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January 2008

Partnering with You to Achieve Results

### 3 Ways To Get More Out of Generation Y at Work By Sommer Kehrli and Trudy Sopp



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It's time to stop whining about Generation Y, those born after 1978. Reason: This group of roughly 80 million who began entering the workforce five years ago is here to stay. And it's your job to get the most out of them at work. Three strategies can help: Informal mentoring, structured accountability and shared responsibility.

Mentoring is a critical component of being an effective manager, but informal mentoring, rather than formal one-on-one sessions, may be more effective with Generation Y. Maybe it's because their parents were so busy earning dual incomes, working long hours and trying to get ahead that Generation Yers really value time with their parents and other authority figures. But they won't waste their time paying attention to someone if they think they're viewed as an expendable asset and unworthy of the time. They will write you off as a heartless manager, and their loyalty will soon fade.

So, the first strategy is to mentor and mean it. Use every opportunity as a learning moment; see it as a chance to share wisdom with them or help them learn from your mistakes or missteps. Generation Yers have an eye to improve how things are done, and they are constantly noting a manager's behaviors as examples of how they themselves might act in future endeavors. And they have a discerning eye for the difference between “fake” mentoring and genuine interest. They are hypersensitive to being brushed off and given a canned answer. But they're willing to work hard for people in their lives who take the time to show a genuine interest in them.

Start by being open to their ideas. If you give them the benefit of the doubt and believe they are asking out of curiosity, then you view the questioning from a different framework. They're more interested in improving a process that strikes them as bureaucratic than questioning your authority. Use these techniques to practice informal mentoring:

- Omit any tones of power and authority. They won't pick up on the subtle messages anyway and instead will be annoyed by your lack of candor.
- Be sure to answer their “why” questions before they even ask them. Stay a step ahead of them by giving frequent and detailed briefings providing information they wouldn't be able to gather on their own.
- Give them the benefits of your experience, the history and context of a situation, your thorough understanding of the corporate political climate, some big-picture thinking, tips on how to deal with that difficult colleague or the inside “scoop.”

Second, Generation Y processes information selectively due to the abundance of MTV images and resources at their fingertips. They can't take it all in so they don't take it all in, and they bring these behaviors to work. This makes them appear slippery about accountability and sometimes leads to incomplete projects. This is especially true when they act like they “got it” but actually didn't and tuned you out too quickly. And maybe some of them are just like workers from other generations who lack accountability.

Creating a tug-of-war about whose responsibility it is to listen to the other just adds more tension and creates a paternalistic, controlling, micromanaging environment that is miserable for the boss and employee. Recognize that this is a management issue, not a values conflict or some heavy principle you must win. You're better off creating a new accountability structure with new technology. Anticipate that they won't remember or hear you clearly, and make sure that doesn't happen by:

- Requiring an e-mail response confirming their understanding of the project and direction you have just given.
- Asking to see them capture the “to do” in their BlackBerry.
- Asking that they factor in a tickler system that automatically reminds them what their due dates are.

Use the technology to stay in constant communication on the project. Tell them you expect them to use e-mail, voice mail or text message to provide you with regular updates on a project. By responding with your thoughts and advice using their technology, you have the immediacy they like and the accountability you need and want.

Third, accept Generation Yers as partners. They've been described as know-it-alls because they frequently come to their managers with a problem *and* a solution. Some managers are threatened by this problem-solving ability and the audacity to tell the manager what they think should be done. But, this behavior doesn't stem from arrogance; Generation Yers are simply hardwired this way. They are products of an environment in which they were home alone or with an older sibling and had to learn to solve problems on their own, which bred fierce independence.

Generation Yers also come to the workplace with higher education and work experience from volunteer opportunities or internships, so they don't view themselves as newbies in the organization. When Generation Yers are given the space to explore and, of course, make mistakes, they learn—just like employees of every age. But this generation expects to be given the space to try new things. As a result, they want autonomy in their work. They have little tolerance for the dues-paying concept in organizations. They recognize authority, but they do not succumb to it automatically. They respect credibility, which is established through pitching in, sharing experiences, being consistent with stated values and mentoring.

You can connect with their value system by giving them the remote control on decisions such as training and development options, such as spending limits, time frames, political consideration, names of people to check with, etc. It costs you nothing; in fact, it frees up time for you to engage in other activities. Just give them parameters if you are worried about their decisions. Where you can, give them some authority. It will pay off in loyalty and make them better decision-makers and future managers in the end.

Most of all, when working with Generation Y, forget about engaging in a power struggle. They know you are in charge—and they don't care. You can accomplish more for your company by making nice with Generation Y, an enormously optimistic, educated, energetic and compassionate generation.