Leading Generation Y

A mindful approach to retaining employees

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Abstract

Generation Y is the up and coming group that will have a serious impact upon the business, political, and social realms of the US. Many from Generation Y have joined the workforce and still more are to come. With Baby Boomers nearing retirement or already retired, Generation Y will soon aim to fill their shoes. However, with the departing Baby Boomers there will be job vacancies because Generation Y simply is not a large enough population to fill the capacity the Baby Boomers occupied. This means companies are currently competing and will continue to compete over the recruitment and retention of Generation Y employees. This paper will go into the background of the desires of Generation Y in the workplace and how a company can orient itself, from supervisor, manager, and leadership roles, to hold onto their Generation Y employees through the application of mindfulness.

Introduction to Generation Y

This new generation that shall soon take up the mantle of business, society, and politics has been known by many different monikers. They are called the Millenials, Net Generation, Twentysomthings, and Generation Y, among other names. The rough time period that the generation encapsulates varies by the sources and study starting anywhere from 1977 to ending in 2003. Most of the commonly agreed upon time periods start around the early 1980’s and last through the late 1990’s.

What has characterized this group of individuals also greatly varies, but there are some common elements. To understand Generation Y (Gen Y or Gen Yers), you need to understand the environment that they were brought up in. This generation has had helicopter parents, frequent positive encouragement, the internet and computer information explosion (along with blogging, social networking, emailing, instant messaging, and so much more), warring politics (internal and external to our nation), and impactful events like the Columbine shootings, 9/11, and natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, and more). These events have helped shape them, as a whole, to be cautious, potentially
distrusting, and self oriented to ensure their own safety and quality of life. In any study or generalization, there will be outliers, but there are many traits and characteristics that Gen Y individuals frequently portray.

Gen Yers are used to getting things quickly, being self reliant, and knowing that new knowledge is just a quick Google or Wikipedia search away. On the other hand, this generation has come to greatly value kinship and seeks close personal connections, collaborative and meaningful work teams, hands on experimentation when learning, and positive encouragement. These elements contribute to how they look at the workplace and what they desire from their jobs.

The Workplace Need for Generation Y

With Baby Boomers nearing and starting the retirement process already, there is a clear gap in the sheer number of jobs being filled versus the number that are and will be available. Generation X and Generation Y will leave millions of possible jobs open because of the gap in the size of the generational populations compared to that of the Baby Boomers. The technology industry alone is projected to have 300 thousand jobs unfilled from jobs opened in the past decade. That big gap will mean fierce competition over choice employees.

There are already such shortages appearing in certain regions and specific job markets. As this occurs, organizations will be forced to attract people and compete for employees. The recruiting appeal will take many forms, but it can be expected that one consistent theme will be to “pitch” the values of the organization (i.e. its culture and climate) as a distinguishing feature, making it a better place to work than other organizations.

Marketing to employees first occurs through the job hiring process and other external activities, but it must also be applied as an on-going basis to maintain the interest of employees and demonstrate that the current employer is a better fit than other organizations. Generation Y individuals are well known for knowing what they want well before previous generations have when choosing their first full
time job. Gen Yers often have a few internships or part time jobs before they start looking for their first full time job. From those experiences, they often have a clear idea as to what values, vision, and work environment they want to have in their future workplace. Along with that, they seek more value out of the work they do besides just a paycheck. Recruiting is going to become a more important and focused activity as the Baby Boomer population work force gradually retires. The recruitment process and value propositions companies are creating have been well covered by research, publications and articles. However, Generation Y is known for switching jobs frequently. This means that recruitment time and costs will continue to rise while maintaining the necessary number of company employees will become even more important. It’s valuable to gain new recruits, but losing them would cause an even bigger loss to the company due to the initial recruitment, on boarding, training, and other processes that take time and resources. With a shortage in the number of employees available in Generation Y, from the candidate pool size decreasing, exacerbated by increased job switching, “organizations need to shift their emphasis from getting more out of people to investing more in them, so they are motivated – and able – to bring more of themselves to work every day.”iii

