

The Leadership Vacuum

Why it is here and what we can do about it

All over the country and in many economic sectors, organizations are experiencing a leadership vacuum. Unless there is great money and corner office, it seems to be increasingly hard to find willing and capable people to fill leadership roles (and even then it is hard to find people you *want* to lead in those positions).

So what is happening?

As the Director of Leadership Development for the Gateway Collegium, I have found it most beneficial to evaluate the leadership crisis through the lens of generational studies. I'm not the first or only one to do this, so if you are interested in further thoughts, there is the Google-verse. Of course it also needs to be acknowledged that all of these observations are generalizations and few people fit the generalizations completely. The goal of this article is not to diagnose any one person or issue, but rather to illuminate conflicting values and paradigms in workplace leadership development in the hope of creating common language and productive conversation. The leadership vacuum is real and not going away without a cross-generational collaborative effort.

The Problem

From the Baby Boomer point of view (Over 56 to 76 in 2016)

Baby Boomers, as a generational cohort are known to value loyalty in the workplace, they are extremely idealistic, and also value personal immortality.ⁱ What does this look like in the work place, particularly in terms of leadership style and leadership development?

First, it means that they have worked a long time to climb the ladder and get into the position that they are in. They worked hard for what they've accomplished and don't appreciate or even understand those who do not see and participate in that system. The value of immortality means that they plan to stay there a long time, not retire, and often find the mere mention of transition planning offensive. The intense idealism means that they also have high standards for everyone else and are likely to be shrewd about the skills or readiness of a candidate to move into leadership. They often want the person to be able to do a great job from the beginning in order to feel comfortable in hanging off the reins of an organization they worked so hard for and hold high ideals for.

Because the professional development ladder is their paradigm, there is little focus on (and sometimes little perceived value for) intentional professional development. They believe that if a person serves their time, pays their dues, then they will be naturally trained – just like they were.

From the Gen Xer point of view (Over 36 to 55 in 2016)

Gen Xers, as a generational cohort, are known to be cynically pragmatic (instead of idealistic). Their highest value in the workplace is competency.ⁱⁱ Given their childhood experiences, they often choose

family over work and place high value on work-life balance. This has evolved the workplace leadership in significant ways.

First, because they value competency over longevity, they value training in the workplace. Professional development for Gen Xers is something you are trained in, and may be more conceptualized in terms of courses or defined programs. They believe that people should be promoted or attain leadership based on their skills and ability to perform the job well. If they feel a leader is incompetent or that their personal talent is underappreciated, they are more likely to change jobs rather than try to change the system.

Given the lack of leadership opportunities that have opened up from Baby Boomers vacating positions (which still continues to be the case due to many factors), Gen Xers often choose not to stay in the system, but leave to create their own. By starting their own companies, they can set new rules based on their values of family and work-life balance. They have left the institution for the start-up. Therefore, the leaders who could have been raised up in an existing organization don't often stay around to wait for the opportunity for leadership. This is not brain-drain as much as it is talent-drain.

One insightful comment from a Gen Xers was that as a generation, they feel like Prince Charles of England. They feel like they will never be king because by the time the position is open, it will be too late for them and make much more sense to pass the baton right onto the next generation. Unfortunately, given the middle-age of Gen Xers (who are 10 years out from retirement themselves), this phenomenon happened 20 years ago and is fairly irreversible.

From the Millennial point of view (Age 20/22 to 35 in 2016)

Millennials, as a cohort are optimistically pragmatic, community oriented and participate in a more of a hive-mentality (think bees and ants).ⁱⁱⁱ In the workplace they highly value collaboration and team work. They change jobs often looking for and valuing diverse experiences and investing in their own personal development. Like Gen Xers, they value work-life balance, but because fewer of them are married or have families, it manifests itself more as work-self balance. Also, and unfortunately due to helicopter parenting and significant unsettling world events in their formative years (September 11, 2001 and economic crash of 2008), they do not seem to be highly resilient and struggle significantly with anxiety and depression.^{iv} These generational differences have much to do with the prevalent leadership vacuum.

First, their high value of collaborative leadership can be at odds with the CEO type leadership often championed and celebrated by the Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. Often, what leadership development processes exists within an organization, can be a mis-fit for Millennial generational values. Moreover, since Millennials change jobs often, it can limit their invitation and participation in pre-existing leadership development programs reserved for those who demonstrate loyalty to the company. (Most companies don't want to invest in the leadership skills of someone who will not stay to offer a return on that investment.) This can create a negative feedback loop where companies won't develop Millennials because they leave and Millennials leave because they are not being developed.

