

Leadergy Center is an exclusive professional leadership development resource for senior executives of corporations, governments, and not-for-profit organizations. We trade in a currency of trusted relationships under-pinned by character, commitment, connection, and competence. We've taken an oath to protect American values, to uphold and protect the constitution of the United States, and to assure each and every client of ours receives our best every day.

Will Gen X Take The Leadership Baton From The Boomers?

Steve is the thirty-something founding President of a midsize company. During his six-year tenure, his business has grown ahead of the market and sustained good returns in spite of the economic downturn. He is articulate, well-liked, and well-respected, not only in his company but also in his community. He has trained other leaders, and been published in several forums, including a blog that is read by several hundred of his peers around the country.

Yet Steve hesitates to call himself a leader. Why?

To Steve, a "leader" is a lone ranger, an outspoken general who calls the shots from an insular position at the top of an organizational hierarchy. Instead, Steve would prefer to call himself an "influencer." As such, he is an integral member of a network of relationships, and he considers those relationships infinitely more important than successfully achieving any particular organizational post or three-year plan. To the emergent generation, leadership is defined in terms of influence rather than authority or position.

But not everyone shares Steve's definition. A generation ahead in leadership, the Baby Boomers, is growing increasingly frustrated by what they view as a serious lack of leadership among Steve and his peers.

Steve is a reflection of many on Gen X; the generation typically classified as born between 1962 and 1981. Now between 25 and 43 years old, the members of Gen X are supposed to be the future leaders—except that, in the eyes of some of their exasperated forebears, many members of this "lost generation" don't seem in any hurry to step up to the plate.

This has some Boomers grumbling that Gen-Xers have spent too much time in philosophical conversation, and not enough time accomplishing; they are tired of waiting for emerging leadership to, well, emerge. As one Boomer-aged executive was overhead to say at a national conference, "Do something, *then* write the book."

But are those descriptions accurate? Is leadership absent among Gen-Xers? Is it not even sought? Is the emergent generation really as anti-leadership, or as ineffective, as some of the Boomer generation portrays them? Or does leadership just look different? The answers, of course, depend on who you ask.

A generation skipped?

Even in church organizations there is evidence that Gen X is not 'stepping up'. Bob Chandler spent 13 years as a campus staff worker for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in North Carolina. Chandler always had plenty of students lining up for leadership roles within the group each year, but in the early 1990s he began to notice a shift.

"Students stopped aspiring to leadership," he said. He now had to work hard to recruit students to these positions. Where did he first observe this shift? In students who had been born in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the heart of Generation X.

There is an explanation for this in "generational theory," the idea that there are recognizable patterns to generational cycles. Leadership skips a generation. It happens with presidents, it happens with business, and it happens with churches. This view reflects the work of scholars William Strauss and Neil Howe, who are considered pioneers of generational theory.

According to their research, the "Boomer" generation (born between 1943 and 1960) demonstrates the traits of a "dominant" generation, which manifests itself in visionary, activist leadership. Gen-Xers, on the other hand, are part of a "recessive" generation, which also happens to be a generation of latchkey kids, children of divorce, and blended families, not to mention the most-aborted generation in history. The result, according to Strauss and Howe, is a "reactive" mindset that values independence and eschews institutionalism.

"The emergent movement is characterized by a general suspicion of traditional forms of authority. This suspicion of authority has a profound impact on how leadership is carried out," says Justin Irving, professor at the Center for Transformational Leadership at Bethel Seminary in Minnesota. Feeling that traditional institutions such as families, government, the church, and big business have failed, many Xers want no part of the system. To them, "Following Boomers ... is like entering a theme park after a mob has trashed the place and some distant CEO has turned every idea into a commercial logo," write Strauss and Howe.

Different definitions

Xer's counter that they do exhibit leadership, just differently than their Boomer predecessors. To Xer's, leadership is defined in terms of influence rather than authority or position. "I don't think leadership in the emergent generation is dead. It's just dressed in different clothes," concurs Tony Morgan, the 37-year-old executive director of WiredChurches.com and a member of the senior management team at Granger Community Church in South Bend, Indiana. "It's less about personality and position and authority. Instead it's more relational. It's more vulnerable. It's more about helping people take their next steps in a journey."

Using the same imagery, Spencer Burke, former mega church teaching pastor and founder of the emergent website theooze.com, posits that the previous, modern metaphor for leadership was that of a tour guide, where "one person finds the way and tells someone else how to get there." By contrast, the postmodern metaphor is that of a fellow traveler, joining others on their journey.

Mark Driscoll, the 35-year-old founder of Mars Hill Fellowship in Seattle, has a slightly different take. Many of his peers are more frustrated with hierarchy than with leadership. "You can have leadership without hierarchy," he explains. "The way I define it, leadership is nothing more than trust built on character. You see someone's character, so you trust that character, and because you trust that person, you follow them. "We need leaders who are humble, accountable, working in a team, and accessible," he continues. "You don't need to have hierarchy for that."

