Who is Going to Lead Us: None Other Than The Forgotten Generation – Generation X

Paul Dannar

Abstract

Generational diversity has been a topic of discussion for some time. With Generation-X now assuming leadership positions in organizations, time has come to focus on their leadership style and determine how they might lead. This article suggests that the X’er worldview is only the starting point of their leadership approach and journey. Generation-X leaders will have to adapt to the needs and desires of the other generational cohorts in order to provide solid leadership. Adapting is something this generation is comfortable with so change will not be difficult. The challenge will be applying their distinct talents which have served them well in the past, towards a new environment of follower first leadership.

This article suggests the overarching motive for leadership is derived from individual and generational defining moments and as such provides an analysis of generation-X in the workplace. This article further demonstrates how these motives relate to transformational and servant leadership theory and will explore how Generation X’s leadership style is beginning to be adapted into current organizational cultures.

This analysis provides consultants, trainers, leaders and other stakeholders a better understanding of how feedback and self correction inform the way Xer’s lead and follow using transformational leadership and how this approach can be adapted to better serve the workplace. Without attempting to re-hash the various predispositions or stereotypes of each generation, a brief synopsis of what tends to make each generation who they are, what one might term their defining moments, is in order.
A Generational Overview

Before we can interpret the preferred leadership approaches of Generation-X some detailed background of the current workforce is warranted.

Much has been written about the three primary generations in the workforce today which are Baby Boomers born between 1943 and 1960, Generation-X born between 1961 and 1980, and Millenials born between 1981 and 2000. By 2020 Boomers will occupy 22% percent of the workforce X’ers around 30 percent, with X’ers assuming more and more of the leadership positions in organizations. Millenial’s and the younger generation to follow will round out the remaining 48% of the workforce.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are more than 80 million strong, by this virtue alone all manner of changes to the way they were dealt with was forthcoming. “Boomers grew up in the spotlight, new products were created especially for them, schools, subdivisions, and shopping malls expanded to make room for them. Never in history has a generation been so pampered. For over 50 years, Baby Boomers have taken center stage.” In fact Boomers still demand center stage. Although Generation-X members were willing to let them or just unable to stop them, Millennial’s will not be so inclined, as they have been told they are special and will expect to be treated special.

The Baby Boom generation was and is still so large many believe in order to stand out from the crowd they had to achieve great things. Therefore, the search for achievement and competitive battle for material things is often what describes this generation’s entire being. Of course this is not all they are. Many great things were achieved; the moon landing, civil rights achievements, and an era of prosperity. The psyche of Baby Boomers was derived from the message “you can be anything you want.” As far as managing and leadership were concerned, the traditional command and control mechanisms created by their fathers after WWII ended became less tenable. Based upon their proclivity for the “big event” they sought after the charismatic or visionary leader to show the way, often seeking to be the visionary leader.

Boomers did not mind visionary leadership, which focused on the leader, as long as they received a piece of the pie. “Boomers are passionately concerned about participation and spirit in the workplace, about bringing heart and humanity to the office and about creating a fair and level playing field for all.” They believe anything is possible and whether fair or not they will continue to define what is important in workplaces and society for some time to come.

Generation-X

This dark and brooding generation is a complex bunch. They are skeptical, change masters, commitment phobic, self-reliant, comfortable with diversity, and technology and uncomfortable with authority. Gen-X grew up in an entirely different world than their Boomer counterparts. Divorce and working moms produced “latch-key” kids. Threats from multiple sources abounded such as gang violence, AIDS, and cocaine. Even TV was different, while Boomers grew up with Leave it to Beaver and Gunsmoke; X’ers were brought up with Three’s Company and Charlie’s Angels, often watching these programs without supervision. Their experiences lead to traits of independence, resilience, and adaptability which translate to a need for autonomy. Micro-management is a big no-no to Generation-X.
Generation-X was harshly criticized by Baby Boomers when they entered the workforce. Instead of trying to understand their differences Boomers labeled them with stereotypical negative traits and performance behaviors. Somewhat surprisingly the old stereotypes still haunt this generational cohort. Below are the four primary stereotypes still thrust upon generation-X:

**X’ers are not loyal.** The concept of loyalty as derived from the boomer generation suggests a relationship where the employee puts in a full day's work, does not rock the boat, and puts the company's goals ahead of their personal desires. In return the company provides the employee a safe place to work, a decent living wage, and security for the entirety of the employees work life. This workforce bargain is obsolete and X’ers understand this because they saw their parents downsized or re-engineered after sacrificing much of their work lives for a company. X’ers experienced firsthand how willing companies are to dump employees when times are tough. Therefore, organizations should not be surprised if X’ers feel no sense of loyalty when times are good. For this reason X’ers often see themselves as free agents and instead of an up and down loyalty flowing from an individual to an institution, they express side-to-side loyalty which is directed towards colleagues, ex-colleagues, clients, projects, or even a particular profession.

