



Nice to Meet You, Mr. Boomer

“Bridging the generational gap in the workplace”

by Mala Grewal, Director of Leadership & Transformation

I vividly remember one evening in Manhattan, sitting with a girlfriend in a quaint cafe in Chelsea. Here we were, both in our late 20's, living in New York City, every young professional's dream. As we got deeper into conversation, Jen began opening up about her current work situation. When I asked her how her job was going, her answer was a resigned, “It's fine.” As I continued to probe, Jen said, “No it really is fine. My boss is great, he's like a Dad. I get paid very well. It's just, I think about what I could be doing, things I really love and am good at, and I'm not doing them.” I remember listening to her sentiments with equal amounts of empathy and frustration. Jen had been telling the same story for years, and yet, nothing had changed. Here she was, a talented photographer, with marketable graphic design skills, working at a prestigious finance firm as a Marketing Director, largely a result of loyalty to a boss and a safe financial position. I asked her one final question, in hopes to change subjects. “Jen, sky is the limit, be as unrealistic as you would like - what in your current position could you change, to make your job better?” After a few minutes of thinking she said, “I would photograph all of our events. And design the event invitations.” I then asked, “Is that in your current job description”? She quickly responded, “No. But I would just add this to my workload. It would be a great opportunity to get paid doing something I'm passionate about. But my boss, as nice as he is, would never go for it.” “Why?” I asked. “Because of exactly what you said earlier, it's not in my job description. He hired me to be the Marketing Director. I've been looking to transfer internally, but there's no other job description that looks like a better fit. My job is easy now, there's much more I could give.”

It dawned on me that night, that in Jen's current situation, both herself and her boss were limited, neither one winning. It wasn't that her boss wasn't pleased with her performance, or that Jen didn't like her boss, but simply a difference in values. Jen's boss thought he was doing a good job because of his amicable and loyal relationship with his employee, and in turn did not feel strong motivation to understand Jen's desire to expand beyond her job description. And although Jen had the desire for independence and personalization in her role, she confined her individual values to the company's. Not fully expressed, Jen eventually took a job at another firm, and her boss fully supported her, not realizing that had expansion been possible internally, he could have retained one of his top talent. And Jen could have continued to work with someone she deeply respected.

As months went on, more conversations ensued. I came to realize that unfortunately, Jen's frustrated state of stagnation and limitation was not only common, but the standard amongst young professionals. Everyone seemed to be somewhat disenchanted with their work, going through the motions to make



their bosses happy, some even actively acting out his or her unhappiness by taking extra “sick” days and booking longer vacations. Few felt authentic passion and connectivity to their managers and themselves.

A study by Towers Perrins in 2008 described this scenario as “the engagement gap”. Of their surveys 90,000 respondents, only 21% worldwide are engaged in their work, meaning they’re willing to go the extra mile to help their company succeed. According to a human relations survey conducted in 2012 by Bersin & Associates, employee engagement is the foremost human resource issue for HR leaders. Annual losses in lost productivity from ‘actively disengaged’ employees has risen to \$328 billion in 2012.¹

These findings beg the following question: why is this disengagement happening now?

The answer is something I refer to as, the Generational Gap. Active disengagement at work is often a result of the values disparity between Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials. The majority of our corporations in the United States are designed to the values of Baby Boomers like Jen’s boss, not to those of Gen Xers and Millennials, like Jen. The problem with this reality is that Gen Xers and Millennials are the future of our corporations.

To prepare for profitable futures, it is imperative companies find a way to create mutually beneficial relationships between the generations. As a Talent Catalyst, I spend my career bridging the gap between disengaged and actively engaged individuals, connecting them to their highest potential in a measurable way. I offer the following introductory advice to the generations by highlighting values² essential to understanding one another:

Advice to Baby Boomers

1. Millennials and Gen Xers want you to engage them! These men and women are not lazy. They want to make a difference. In fact, 96% of Millennials want a job that “allows me to have an impact on the world”.³
2. Work is personal to Millennials and Gen Xers. While it may not be life, it’s a big part of their identity. They are eager to invest themselves to help the company succeed, but want to understand what’s in it for them. Will they be personally recognized?⁴

¹ 2012 ASTD Conference

² Young & Rubicam, “The Dynamics of Work and the Workplace”, 2008

³ Harris Interactive Poll, 2008

⁴ Towers Perrins 2008



3. Appreciation and acknowledgement are key reasons for Gen Xers and Millennial engagement. 79% of employees who quit their jobs cited a lack of appreciation as a key reason for leaving.⁵

Advice to Millennials and Gen Xers

1. It's not that Baby Boomers don't care about your opinion; they just highly value your experience as well. The old adage, "put your money where your mouth is" matters to them, it's how they paved their way to the top.
2. Baby Boomers expect you to work hard. There is no such thing as free lunch, despite your smarts or experience. If you want something, earn it.
3. If you prove yourself to be of value to a Baby Boomer, they will be loyal to you in return. They will be an advocate in advancing your goals and desires.

Understanding generational values is the first step of several to bridging the gap between actively disengaged and actively engaged talent, thereby increasing profitability for companies.

Jen, left her finance firm a year after our conversation in Chelsea. She fulfilled her job responsibilities as the Marketing Director and found another Millennial named Kim to take her spot when she moved on. When I asked Kim what her expectations were going into the position she said in true Millennial fashion, "I'm pretty sure it will take me half of my time to do the responsibilities in the job description, which will be great to learn. Then I'm going to talk to my boss about other ways I can help the company based off of the skills I bring to the table. I know he's older, but I'm confident he'll listen to what I have to say."

Kim's attempt to unlock the confines of the job description is a forward step towards engagement, her success hinging on her ability to speak to the values of her parent's generation, while introducing her own in a collaborative, non-threatening light. The hope is that our Baby Boomer shares the mutual desire to understand his younger talent and expands his own to incorporate hers, thereby bridging the gap.

About the Author

⁵ Chester Elton, The Carrot Principle



Mala is the Director of Leadership & Transformation at VIP. She is also a Executive Coach, working with clients in industries ranging from law, education, healthcare to business. Her global experience includes work with the United States Navy, Apple, IBM, Arby's, Subaru, Wolfgang Puck, and Hyatt. Mala hold's a Masters Degree in Organizational Leadership from the University of San Diego and a Bachelor's Degree in Marketing Communications from Brigham Young University. She is a graduate of Landmark Education and is currently pursuing her ICF coaching certification.