October 2013

Leading in a Gen Y World - A Corporate Essay

Deborah S. Levine

AGL Resources / Global Payments, Inc, dlevine@aglresources.com

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Deborah S. Levine
Managing Director, Talent Management
AGL Resources

Introduction

Envision a business environment where relationships are built the old-fashioned way. Managers and employees spend a significant amount of time together learning from each other, collaborating, participating in hierarchically-irrelevant structured teams, and where there is a tremendous amount of information sharing. The atmosphere is one similar to a well-functioning family environment, where the level of respect is so strong that great creativity and sharing can take place. People learn from each other and deeply respect and value the diversity of opinions. The need for interaction throughout the department and the entire organization is a specific design intended to build healthy, collaborative, supportive, empathic and respectful relationships. Similar to Pat Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* model, the foundational layers of trust, confliction resolution and commitment result in highly accountable and results-oriented teams and organizations. Technology is truly leveraged to drive effective and ongoing communications, improve efficiencies and add elements of "fun" in the workplace. Less structured office environments, where physical space is less defined by hierarchy, creates extraordinary opportunities for information sharing and learning.

The environment described above is the organization being formed now through the introduction of Millenniums or Generation Y (Gen Y) into the workplace. The Gen Y population, those born between 1981-2000, views the world much differently than prior generations and expects an organization to be an extension of an already well-established personal lifestyle and technology-savvy world. Gen Y "works to live" rather than "lives to work", and they expect a working environment that supports their personal needs. Without shifts in leadership style and leader engagement, organizations will have a difficult time attracting and retaining Gen Y talent.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the leadership challenges in a Gen Y world and propose changes needed to capitalize on the new realities of this important element of the workforce. The summary information and propositions described in this paper are based on over 140 interviews collected as part of a research project led by Deborah S. Levine at AGL Resources, a Fortune 1000 energy-based company located in Atlanta, Georgia. The interview data includes Gen Y individuals currently employed by AGL Resources, as well as students in Louisiana, Georgia and Ohio at post-secondary schools.

What Makes Gen Y Unique?

Gen Y believes and expects a productive and collaborative free flow of information that is usually achieved through a wide variety of technology mediums. Learning and sharing information in open forums anywhere in the world and at any time defines the Gen Y lifestyle. This type of lifestyle is available through the Internet using connectivity tools. Recognizing and utilizing Gen Y's technical abilities to display and leverage their creativity and ability to "dream"

could lead to significant positive organizational change, if this generation is given the resources and flexibility to do so. Because this generation is so comfortable with technology, building and maintaining relationships virtually is commonplace. "This Digital Generation" is ready to learn anywhere, anytime and is even more comfortable with technology than Generation X" (Wolfe, 2007). Technology provides Gen Y with immediate and free flowing feedback and ongoing information in which to learn and grow. Instantaneous information and feedback in the workplace has significant implications for leaders of Gen Y employees. A feeling of family and friendship resulting in deeper relationships and trust is also very important to Gen Y. Beyond linear leadership reporting structures, they envision more blurred lines of demarcation, opportunities to contribute their personal strengths, and work in environments with a high quality of diversity. In this new environment, a feeling of being useful and making meaningful contributions in the workplace and to "the team" is expected.

Implications for Leadership in a Gen Y World

Learning to be a "leader as teacher" in the new world of Gen Y employees will be a critical and meaningful skill set for leaders. Gen Y wants to learn by doing, given opportunities to take risks and learn from mistakes and engage in environments that promote inquisitiveness and inquiry. Setting very clear and specific expectations is critical to Gen Y. Because Gen Y are seeking meaning and the opportunity to make a difference, they want to understand from their immediate manager what results need to be achieved, why it is important to the organization, and how they will be rewarded or recognized for it. Regular and *frequent* feedback, similar to their very personalized technology world, from their immediate manager will be expected. Managers who are unable or unwilling to deliver on this expectation will run the risk of either disengaging his/her Gen Y employees or losing them altogether to other companies.