**X’ers are arrogant.** As the first generation of “Latch-Key,” kids X’ers have developed a fierce self-confidence. Often confused with arrogance, an X’ers self-realization allows them to take care of themselves, as they have often been asked to do. There is also a psychological dynamic at work here as X’ers are continuously trying to prove themselves self-reliant.

**X’ers are not willing to pay their dues.** Working until midnight, going into the office on the weekends, and taking work home has been, and still are to some extent, the behaviors rewarded by many companies and are the hallmarks of the Boomer lifestyle. However, commitment to an organization did not always pay off for Boomers as they were laid off, fired, or downsized short of retirement age, thus never receiving what was promised them. X’ers instead seek not just balance in their lives, but blending and have replaced the “Work is life” motto with “Get a Life” as they seek informality and daily dividends in the workplace. Like millions of American workers, putting a career first while robustly following the bottom line has been replaced with putting the family or personal life first and robustly pursuing a better quality of life.

**X’ers need instant gratification.** Generation-X’ers are not satisfied with annual or semi-annual feedback. They want to know how they are doing and they expect a timely and tactfully truthful response. They want to know if what they are doing is productive and contributing to the organization. Having been raised in a culture of immediacy and uncertainty, Xers expect the world around them to respond quickly to their input, and they want problems and conflict resolved quickly, which was proven possible by a multitude of television shows. X’ers witnessed a victory in Desert Storm, brought to them live by CNN which only took 100 hours to accomplish, how’s that for immediacy? In summation; X’ers need and want self achievement from their jobs, their basic needs met, and do not want their job to negatively impact on their quality of life.

**Millenials**

In the book “Millenials Rising” Howe and Strause describe this generation as the next great generation. The first great generation were those who won WWII and whose work ethic brought upon great prosperity for decades. If Millenials are going to reach such heights they are going to need help. Fortunately for the Millennial they believe the more the merrier and collective action.
is there is plenty of help to be found whether it be the enthusiastic Boomer mentor or the Gen-X loner who will, sometimes reluctantly, provide coaching most often due to the millennial not taking no for an answer. Raised at the most child centric time in history the Millenials have a great deal of self-confidence and like the Boomer generation Millenials are quite optimistic about the future, and trust centralized authority. Similar to the X’er cohort Millenials are very tech savvy having grown up with the Internet and other technologies throughout their entire lives. Unlike their X’er counterparts however, they are team oriented and prefer group over individual endeavors. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the key defining moments of each of the three generations in today’s workplace.

Table 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Generational Cohort</th>
<th>Key Defining Moments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>Assassination of John F. Kennedy</td>
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<td>Vietnam War</td>
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<td>First Man on the Moon</td>
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<td>Assassination of Martin Luther King</td>
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<td>Watergate w/Nixon Resignation</td>
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<td>Civil Rights Movement</td>
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<td>X’ers</td>
<td>AIDS Epidemic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Challenger Disaster</td>
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<td>First Gulf-War (Lasted only 100 days)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fall of Berlin Wall</td>
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<td>Increased Divorce; Two Working Parents</td>
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<td>Diversity</td>
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<td>Millenials</td>
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<td>Columbine School Shooting</td>
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<td>Solid Economy</td>
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<td>Clinton Impeachment</td>
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<td>9/11 and the aftermath</td>
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The Gen-X Follower

What approach should X’ers take with regard to leading these two generations? How might the loner generation lead those that prefer team endeavors?

To understand how Gen-X provides leadership we should first look at how they like to be led. Leadership is of course what they desire not management, as the first ever latch-key kids they have been managing themselves for quite some time and are comfortable doing so. Generation-X members despise micro-management so they will not micro-manage others, and they expect to be treated like professionals, even early on in the employment scenario. The concept of paying dues and company loyalty does not resonate; they see this as an outdated concept.

Generation-X thrive on continuous feedback of their performance. The traditional performance appraisal just does not suffice. X’ers want to know how they are doing today, on this project, and this afternoon. X’ers need feedback as we all need water, without it, they will become dehydrated in the workplace. Think of feedback as the mail. No longer does it take months to receive a letter from the Pony Express, or a couple of days or even overnight from the US postal service or Federal Express. The mail or message is now instantaneous through e-mail, instant messaging, Skype, and Facebook. Xers expect an immediate approach to feedback and when they do not get it, they become frustrated. Without
feedback there is no way of determining if they are succeeding at work or if their investment in themselves is paying off. If feedback is the breakfast of “champions” as Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson state in The One Minute Manager, X’ers are champions with enormous appetites. Quality of life is another significant issue for the Generation-X cohort. The idea that work should always come first is an old paradigm. Family, friends, and fun are just as important to them and they will continue to seek out balance throughout their careers. More than anything else X’ers seek trust. Trust by leaders to do their jobs without constant hovering and trust that their approach to work, while unique, is no less productive.

