

The Leadership Vacuum: What We Lose With the Next Generation

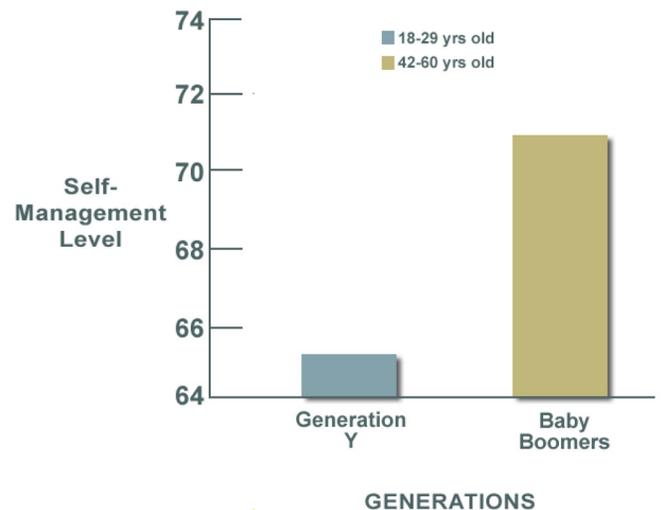
By Nick Tasler, M.S. and Lac D. Su, M.S.

The mass exodus of Baby Boomers from the workplace has begun. You'd hardly know it with unemployment expected to average 10% this year—the highest level in seven decades. But make no mistake about it; Boomers are on their way out. New research from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management reveals that smart companies should examine not only what they're winning—talented youth—but also what they're losing—quality leadership.

For the first time in history, organizations find their offices occupied by employees spanning four generations—Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists. In recent years, the differences between these generations have become one of the hottest topics in business. While the generational gap can create a healthy marriage of fresh perspective and deep wisdom, we've all seen it give way to a significant culture clash. For instance, the largest generation in the workforce—Baby Boomers—are used to a structured work environment with planned face-to-face meetings, overtime, and the occasional weekend at the office. While most never really learned to love the structure imposed on them by their Traditionalist predecessors, Boomers have learned to deal with it. Generation Y, on the other hand, has never lived in a world without telecommuting, business via BlackBerry, and text messages crafted with code words that stump even the most tech-savvy among the older generations.

Aside from lingo and work habits, we discovered an eyebrow-raising generational gap in the vital workplace skill of emotional intelligence (EQ)—recognizing and managing your own emotions and those of others. TalentSmart's analysis of 10,614 individuals revealed a sizeable difference in the core EQ skill of self-management.

Notably, the two largest groups in today's workplace—Generation Y (18-29 years old) and Baby Boomers (42-60 years old)—show an alarming gap. It's especially concerning when you consider that this is the generation to whom we are entrusting our future livelihoods.



So what does this gap look like in the workplace?

The Difference between Leaders and Trophy Kids

To gain some more insight on the topic, we spent a few months conducting structured behavioral interviews with managers from corporate stalwarts including Target, Best Buy and General Mills all the way to cutting-edge startups and non-profits. To avoid speculation and generic platitudes, we asked these managers to tell about a specific Gen Yer they have worked with that had/has clear leadership potential. Then, we asked them to describe specific events and situations covering everything from how they do project work to how they write emails. After 30 or 40 minutes, we then switched gears and had the



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exact same interview about one specific talented, yet somewhat disappointing, Gen Yer (i.e. a trophy kid).

Regardless of age, industry or company size, we were astonished to hear manager after manager tell virtually identical stories, listing virtually identical behaviors, distinguishing the effective Gen Y leader who “gets it” from the talented trophy kid who doesn’t. The much-touted intelligence, confidence and ambition of Gen Y are every bit as real as the entitlement, narcissism and poor follow-through. The big difference? Some Gen Yers have simply learned to manage their behavior so that it’s more in line with the first set of traits than the second.

Next-Generation Leaders	Trophy Kids
Create meaningful work for themselves	Expect meaningful work to be given to them
Ask, “Is there anything else I can do?”	Say, “That’s not really my job.”
Constantly strive to do their best work	Constantly claim “I’m trying my best”
Try to solve problems on their own before asking for help	Ask for help at the first sign of an obstacle
Use self-deprecating humor to give everyone a laugh	Make sarcastic comments in attempts to be funny
Think about what other people want	Frame things in terms of “what I want...”
Have enough self-confidence to learn from other people	Talk down to other people
Eye long-term rewards for themselves	Expect a constant flow of immediate rewards
Pride themselves on results	Pride themselves on trying hard
Earn their success	Blame others for failures
Try to create real value	Try to earn praise
Adapt their language and appearance to fit the situation	Believe that their appearance defines them
Seek out feedback on their performance	Get defensive when critiqued

The good news is that even raging, narcissistic trophy kids can whittle away their rough edges to reveal the confident and humble high performer underneath. It’s not rocket science, but it does take a willingness to confront face-to-face some uncomfortable realities about their thinking and action. Most of them—at least the ones worth investing in—are willing to stare down the truth and act on it. You’ll find, almost without exception that the trophy kids who aren’t willing to own their deficiencies are the ones with a serious need of an EQ adjustment.

