of the generation in which they fall chronologically.

Most common are the differences resulting from upbringing and culture. As I mentioned when discussing immigrants, there are considerable cultural differences from one part of the country to another. Someone raised in a small mid-western town will have different experiences than someone who grew up in a large metropolitan area. In fact, someone raised in New York City will have very different experiences than someone raised in Los Angeles. For late Boomers and early Xers, these differences have been compounded by technology as those in more rural areas were not as exposed to the world of the internet as quickly as those in more urban areas.

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That gap is closing rapidly as technology works its way into every corner of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

I'll use myself as an example. I was raised in a fairly strict and conservative home. Traveling around the country in a microbus trying to "find ourselves" was just not something my sisters or I would have done. We stayed in school, applied ourselves, (them more than I) and wouldn't have known where to get drugs if we'd wanted to. I remember a protest in the city where we lived then that quickly boiled over into a full-fledged riot. We didn't get involved, nor did any of my friends. The counterculture pretty much passed us by!

This disparity in experience was especially evident in the 1960s and 1970s. There's a saying that if you can remember the '60s, you weren't there.<sup>2</sup> It's a little unclear where "there" was but the point is, there were many different experiences during that time. A young man who attended Woodstock mentioned that he and his friends were surprised to see so many "hippies" and "freaks" like them. He didn't think there were that many!<sup>3</sup> Though there is certainly a common thread running through the Boomer Generation, it is unfair, and unwise to paint them all with the brush of the protest period.

Though not as clearly defined, Generation X also has many who don't fit the normal definition. Much of Generation X is defined by how they were raised and here again, where they were raised most likely had a big effect. While the generation is normally associated with a demise of the nuclear family, that wasn't the case everywhere. There were certainly many Xers who grew up in what previous generations would consider a fairly normal

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family. But, at least through my Boomer eyes, Xers are a more consistent group than Boomers.

Millennials are a different matter all together. Marc Prensky believes that video games have a lot to do with the fundamental differences in Millennial brain structure.<sup>4</sup> Though as we saw in Chapter 4, Millennials come from very diverse parentage, video games seem to have been a common, overwhelming presence in Millennial's lives and were instrumental in teaching them to think in that fundamentally different way. With that saturation of the generation, it's conceivable they will be the most inclusive group yet. An additional factor is, as was previously mentioned, Millennial's parents were much more involved in their earlier lives.

The other problem with our generational groupings is that the start and end points are not clearly defined. The boundaries normally set for each generation tend to follow events rather than strict chronological periods. The groups are large enough that they include people who had very different views of those events. For instance, the early Silent Generation saw the depression at a young age, and though they were too young to fight, World War II. Even the late Silent Generation, which was too young to experience the depression, certainly learned about it in great detail as it was fresh in the minds of parents and older siblings. As I mentioned before, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism in the former Soviet Union was probably one of the biggest events in the lives of Boomers, their parents, and even some Xers, but younger Xers and Millennials did not have the life experience to appreciate the significance of those events.

In their work on generations in the workplace, Lancaster and Stillman have identified these people who find themselves in the first or last cohorts of a generation as "cuspers" because they exist on the cusp between one generation and the next. They mention that, sometimes these people can have success in bringing the generations together because they can cross experiences.<sup>5</sup> The idea of "cuspers" may be too narrow a definition. There are some in a generation's central cohorts that, because of how they were raised, where they were raised, or other personal experiences, tend to feel a closer connection to another generation. They aren't "cuspers" but they have the same feelings of not belonging. But as Lancaster and Stillman point out, people who find themselves balancing between generations or just not fitting in are in a unique place to be a bridge between the groups they straddle.

So why is it important to study the generations if there are so many exceptions and so many different people? Simply because it provides a starting point for a leader to begin to understand his or her people. Though there are exceptions, the various generations do have much in common and that understanding will help the leader gain a little better insight into what leadership methods will work better with each person. It isn't an inflexible formula and understanding generations is just the first step to better leadership.

Combining this knowledge of the generations, the leader can apply leadership principles in a more specific and targeted way that can defuse inter-generational tensions by taking advantage of the unique attributes of each one.

