

## Leading a new generation

What do the new generation of twenty-somethings want out of work?



They are young twenty-somethings who are well-educated, well-connected, techno-savvy and consider themselves to be in great demand on the job market.

Employers, however, perceive them as ambitious, unreliable, disloyal and demanding. *Fortune* deemed Generation Y as high-maintenance, yet potentially high-performing as its members are entering the workplace armed with more information, greater technological skill and higher expectations of themselves and others.

How can managers engage and lead today's new breed of iPod-toting executives?

### Expectations of a new generation

- Generation Y is clearly defined by the age they grew up in – amidst rapid technological advancements and global expansion. And in an increasingly time-compressed society of overnight deliveries and instant messaging, Gen Y wants things fast, and they want it *now*. This is how the frenzied pace of today's world has impacted the demands of Gen Y.

The average tenure of Gen Y in a company stands at 16 months; there is little wonder they have earned a reputation for poor company loyalty and weak job commitment, and are barely apologetic for it. The workforce's youngest members desire change, variety and new challenges. They are less intimidated by management directives and would rather “work to live”.

And while they may be known as an overindulged, overprotected and over-stimulated generation, Gen Y is inquisitive, challenging and creative. They desire the flexibility to complete their tasks in their own way. They are learning-oriented, and want instant feedback so they can progress.

### Leading Generation Y

Just like how a salesperson needs to believe in the product he is promoting, Gen Y-ers need to feel a connection with the company they work for and its values. For these young workers, the workplace provides a social network where they can create relationships within the organisation. It is for this collaborative work environment that Gen Y-ers reject the traditional “command and control” style of work environment espoused by Baby Boomers.

With today's increasingly flat organisational hierarchies, Gen Y seeks mentors within their leaders. From a study done in Singapore, *'Y' are they Different? A study of Gen Y at work, their views and how they are viewed*, by The GMP Group and Temasek Polytechnic, it was revealed that the most important characteristics the Gen Y workforce desired of their leaders are caring, inspiring and competent. Because of the need to have a deep sense of purpose in their work, Gen Y-ers expect their leaders to guide them with a friendly and firm hand while acknowledging and accepting the individual's unique traits and abilities. Thus, it is important to have regular and open communication between managers and their Gen Y staff.

However, it is important for Gen Y-ers to recognise other values and attitudes that pervade the workplace. In a highly competitive business environment, a softer approach may be more detrimental than a task-oriented one. Furthermore, managers would have to cater not only to Gen Y-ers but other generations working within the organisation as well.

### **Keeping Gen Y engaged**

Gen Y-ers will gravitate towards employers who not only help them achieve their professional and career aspirations, but also their personal and social needs. Therefore, it is important for managers to overcome prejudices and recognise an alternative way of managing their younger employees.

#### **Dispel negative mindsets**

While some stereotype may ring true, negative preconceived notions of Gen Y only serve as psychological barricades which prevent employers from understanding their younger employees and uncover their potential. Not only that, it can add tension and hinder harmony at the workplace.

#### **Communicate**

Maintaining regular dialogue not only helps to manage expectations and solicit feedback, it is part of coaching and mentoring Gen Y. Through communication, leaders are able to suss out career growth opportunities as well as recognise Gen Y's work and contribution, big motivations for Gen Y to remain in a company.

#### **Be genuine**

“Keeping it real” is key to gaining respect from Gen Y. They can easily detect unauthentic managers who are preoccupied with keeping up with appearances of a “model” leader instead of leading from the heart. Showing vulnerability demonstrates sincerity while recognising one's shortcomings.

#### **Inspire**

Gen Y is drawn to leaders who incite and inspire – U.S President Barack Obama is one good example. To inspire their younger staff, managers need to demonstrate the passion and drive they desire their staff to possess. In turn, Gen Y would be motivated to work towards common business goals.

The route to effective management of a Gen Y workforce requires commitment and collaboration from Gen Y-ers and their managers. While a paradigm shift is needed from managers in managing their younger staff, Gen Y-ers have to equally manage their own expectations and affect their own mindsets, especially so during tough economic times.

*This article is contributed by Mr Josh Goh, Assistant Director, Corporate Services, GSI Executive Search.*