Part of this deficiency in some Gen Yers’ self-management skills might have something to do with the alleged “narcissism epidemic.” Psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell point to decades of research claiming that today’s young adults have a serious issue with loving themselves way too much and loving others not nearly enough. That means their behavior often reflects a total disregard for other people. If they are mad, they see no problem with letting it all hang out. Twenge and Campbell believe that the self-esteem movement has taught today’s youth that their own opinion is the only one that matters. And when you don’t believe you have to justify your actions to other people, who gives you carte blanche to do whatever you darn well feel like?

But not everyone agrees with Twenge and Campbell. Richard Robins, director of the Personality, Self, and Emotion laboratory at the University of California, Davis, is one of those dissenters. Robins says that solid evidence for the alleged “epidemic” pretty much disappears when Twenge and Campbell’s data are analyzed properly. Based on his team’s research, Robins concludes that “this current [younger] generation does have inflated egos, but” he says “so did every other generation of youth . . . There are writings on cave walls from thousands of years ago saying,

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more or less, that today's youth do whatever they want, don't listen to their elders, think they know everything, etc." In other words, if there really is an epidemic sickness infecting the younger generations, it would probably be more accurate to call it the "youthfulness epidemic." And nothing short of mass infanticide is going to kill that bug.

The bigger problem according to Robins is that most researchers are finding no increase—and sometimes even a slight decrease—in self-esteem in the younger generations. So Twenge and Campbell might be onto something when they suggest we “ditch the self-esteem movement,” not because it's reached overkill mode, but because it just isn't working. A big reason why it isn't working is the misunderstanding that unconditional praise boosts self-esteem.

Psychologist Deborah Stipek, now the Dean of Stanford's School of Education, has pointed out that criticism, and not just praise, plays a key role in boosting the kind of self-esteem we need to perform well and to stick it out when faced with a challenge. Her logic is simple: when a manager tells you “good job” on that half-baked report you tried to pass off as finished, or in that client meeting you were ridiculously unprepared for, you have to conclude that this manager doesn't expect much from you. Developing self-esteem requires honest and constructive feedback. Allowing yourself to be open to that feedback rather than defensive about it requires good self-management skills.

The Age of EQ

It could be that coming of age with too many video games, instantaneous Internet gratification and adoring parents have created a generation of self-indulgent young workers

who can't help but wear their emotions on their sleeves in tense situations. However, a deeper look reveals another explanation. Even within the same generation, older people have better EQ skills than the younger one—despite sharing the same generational influences.

Self-management appears to increase with age. Like Rick Robins found in his research on generational self-esteem, youth itself plays a bigger role than some unique generational trait. Experience and maturity facilitate the mastery of one's emotions. Generation Yers just haven't had as much time to practice and perfect their skill at managing their emotions. That's good news. It means that the younger generation's deficient self-management skills have little to do with things you can't change, like the effects of growing up in the age of iPods and Facebook.

Companies have the power to address and improve Gen Y's core EQ skills. They not only can do it; they *must* do it. The ultra-competitive, fast-paced marketplace of today won't give many organizations the time to sit back and wait for nature to take its course. With much of the talent pool nearing retirement age, organizations need to prepare talented twenty-somethings for leadership roles today. Despite tech-savvy self-confidence and top-notch educations, the younger generation's lower self-management skills severely hinder Generation Yers' otherwise high potential. After all, if they can't manage themselves, how can we expect them to manage others?

Developing EQ

Fortunately, emotional intelligence is already on the radar of most businesses' learning and development departments. TalentSmart® alone provides support to EQ initiatives at nearly 75% of blue-chip companies.

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While the level of commitment to and investment in such initiatives varies widely between companies, nearly all successful initiatives follow these guidelines.

1. You get what you measure. Assessing each individual's EQ skills with a validated measurement tool helps people with only a fuzzy understanding of the topic to personalize it and shows them exactly which of the core skills they personally need to focus on developing. Perhaps more importantly, it sends a message that emotional intelligence is something the company values and in which it expects to see improvement.

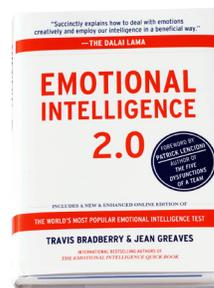
2. Provide ongoing development opportunities. Once people know which areas to work on, they need to have some guidance about the steps they can take to improve. Some companies rely strictly on self-guided e-learning, and others conduct group training or individual coaching sessions. Still others will send individuals to off-site public workshops. Which one each company chooses often comes down to a matter of budget and priority.

3. Follow-up in six to 12 months. Perhaps the greatest discovery in human development over the last couple of decades is the brain's plasticity. In other words, if you carry out a new behavior repeatedly, over the course of time your brain forms new neural connections that alter your natural behavior patterns. But it takes months to create noticeable change. Schedule a follow-up session to let your people know that they are expected to do more than take a test or attend one training session instead of reverting back to their old ways. 🔄 July 2010

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