There are also a couple other generational clashes going on that amplify the issue. Perhaps most significantly, Millennial leadership style and workplace values and almost opposite of the Baby Boomers.

Millennials value collaboration and see high feedback as a sign that they are valued as an employee. Baby Boomers, who often had to earn the right to have a voice, can find feedback to be at best an unnecessary waste of time (“just let me do my thing”) and at worst a questioning of their leadership and decision-making (and therefore offensive). Millennials don’t trust or are ambivalent towards CEO style leadership while Boomer’s hold them to be heroes.

As a generation, Boomers think that they have already proven their ability to lead, and thus they have their position. Professional development for them is a mixed bag and not a high workplace value. Meanwhile Millennials see professional development as perhaps the highest value a workplace can provide. They can get paid for doing anything, and are not that skill or trade specific, so the main consideration in choosing a job is often based on the people they will work with (community and hive-mentality) and what will be invested in them. They come to the work place and present themselves as an investment in the company. They expect the workplace to develop them as a reciprocal investment.

Boomers and Millennials both agree that that Millennials are not ready for leadership. Millennials are, honestly, very underdeveloped in terms of leadership skills and they know it. Boomers have not placed much value on developing leaders (in either the Gen Xer or Millennial generations) due to the focus on their own careers, and perhaps their focus on being a good leader due to Gen Xer pressure for competency. It seems that 20 years have passed and many Boomers still think of Millennials as college students, not as those with potentially teenage children. Arguably, they missed adapting to and developing a whole generation.

The second main issue comes back to the lack of resiliency in Millennials mentioned before. On top of Baby Boomers tearing down the institutions of the nation in the 60’s and 70’s, and then national leaders being impeached or removed due to scandal, Millennials came of age in a time when national leadership knowingly and self-servingly facilitated economic meltdown. The point being, they generally don’t trust leadership.

This mistrust in leadership then becomes focused inward. They don’t want to repeat the mistakes of they have seen and yet are self-aware that they easily (and possibly inevitably?) could. They hear the slander and criticism of leadership by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, and don’t feel any desire to put themselves in the focal point of such critique. They hear the idealistic virtues of leadership espoused by Baby Boomers and painfully feel their own underdevelopment in comparison with that ideal. Millennials don’t seem that inclined, at this time, to live up to the Hero Generation^v they were prescribed to be. Perhaps such a prediction in 1991 was unfair; perhaps their day is yet to come.

The visible result is that as Boomers finally decide to retire or pass leadership positions on and opportunities open up, there are few willing to take them. Gen Xers are not so inclined to give up their autonomy, freedom, and the lifestyle they have created for themselves, and Millennials feel like they are being setup to fail and therefore decline the position as well.

From the Gen Z point of view (Age 0 to 19/22 in 2016)

Gen Z, also known as Digital Natives or the iGeneration, are fairly new to the work scene, sort of. Many of them (17%) have actually been working since high school and 58% of teens today are currently saving money.^{vi} They are working, saving, career-focused, and are already starting their own businesses.

Though still being studied, they appear to be financially conservative and globally minded. In 2015 they made up 26% of the population, (just slightly larger than Millennials who are 25% of the population.^{vii} They live in a world that is multi-racial, multi-cultural, and is embedded in technology. It is not unusual for them to have close friends located around the world that they met online. Early studies show them to be mature for their age, resilient with a strong work ethic, but also a propensity to “hack” the system and find more efficient and more creative ways to create their world.^{viii} They want to piece together the parts the need to accomplish their goals, whether those are educational or vocational. Both their educational journey and their job profile are likely to be mosaic in nature, being interdisciplinary and working multiple jobs at a time. They are debt adverse^{ix} and therefore are much more likely to always be working in some capacity. My personal belief is that sustainability will be one of their highest values, pertaining to economics, vocation, and the environment. They seem to be strongly future-minded.

While they do not comprise a significant portion of the workforce and are not currently vocationally influential, any discussion of leadership development needs to be designed with them in mind.

Potential Solutions

By considering these four different generations in light of leadership development it becomes obvious that our conceptions of leadership positions and leadership development need to change, adapt, and evolve.