The Focus Becomes Retention
As touched on previously, Generation Y is known for their frequent job changes. Many from Gen Y have become suspicious of business, government, and other institutions. They’ve lived through war, economic downturns, Enron, 9/11, Columbine shootings, Hurricane Katrina, and other impactful events. As a generation, they have become cautious and even distrustful. When Gen Yers look into employment, they’re picky and knowledgeable about what they want. They want a variety of different benefits like flex time, more vacation, a clear work and life balance, great learning opportunities, high visibility for career advancement, exciting challenges, a collaborative environment, fun at work, up to date technology, diversity in team members and perspectives, and other employment aspects.iv However, Generation Y seeks one job aspect far more than others.
The interest area then centers on what truly matters the most to Gen Y. A study was done in early 2008 by AGL Resources that interviewed Gen Yers in the workplace, in college (trade and technical schools as well as graduate business degrees), and out of college from different geographic regions, demographics, and experience level. In asking the interviewees about what they sought most from leadership, themes emerged. Those themes included leaders showing support in times of work need by taking on some of the workload, forming a positive and encouraging relationship with employees, trusting and empowering employees, professional growth opportunities, frequently giving feedback, and having expertise in the job area. It concluded that the relationship with leaders, meaning supervisors and managers of employees, is by far the most significant aspect with approximately 80% of the interviewees remarking on and stressing that theme’s importance. This means that the leaders play a critical role in job satisfaction and the ongoing career upkeep for Gen Yers. “Managers and leaders set the climate and sometimes the culture of an organization and manage the modifications. This may be explicit or implicit, but it occurs.”

Gen Yers know intuitively what our research has been telling us for years -- and what everyone is saying nowadays: The number one factor affecting employee performance, as well as retention, is the relationship people have with their immediate supervisor. People may be drawn to your business initially because of your name or reputation, but what makes them stay is how they’re treated by their bosses. The best managers listen. They care. They support. They respect. They trust. They guide. They communicate. They challenge. They teach. They give feedback. They reward."

Thus, Generation Y seeks relationships with their leaders at work, which will be an absolutely vital element in retention. Everyone has the potential to be a leader; however people have to choose to act as one and have to be able to relate well with Gen Yers in order to be effective. Leadership is by no means easy, especially when the demands of work and life can weigh heavily upon everyone. This can lead some who have been effective and great leaders in the past, to slip into behaviors of dissonance, where they no longer relate well with others. Furthermore, people in leadership roles “will likely notice
that people seem to hold back, or become very careful, or they act as if they do not care about [the leader’s] feelings. Somehow, the power that goes along with leadership causes people to believe that the leader is somehow ‘above it all,’ and does not feel things as keenly” as other people do. A result of that behavior is that leaders will have a harder time engaging with those around them. Cultivating, nurturing, and strengthening relationships is tough and it takes persistent effort, otherwise the positive influences of leadership dissolve.

**Mindfulness**

A leader that is mindful is one that will be able to sustain the positive and important qualities of leadership over time, despite the ebb and flow of stress, deadlines, challenges, and obstacles that come up in work and life. “Mindfulness is the capacity to be fully aware of all that one experiences inside the self – body, mind, heart, spirit – and to pay full attention to what is happening around us – people, the natural world, our surroundings, and events.” It is through the awareness and attention that mindfulness engenders that leaders will be able to retain Gen Y employees because their relationships with Gen Yers will always be in tune and well suited. For any leader, mindfulness takes two different forms in order for its importance to be realized.

**Mindfulness of Self**

The first form is being mindful of your own self. Would be leaders who are not completely aware of what is going on within themselves, will be unable to properly interpret what goes on beyond them. A computer that is not wired properly will not only be unable to do its normal tasks correctly, but hooking up to a network will become even more overwhelmingly difficult. Similarly, if someone does not know what he or she is experiencing in their own world, what goes on around them can be easily misinterpreted or improperly channeled. Bad days happen upon occasion and the sooner one accepts
that it’s not everyone else’s fault because the day is Monday, it’s a “bad hair day” or whatever the source may be, the sooner the day can shift from bad to good.

There are many different facets to self awareness. Along with that, there are many different activities that can help boost awareness and sustain your energy. It takes energy, time, and behavioral changes to become more mindful of yourself. There are four key elements to pay attention to, which are: body, emotions, mind, and spirit. Each of those elements has actions that help people become more in tune with them and sustain their productivity and awareness. To keep up your body’s energy; regularly exercising, having a good diet, keeping a consistent sleep schedule, taking breaks and more all help maintain physical energy over time so that you are not worn down. By finding ways to understand your emotions, maintaining your cool by utilizing breathing exercises when under great amounts stress, and taking the time to see the opportunity and additional insights daily events bring, you can retain your positive mood and emotions. Creating a routine to focus your efforts, such as scheduling specific times each day to address all of your email instead of constantly attending to it, switching tasks to allow for different thinking to happen, and, simply put, minimizing distracting multitasking all promote your sustained mental productivity. Acting to fit your interests and strengths through complementary partnerships or undertaking choice opportunities, as well as finding the areas of work that you find truly meaningful and rewarding all align with keeping up your spirit.