Gen Y employees expect to spend a significant amount of time with their immediate manager and be mentored in ways that add real value by building upon existing skill sets. Learning through mentoring, listening to "stories" and understanding logic and the "whys" behind ideas and decisions will be of particular interest to Gen Y employees. Essentially, Gen Y employees are asking for and seeking leaders who want a relationship with them, enjoy mentoring and are open to learning through being receptive to and considering other perspectives and ideas. "They want managers to spend time getting to know them and their capabilities, and to develop a personal mentoring relationship with them. In keeping with the atomization of the Internet, they want their jobs to be even more personalized, and even more customized than their predecessors, Generation X." (Wolfe, 2007). Gen Y employees will expect quick, short and immediate interactions with their managers via sending and receiving instant messages. Conventional command and control, passive and/or disengaged leadership will be challenged by the Gen Y population. Leaders who can deliver a genuine, mentoring and reciprocal style of relationship with Gen Y will be the winners, thus improving their ability to attract and retain Gen Y employees.

Although interested in "climbing the corporate ladder", Gen Y employees are seeking a balance between work and life. Leaders will be expected to help Gen Y find their unique path inside Corporate America. A sense of "self" is still developing, and Gen Y employees expect their immediate manager to help them along this journey of self-discovery. Managers will need to be equipped to help Gen Y employees identify their strengths, opportunity areas, and how to

close the gaps. Because prior generations have not consistently explored their own sense of self in work, life and overall relationships, this may be an ideal time to co-learn beside the Gen Y.

Along with embarking on a self-discovery journey with Gen Y that includes life inside and outside of work, leaders who consciously acknowledge the importance of work/life balance, have varied interests and demonstrate through actions and words a desire for balance will engage the Gen Y population on a more emotional level. Again, Gen Y employees are seeking an environment that feels nurturing, caring, balanced, supportive and challenging. By re-configuring traditional team structures, promoting co-learning and relationship building/partnerships, leveraging technology for creative as well as work/life balance purposes, and creating formal policies that allow for work/life balance and whole person relevance, leaders will demonstrate through their actions a level of understanding, respect and admiration for the Gen Y employees' differing life value set.

Leadership Behaviors in the Future … Which is *Now*

Most leaders would say they want to accelerate the pace of learning to drive increased productivity levels. Unfortunately, many leaders believe that by sending an employee to a training class, conducting annual performance reviews and periodically giving feedback to employees, their work is completed. Creating "a co-learning organization" is a relatively new concept in the corporate world, as opposed to "learning organizations" where individuals are "expected" to engage in self-directed learning. Many "learning organizations" do not follow a holistic and prescribed process for learning and are difficult to measure related to specific business outcomes (Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino, 2008). As mentioned above, Gen Y are hungry for and expect their immediate manager, who **is** the company to them, to provide a holistic approach to leading and providing developmental experiences. Again, the learning process will begin with the leader securing a deep understanding of the Gen Y employee as an individual, including, among other things, his/her interests inside and outside of work and assistance in defining a career path for the future.

From an employee life cycle perspective, a sequenced and intentional model to orient, learn/perform and reflect should be considered when creating an attractive and meaningful work environment for the Gen Y. As outlined by Tony Schwartz, "to effectively reenergize their workforces, organizations need to shift their emphasis from getting more out of people to investing more in them, so they are motivated – and able – to bring more of themselves to work every day"(2007). Leaders must believe in the inherent necessity of strong relationships, the value of learning and doing, and the nature of renewal and short periods of reflection. This holistic view of the company's value package will drive greater positive Gen Y behavior and engagement than traditional compensation and benefits incentives.

A Proposed Leadership and Learning Model for Gen Y Employees

During the initial months of employment, Gen Y employees should be intentionally placed in situations where they not only learn about the business, but they are also introduced to other colleagues in ways that are meaningful to them. Such opportunities may include, for example, participation in Gen Y peer affinity groups, after-hours social functions, discussion groups with customers and/or cross-functional job shadowing. Managers intentionally delay launching the new employee into specific work tasks until Gen Y employees have enough time

to absorb the new work culture, cultivate new relationships and begin to understand how their role will align with the overall company objectives. As a result, Gen Y employees will quickly begin to feel like part of a "family" and enterprise that is much larger themselves. In addition to building relationships and understanding the business, Gen Y should also be supported in efforts to begin exploring "self". This may include leveraging tools to help Gen Y understand themselves, career interests, learning styles, and strengths and challenge areas. Implications for leadership during the orientation stage of employment will include ensuring that enough time is embedded in the employee orientation process for social, emotional and educational development, all of which create the foundation for trusting, meaningful and sustainable connections. Leaders will also be required to invest in resources to help new employees identify a better sense of self and career direction, along with investing their own time and thoughts as an active participant in the self discovery process.

