

The times they are a-changin'

Pleasing Gen Y is key to surviving this storm

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Much of corporate Canada and North America is sitting in the eye of the storm that could soon reach gale force and wipe out your company. In the 1960s, Bob Dylan sang that "the answer is blowin' in the wind." But how many departures will it take for senior management to recognize the trend, and how many disruptions to productivity will it take for bosses to start listening?

We're right in the middle of a massive shift, and how we're going to be conducting business in the future does not lie with Baby Boomers. For anyone who doubts the intensity of this global shift, check out Karl Fisch's "Shift Happens" on You-Tube.

If companies hope to survive the impending storm, they need to stop doing what they've always done, and start listening and responding to Generation Y. Stop looking at people as costs and start seeing and treating them for what they are -- your greatest asset and the heart of your organization. Stop concentrating on tasks and start looking at processes and the big picture. Stop the empty rhetoric about continual learning and continuous improvement, and start learning to unlearn and relearn by listening to Gen Y employees. Stop the bottom-line focus, and start taking a top-line view with employees as the primary subject. Stop paying lip service to the concept of employee engagement, and start connecting with your people individually and face-to-face. Stop insulting the intelligence of your young vibrant and highly educated workforce by making empty promises, and start delivering. Stop trying to put old ideas on young shoulders; stop talking and start listening-- the winds of change are just beginning to blow.

The portability of competencies means many of your most talented employees can change jobs and move to another industry with very little disruption to their careers. The old notion of a 25-year career is not on any Gen Y's radar. Recognize that all knowledge is not the same. The "old" knowledge, accumulated throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s, is dramatically different from the "new" knowledge that has been accumulated at a far faster rate by these young minds throughout the '90s and into the new millennium. This generation was born into the cyber age. They absorb information five times faster than Baby Boomers. We are not living in the agricultural, industrial or information age -- we're moving into a new age of collaboration, social networking and cyber communication. Gen Y communicates in its own language. It's time to start learning that language if you ever hope to influence them.

In 1999, when 19-year-old Sean Fanning introduced Napster to the world, it was embraced by the youth and slammed by the music industry. It changed the music industry forever. Have you seen any of this generation without an iPod or Mp3 player plugged into their ears? But typically, the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) resisted and fought him.

Nearly 10 years later, the industry is opening the door and unlocking free downloads. Qtrax announced the release of 25 million tracks for free downloading, and was endorsed by the same record companies that hounded file-sharers through the courts in their attempt to stop music piracy. When change is imposed, it is resisted. But when change comes from within, it is embraced. The challenge is to recognize when change is necessary from within. The music industry was forced to change the way it did business, simply by the creations and innovations of young minds and the sheer power of popular demand.

There are many other industries that are going to have to change. But if they listen to Gen Y, and don't ridicule their ideas, then maybe that change may not be as costly or painful as it was for the music industry. Stop telling Gen Y you know what they want. Have the courtesy to ask them. The challenge for most industries and businesses now is that Generation X workers are taking a lot of the management jobs, and they've been trained by their Baby Boomer bosses. The Boomers are preparing for retirement, and don't care, or don't want to break out of their comfort zones at this stage in their careers. And decisions are still made at the top senior management level, without sufficient consultation with the Gen Y workforce.

It's time to push boundaries, break out of comfort zones, expand horizons, and let this powerful group of passionate and motivated workers do their thing and drive your organizations into the uncharted waters of the future.

If you're feeling comfortable right now about your employee engagement and retention initiatives, perhaps you might be just basking in the eye of the storm. It's time to take stock of the situation before this wind of change becomes a hurricane. The answer, as Bob Dylan would say, "is blowin' in the wind."



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