Still, Johnston remains concerned by what he calls leadership "danger signs" in the emerging generation, including a propensity toward deconstruction of current organizational architecture in its existing forms. "I think a leadership danger sign—in anybody, of any age—is when they feel like they have to reinvent the whole wheel," he warns. "To me, that says that a person is usually not teachable, not humble.

"Immature leaders react; that provides a lot of energy at first, but the problem is that it's toxic fuel. Mature leaders don't react; they respond. For me, [the primary thing is] absolutely an attitude issue, one of teachability and maturity."

Although he is a member of Gen X, Driscoll agrees wholeheartedly. "Saying we don't believe in leadership is saying we don't believe there's anyone who can teach us anything," he charges. "It sounds really humble, but in the end it's really proud—because it's saying there's no one who has the right to tell me what to do or show me how to live."

Where from here?

First, leaders (or influencers) of both generations acknowledge that leadership can take varying forms. Leadership can be demonstrated in a number of contexts, whether as the head of an organization, or as the unassuming Everyman (or Woman) who may not have an official title but who still wields tremendous influence through relationships.

For Boomers, this means being open to more fluid systemic models. "Emergent's tend to emphasize organic process over linear organization, and relational networks or webs over hierarchies," Irving notes. And Bruce Butterfield, CEO of the Forbes Group, agrees. "Leadership ladders have to give way to leadership bridges." This is currently reflected in the greater use of "strengths-based" job descriptions (à la Marcus Buckingham) rather than static hierarchical roles, and the preference for coaching instead of consulting.

Yet some members of Gen X need to remember that both the gift of leadership (Romans 12:8) and the office of leadership (1 Timothy 3:1) are Biblical concepts. There is no evidence that the need for strong leadership has ceased, even though it may have been misused or abused. The Bible does not speak against formal authority structures. A group, by definition, becomes an organization, and the structure and culture of that organization can be shaped by those in positions of authority. Neither organization nor authority is inherently wrong constructs.

In their disdain for formal authority and leadership-as-celebrity, some Gen-Xers echo the sentiments of the late management guru, Peter Drucker, who observed: "The three greatest leaders of the 20th century were Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. If that's leadership, I want no part of it." But obviously there's more to the picture. Leaders such as Winston Churchill leveraged the authority of his office for even greater positive influence.

An uneasy partnership?

Gen-Xers value design as much as functionality, process as much as product, and relationships as much as results. Sometimes, however, this generation has overcompensated in these areas, resulting in a lot of motion but little movement. Boomers, on the other hand, are characterized by the power of organizations, and seem therefore to believe that the organization has a unique opportunity to impact its community. Sadly, however, examples abound of Baby Boomer leadership "superstars" who have left the path littered with wounded individuals trampled on the road to "bigger and better."

Time magazine featured its "Persons of the Year": Bill and Melinda Gates, and Bono. One man heads a multi-billion-dollar business that impacts the global economy, and is now using a portion of those profits to impact the fields of education and healthcare through his charitable foundation.

The other man is a rock star who is using his personal influence and platform to raise awareness of the AIDS epidemic in Africa, the need for debt relief, and to challenge individuals toward greater personal social action.

Gates typifies the Boomer mindset: build a powerful organization, and then use it for positive impact. Bono, on the other hand, exemplifies more of a Gen-X approach: leverage personal influence to spur others toward "love and good deeds." But no matter the definition, both men are leaders, and both are having an impact.

Our Invitation

The Leadergy® Center is a safe haven for exploration, discovery, and application of transformational leadership that delivers business results in a constantly changing world. We would like to serve you and your organization by helping you achieve 21st century transformational leadership. This may include helping you identify your unique capabilities that are currently being under-utilized, as well as that of your leadership team.

Our personal and professional lifetime commitment is to help leaders like you and your executives achieve differentiating results in relationship to bringing out the best in your people. After all, that is really what leadership excellence is about – bringing out the best in others to advance achievement of shared goals.

We want to help you mold and shape your groups leadership to accomplish that. Our focus is crystal clear. If we can help you equip and shape your organization for achieving performance firepower, then it becomes another building block in our pursuit of nation building. Our goal is to help facilitate the refinement, or possibly the re-creation of organizations like yours in ways that will utilize all its resources to achieve uncommon results through transformational leadership, thus serving future generations in a positive way.

We would love to come up alongside of you and give you some tailwind to help you lead a transformation. Give us a call today, or drop us an email, as we'd love to get to know you better, and evaluate how we may be of service to helping you live your dream, your passion, and your purpose.

For more information about us and our business please visit us at: www.leadergycenter.com

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