Pursuing these activities or others may seem to contradict the pursuit of progress in the business world. It’s well known that there are plenty of choices available that could be better for you, like taking an exercise break instead of continuing non-stop to work late into the night. However, these different activities make it so that you are significantly more effective at work. Taking breaks, going on short walks during work hours, scheduling focused email sessions and more all contribute to being more effective overall when you return to other work aspects. You have more energy, and you are able to be
more in tune with yourself. The end result of managing your energy is that you become more productive and effective. By pursuing this aspect of mindfulness, you will be well suited to being highly observant, demonstrate empathy, think creatively, solve problems, and, most importantly, relate to others so that you are in harmony with them.

**Mindfulness of Others**

When a leader of Gen Yers is mindful, the Gen Y individuals around that leader will be able to get the kind of relationship they seek. The understanding, knowledge, and actionable insight that leaders gain from being mindful of themselves and to those around them opens up doors of possibility, collaboration, and opportunities for great things to happen.

For a leader, each conversation and exchange is an opportunity to gather valuable information about people, groups, and cultures, while building relationships and resonance. Attending carefully to our human environment and our relationships enables us to see details we may have missed and generate more accurate ideas about what is really going on. We notice subtle patterns in people’s behavior, group dynamics, organizational processes, and even world-wide events. When we are mindful, we are more in control of ourselves and situations simply because we see reality more clearly.

Mindfulness, coupled with the desire and pursuit of relationships promotes positive reinforcement between the leader and follower. If the mindful leader truly cares about and strives for the betterment of the Gen Y employee, the result will become so much more powerful. Compassion and hope are two further elements of mindfulness, which bring together the positive intentions behind creating and sustaining a resonant relationship at work. Through these additional characteristics, all of the leader’s awareness and the understanding from his or her relationship with the Gen Y employees will create a very strong pull to keep the Gen Y employee at the company, especially with that leader.

Once a leader is mindful, he or she can then lead others into more mindful behaviors and actions. Generation Y seeks relationships most from their leader, but other elements of teams, collaboration, valuing diversity, and more all come from collaboration, communication, and
coordination with others. Through understanding and creatively applying what best suits the business and team members, mindfulness can spread. Along with that, a leader can utilize feedback for mutual benefit. Generation Y employees actively solicit frequent check-ins so that they are on track with their actions, and to know how and where they might improve, change, or reinforce their progress. If a leader takes time to be appreciative of his or her team members, both the leader and the feedback recipient will benefit from the exchange. A leader sets the tone for the team and can encourage actions, routines, and behaviors to help propagate the same kinds of energy promotion and awareness that lead to new levels of productivity. If the mindfulness spreads, the team the Gen Y employee works with will also become a strong tie to reinforce the positive elements of working at that company helping to ensure retention.

**Mindfulness Throughout**

The thought of an entire team, division, department, business unit, or even company being mindful conjures up the thought of immense productivity, effectiveness, communication, and retention gains. However, the spread of mindfulness would need to be supported at each level, wherever it might spread. Mindfulness and the activities that accompany it can appear as a foreign notion or potentially seen as detrimental pursuits to productivity when initially examined. The most important decision makers must also buy in to these pursuits. “To succeed, renewal efforts need solid support and commitment from senior management, beginning with the key decision maker.” The first line of action to a Gen Yer continues to be from the leader of the Generation Y employee, which could still bring forth immense benefits from being mindful even if not all areas of the company pursue mindfulness. Yet, for a company to truly be sustainably effective at retaining Generation Y employees, resonating leaders who are mindful and form relationships with Gen Yers, among other positive efforts, will need to be the first among other lines of support and a clear value shown to Generation Y employees.
Conclusion

Gen Y is going to be an exciting generation with a lot ahead of it. It’s well on its way to have a major impact upon life as we know it because of their thirst for action, collaborative spirit, and technical know-how. Being mindful to help cultivate the positive influence Gen Y could have on your organization will take effort, but it will show even greater rewards. Mindfulness starts with your own core self, bringing immense benefit through those actions and behaviors alone. When mindfulness extends to others from that core, the effect becomes all the more influential and powerful. Generation Y is absolutely vital for the long term efforts of a business. What Gen Yers seek above all else is a great relationship with their leader at work. Mindful leaders will be harbingers for togetherness and productivity when working with anyone, especially Generation Y employees, because they are able to more effectively work in any of their own job duties and with the people around them. A question for the reader emerges, asking why you would not choose to become more mindful for yourself, for your colleagues, and for your company.

References

viii Ibid.
xi Ibid.
xiv Ibid.