Next, the manager will need to create multiple learning forums where Gen Y employees feel like they are being developed, have challenging assignments that add value to the business and provide support when taking risks that could result in mistakes or failure. Formalized opportunities to participate in cross-functional, diverse teams to share and learn different perspectives and knowledge sharing; provide opportunities to be heard and to listen to new ideas; collect and analyze data; create recommendations and discover implications are some of the ways leadership can create a co-learning environment for Gen Y. Again, Gen Y employees are focused on learning and are accustomed to learning in a variety of ways, such as formal one-on-one relationships, mentoring, virtual communications, and frequent and constant virtual interactions with others throughout the world. Implications for leaders will center on creating and leveraging strong relationships and partnerships with *other* functional areas, as well as virtual internal and external relationships, to allow for knowledge transfer and education. Leaders must demonstrate a willingness to take risks on untapped and/or unproven talent thus allowing room for success and failure. And they must set clear and concise performance expectations, which intentionally include some delay in product delivery to accommodate the learning process, while allowing space for failure and learning.

To complete the learning and growth cycle which funnels back to orienting and self-discovery, leaders will need to create formal opportunities for multiple generations to share stories and experiences in a safe and learning environment. Reflection and renewal time will require leaders to set expectations and an environment that embraces a balance of work demands, reflection on experiences and considerations for next assignments and intentional learning. Implications for leaders will also include carving out time to reflect on the importance of project(s), engaging in intentional and meaningful discussions regarding an employee's greatest contributions and opportunity areas, lessons learned, and the reasoning behind why the opportunity and learning was important to the employee. Lastly, the most effective leaders will create opportunities to celebrate successes and acknowledge contributions. As Gen Y employees begin to develop a better sense of self and key contributions made to the organization, greater confidence and willingness to further experiment will occur.

Leaders from prior generations have the great gift of experience, which sometimes can be his/her worst enemy. Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to change behavior, without a specific, intentional and sustainable change approach, many tenured leaders continuously recycle old material and/or behaviors that have worked well in the past. When new information is introduced and/or especially when the project becomes more complex, many leaders will resort to prior knowledge and/or experience (Sengupta, Abdel-Hamid, Van Wassenhove, 2008). This

phenomenon will be difficult for Gen Y to understand, as he/she enters the work environment with less experience but with an insatiable desire to seek and understand new information. Complacency around new information may prove fatal in generating connection and energy for the Gen Y employee population.

Conclusions and Considerations for Business Schools

Leaders have a great opportunity to leverage the inherent desire of Gen Y to learn and integrate technology in all aspects of their lives. Gen Y are continuously seeking new information and want to voice their opinions even though they are not considered subject-matter-experts and/or are in a formal leadership position. In fact, because the hierarchical structure itself is irrelevant to the Gen Y employee, he/she will expect to be invited to participate and co-create with others. Working in teams and sharing information is as natural as using technology to communicate, innovate and be connected with others. It will be the leader's responsibility to create forums and opportunities for information sharing, co-learning, risk-taking and reflection that not only contributes to the company's bottom-line, but that also contributes to an overall meaningful life to the Gen Y employee.

In addition to traditional accounting, marketing and finance coursework, business schools should consider embedding emotional intelligence and other self-awareness curriculum. Corporations today not only need leaders who are technically business savvy, but they also need leaders who are emotionally competent and have the ability to relate to others in compassionate, understanding and in meaningful ways. Coursework that requires students to explore their own historical patterns of behavior, unique strengths and weaknesses, dreams and hopes for the future and their overall impact on others will prepare them with the ability to understand others in similar ways.

Next, curriculum content should focus on the importance of and the skills needed to engage in meaningful face-to-face conversations. Curricula grounded in appreciative inquiry and discovery will help the leader develop a visceral understanding of the needs and desires of others, which will in turn greatly contribute toward generational relationship building, trust and in gaining an understanding of what is most important and motivating to the Gen Y employee.

Lastly, business schools may consider deepening its curriculum in workplace diversity. Specific topics may include the profound opportunities that exist through leveraging technology to promote diversity of thoughts and ideas. Viewing "diversity" through a less traditional lens will promote greater creativity, internal and external knowledge sharing and greater connectivity throughout the corporation.

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