Leadership Positions by Generation

To recruit Gen Xers to leadership in existing institutions, work weeks need to be reasonable (many of them are used to 32 to 36-hour work-weeks^x), boundaries between work and home life need to be established, and family commitments and concerns valued – if not provided for via benefits.

Millennials and CEO style leadership positions are, for the most part, incompatible. Leadership job descriptions need to change to be more collaborative and team-oriented in nature. This does not mean that there is no point-person, but rather leadership includes collaborative structures in a 360 orientation. This means that advisors, collaborative peers, and support teams are included. Additionally, on-going training, development, feedback, and community need to be part of the leadership culture ethos.

Gen Zers will likely have some experience with leadership positions as they enter the workforce. While it is still unknown that their idea of a good leader or a good leadership position will look like^{xi}, current research shows them to be innovated, highly entrepreneurial, and competitive.^{xii}

Leadership Development

Leadership development has to become a main ethos of an organization. People need to be invested in, whether they plan to stay or not. Professional development plans need to be part of the discussion upon interview and hiring. Paths for professional advancement need to be clear, as well as the competencies required for those positions. Development in those competencies need to be offered ala carte, and thought needs to be given to what constitutes ‘equivalency’ in order to recognize training and experience that occurred outside of the organization. Promotion or reward need to be coupled with achievement. This does not have to look like money, but given the dire financial concerns of many

Millennials and financial savviness of Gen Zers, if it is not money, then the value of rewards should be explained. Offering a menu of rewards (bonus, raises, more vacation time, learning opportunities, leadership opportunities, promotions, etc.) may also be of benefit.

Leadership development also needs to take on a group (as opposed to individual) focus. It needs to be highly relational, contextual, provide diverse perspectives and cross-functional collaboration. This means that group dynamics will be more inherent in the leadership development process, as opposed to mere individual skill or knowledge development. Opportunities for mentor-mentee relationships should be established. Since many Boomers may not have previous experience in or developed the skill set for mentoring, training for all mentors should be required.

Addressing the leadership gap NOW

Give the scale and scope of the problem, the leadership gap needs to be addressed comprehensively. Gen Xers will start to reach retirement age in 10 years, Millennials are the second most numerous generation on the planet right now, and Digital Natives of Generation Z are in college and are an emerging influence on the workforce. Together, Millennials and Gen Z make up 50% of the population. This means that at least 3 different strategies need to be employed to address each of these populations.^{xiii} A few of the more common ones are discussed below.

Leadership Gap Solutions, by generational coupling

Boomer/Millennial – Intentional mentoring relationships are a good strategy in pairing Boomers and Millennials. Boomers will likely need to be interviewed and trained on how to be a mentor. Pairing them with Millennials working in similar contexts will help facilitate passing along valuable Boomer knowledge and experience, and help create the support Millennials need.

Boomer/GenX – Boomers and Gen Xers may be served well through collaborative leadership positions.^{xiv} This may mean creating more C-Suite positions (CEO, COO, CFO, CIO etc.) than presidencies. Potential gains might be made by creating co-presidencies with roles and job descriptions clearly defined and board accountability, or chair swapping (where a department head and their first associate trade positions for a space of time until the Boomer transitions out).

Boomer/Gen Z – Boomers can create internships and residencies for Gen Zers. Since Gen Zers are more drawn to meaningful and impactful work, put them on a real project to address a company issue or solve an organizational problem. Give them space to succeed or fail and be sure to steward and develop them well by utilizing good managerial skills. Treat them like valued employees and they are likely to preform accordingly.

GenX/Millennial/Gen Z – Since these generations are used to collaboration in the workplace, leadership development can happen through project teams with highly-developed feedback and extended debriefing. Teams should have a leader and expectations of that leadership should be clear and debriefed. Gen Xers can bring their leadership development programs and curricula to the table, but make it experiential and project-based, and divide it up into modules that can be taken as needed.

Conclusion

In summary, Gen Xers need to be recruited back into leadership. Millennials need to be mentored, trained, and leadership positions redefined as part of organizational changes. Gen Zers need to be asked questions, listened to, and given hands-on practical experiences. Overall, leadership development throughout an organization should include clear paths for promotion, clear role/ job description expectations, and an ala carte menu of rewards and recognition for development. Finally, and most critically, relationship building and seeds of future leadership ethos need to be planted now so as to not lose another 20 years.

ⁱ Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 1992. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. New York, NY: Perennial.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ This has been said by some, but might be a more accurate metaphor for Generation Z. Only time and reflection will tell.