# PART II



## Chapter 7

# Leading the Generations

The company is owned by a member of the Silent Generation. Most of the company's senior leadership positions are held by Baby Boomers, though some Xers have worked their way to that level and actually supervise older Boomers. Middle management is a combination of Boomers and Xers supervising Millennials, many of whom have been recently hired. The company's two best clients are an older, well-established firm that looks very much like them, and an internet enterprise owned by an Xer who has a small staff whose average age is about 26.

This example illustrates a complex situation that is not uncommon! Probably more than at any time in history a greater number of multiple, and very different, generations occupy the same workplace and interact with each other. Add to that a fundamental shift in the dependence on technology for even the most basic tasks. The result can be conflict and disaster. But, when properly managed, these same ingredients can bring about a terrific opportunity for success! The leader's task is to bring it all together, avoid conflict when possible, and manage it when it can't be avoided. And yes, there will be times when it can't be avoided.

What must a leader do to be successful in this dynamic environment? It takes a combination of knowledge and skill: the knowledge of people and what

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motivates them and the skill to bring out the best in people no matter their age.

Leaders need knowledge about the general experiences of the generations. One of the interesting things that became apparent in my research is that most authors who write on this subject approach it from the perspective of their own generation and their own experiences. It seems when they refer to other generations, it's often in a way that, if not actually negative, at least is not with glowing praise. Successful leaders cannot allow themselves to look on other generations as better or worse; only potentially different.

In my research, I have found a phenomenon that I call generational adoption. Quite simply, this is when one generation, usually older, adopts something from another generation, usually younger. This is most evident in technology. Boomers, who didn't grow up with technology as later generations would, have adapted quite well and many now find a need for computers and cell phones just like their younger offspring. Most Boomers can remember their first color TV and how that was the height of progress at the time. Once a family had a color TV (usually only one per household) they were set! In contrast to their earlier years, many Boomers are quick to head to the store for the latest (or largest) model newly available this year. This concept of generational adoption is important for leaders to consider as it can further confuse the issue, making it difficult to sort out generational differences. What's important is that even if a worker appears to have adopted something from another generation, that fact does

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not change their life experiences, the overall way they view the world, or what motivates them at a basic level.

The differences in the generations lead to another critical area of knowledge necessary for good leadership, especially in a multi-generational situation. This will require a little "Leadership 101" study because some of the basic principles of human behavior haven't changed that much. People still have needs and respond to different motivators. As is true in any leadership situation, getting to know who subordinates are is critical to success. That's just more difficult when a multitude of generations occupy the same space.

Once acquired, it takes a certain amount of skill for leaders to effectively use this knowledge. Again basic leadership skill will probably need to be modified to fit the different groups. Much basic leadership and management theory is the result of the study of organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. These organizations were usually led by members of the GI or Silent Generation with Boomers working their way through the ranks. That dynamic has changed and two more very different generations have joined the workforce, adding new issues for a leader to deal with.<sup>1</sup> However, the basic theories they produced are still valid today and provide a basis for an adaptive leadership style which adjusts to the dynamic workplace of today.

The leaders challenge is three-fold. First, recruit the right people, second retain the right people, and third, provide an environment that allows them to grow and be as productive as possible. These steps have become more difficult than they used to be, requiring different

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techniques for different people. But, there are still some basic principles that transcend the generations.

Before we proceed, I want to briefly discuss the one absolute above all else. Leaders must have a set of values and must know what they are. Those values cannot be situational! A mistake made by too many leaders is an attempt to adapt their values to the people they are leading. That never works! One fact that's common to all generations is the need to know the genuine person. Most people have an innate ability to sniff out anything less and even those who don't agree with a particular set of standards are more likely to respect and follow a leader who stands by those standards than one who changes with the wind, making it difficult to know what he or she is thinking.

So, as we move ahead and apply some leadership principles to the generational conundrum, remember that the most important thing for a leader to do is know their people. This is so important you'll see it as a continual thread throughout the following chapters.

Balancing the Generations examines each generation to dispel myths and help leaders recognize and take advantage of their strengths to build more successful organizations. The book will answer your questions about how to handle the different generations on your team! This book will make you a more effective leader. If you were born between 1900 and 2010, and are in the 21st Century workplace, you need to read this book!

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