^{iv} As a cognitive neuroscientist, I also believe an over predominance of technology use and constantly being “plugged in” has a significant impact on depression and anxiety levels in the Millennial generation. My point is that their mental health issues are not merely due to historical events, but the product of several environmental factors.

^v Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 1992. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. New York, NY: Perennial.

^{vi} https://reports.sparksandhoney.com/campaign/generation-z-2025-the-final-generation?utm_source=slideshare&utm_medium=social&utm_term=organic&utm_content=2015_genz&utm_campaign=slideshare_clickable_link

^{vii} US Census Bureau, 2012 (via Mintel 2014)

^{viii} <https://reports.sparksandhoney.com/campaign/generation-z-2025-the-final-generation>

^{ix} http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/fashion/move-over-millennials-here-comes-generation-z.html?_r=2

^x Research in many sectors of business has consistency revealed that a 32 or 36-hour work week not only demonstrates no reduction in productivity, but it has also demonstrated an increase in productivity, job satisfaction, and retention.

^{xi} Personal current research is demonstrating Gen Zers to value kindness, honesty, effort, and sustaining relationships to be very important. They seem to be more okay with failure than their Millennial older siblings, but they also seem to be more competitive as well.

^{xii} http://www.slideshare.net/sparksandhoney/generation-z-final-june-17/26-26They_seek_education_and_knowledgeResearched

^{xiii} See attached charts in appendix for more information

^{xiv} Some top executives are sharing leadership by dividing up positions that were once held by a single person. <https://hbr.org/2016/04/culture-is-not-the-culprit>

Primer on Generations and the Workplace

Compiled by Jessica Cruickshank

Generation	Years Born ⁱ	Population ⁱⁱ	Personal Value	Workplace Value	Default Leadership Structure	Preferred Method of Leadership Development	How to ask a Question	Conflict Arises When
Baby Boomers	1945-1964	23.6%	Immortality/ Legacy	Loyalty/ Hierarchy	Hierarchical based on time in existing company/structure; CEO/ Hero leader	Longevity with the organization and learning by watching	Communicate a respect for experience and time/longevity. Draw on previous life experience.	When they are unclear or feel undermined in the hierarchical power structure. Also, Legacy is a strong motivation. Conflict may possible arise when a Boomer feels this is threatened.
Gen Xers	1965-1980	15.4%	Life-Family balance	Competency	Flat and mobile, based on competency in a given area	Formal training through classes, informal training through on-the-job training	Communicate a respect for competency and expertise. Draw on creative, out-of-the box thinking.	When they feel the best idea is not the one being acted upon or when expertise is not recognized. Conflict can also arise when they feel their life balance or work/family balance is threatened.
Gen Y/ Millennials	1981-1996	24.5%	Health, Happiness, Relational, Need validation and approval	Community	We are all leaders; none of us are <i>the</i> leader. We all follow and listen to each other	Cohort and collaborative training with diverse people group (different perspectives); cross-functional collaboration and interdisciplinary training	They are not accustomed to questions outside of friend and close relationships. That means they need to feel like they are in a relationally safe environment to offer opinions or honest thoughts. Honesty and authenticity build rapport.	They feel uncertain in relational dynamics. The degree of friendship is individual and must be earned. Conflict can arise when relationships feel forced or inauthentic. It can also arise when expectations are unclear but they don't feel safe enough to ask for clarification.
Digital Natives /Gen Z	1996-2015	26%	Justice?? ⁱⁱⁱ Sustainability	Success? Expertise?	The one with the most focus, best effort, and greatest understanding of diverse relationships ^{iv}	They can manage and skim through information instantaneously – and move on. Want hands-on and practical training, internship, application focused. They want to co-create real solutions. ^v	Show respect for their thoughts, they likely have more experience and education than you might realize. They are used to be talked to as adults.	Treat them like an adult and explain decision-making process; help them see the choices inherent in the situation and walk them through your thought process ^{vi}

These are generalizations and are not meant to accurately describe any one specific individual, but rather depict the beliefs and behaviors of the generational cohort at large.

ⁱ Howe, Neil; Strauss, William (1991). *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. New York: William Morrow & Company

ⁱⁱ US Census Bureau 2012 (via Mental 2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ Jessie Cruickshank's speculation

^{iv} Speculation based on personal ongoing research

^v Ibid

^{vi} <https://reports.sparksandhoney.com/campaign/generation-z-2025-the-final-generation>