The Generation-X Leader

The Generation-X follower and now leader could never quite adapt to the transactional, visionary or charismatic leadership approaches utilized so well for the previous generation. The transactional approach did not mesh well with this generation because they were not willing to sacrifice and postpone rewards for the prospect of a long term employment relationship. The visionary leadership approach does not fit well either due to its focus on the leader and the potential for the visionary to wield too much power over the X’er.

Generation-X leaders are sandwiched between an older generation that never completely understood them nor took the time to provide them the leadership they so desperately sought, and one who has many traits similar to Boomers. Fortunately for the X’er psyche they can see a bit of themselves in the Millenial as well; a tech savvy change agent not afraid to try new things.

X’ers rarely accept the idea of one individual having all the answers or one way of doing things. A visionary leader requires ultimate loyalty and frankly the X’ers first loyalty tends to be to themselves rather than an institution or individual. As is often the case the visionary leader will be quite authoritarian at times and will put their vision above all else, including followers. Perhaps even more damaging is if the visionary departs the organization for any reason, much of the confidence in the organizations direction may go with them. Due to their self-reliant nature, X’ers are not comfortable allowing someone to have that much power over their work and life situation.

The question remains; what type of leadership style seems to fit well for X’ers and how might they take these lessons learned and lead? Table 2 depicts how X’ers will lead today’s organizations which is based upon how they want to be led; a transformational approach.

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<tr>
<th>How to Lead Gen-X</th>
<th>How Gen-X will Lead</th>
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<tr>
<td>Do not Micromanage</td>
<td>Delegation. (X’ers trust the Individual not organizations)</td>
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<td>Need Continuous Feedback</td>
<td>Daily Feedback via Numerous Methods (May Prefer E-mail over Verbal Feedback)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invest in Their Skills and Desire for Self Improvement</td>
<td>Individual Mentorship (Very Informal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance/Blend Work, Family, and Fun</td>
<td>Ensure Followers are Achieving Quality of Life</td>
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Transformational Leadership.
Bass viewed transformational leadership as more effective in achieving higher levels of improvement and change among employees than transactional or other forms of leadership. This approach puts the leader second to the organization’s needs and in some cases the follower’s as well. Transformational leadership is quite conducive to the Generation-X member mindset as they are looking for a quality reciprocal relationship with their leaders, colleagues, and followers as well as seeking to be partners in the outcome of the organization. In order for transformation to take place, key aspects of the leader must be present. First, as Azman, Hasan, Ahmad, Mohd, and Munirah point out in a recent article, the interactions between the leader and the led must be built on personal integrity, reciprocal trust, and an overall desire to enhance the other. This approach meshes well with the X’er who is looking for continued feedback on how they are doing and have a need for contributing to something unique and fulfilling. The X’er cohort has an inner desire for continuous improvement and Bass and Avolio state the only way to help a follower develop is to understand how he or she views the world. The desire to comprehend the follower’s needs beyond those at work is extremely attractive to this generation.

Since X’ers are quite comfortable managing themselves, as they have been doing since their teenage years, they desire more autonomy and less rigid rules and regulations. The most significant difference, proposed by many experts such as Bruce Tulgan, Claire Raines and Ron Zemke between the Boomer generation and the X’er cohort is their view of work. Put succinctly Boomers have a “live to work” attitude while X’ers have a “work to live” approach to work life integration. This viewpoint of an X’er aligns well with a transformational leadership approach because of its individualized consideration component. According to Eeden, Cilliers & Deventer individualized consideration implies that the leader considers the ability of the follower and their level of maturity to determine their needs. The need might be mentoring or increased autonomy regardless the key is together they decide upon a plan of action satisfying the needs of both parties and thus the organization.

What does X’er leadership look like?

X’ers understand change is an inevitable reality of life with organizations in need of continuous transformation. As X’ers and Millenials are both comfortable with change initial resistance will not be significant. The challenge will be to ensure change initiatives meet the needs of all in the workplace. This means the transformational X’er must strive to align their own interests with the good of the organization and the follower.

Generation-X leaders will go out of their way to communicate. Face to Face communication is not always necessary. Communication will come via blogs, interoffice memos, email, video-logs, texts, the corporate Facebook page, and even the occasional conversation over lunch. Those being led by X’ers will have a good idea where they stand with regard to their performance and the performance of the organization as X’ers still believe in constant feedback which will be readily reciprocated.

X’ers tend to problem solve via the trial and error method. They focus less on the end result or bottom line and more on process development and the lessons learned in the endeavor. Some of the arrogant external stereotypes might arise as X’ers will seem quite sure of themselves even up to the point of failure. Fortunately, their self-reliant background will allow them to move on rather quickly as opposed to belaboring past mistakes.

The “me” first mindset of Generation-X has served them well for many years. Overall mental health is crucial to their upbringing and is deeply embedded in their psyche. However, if this generation is to provide quality leadership to Boomers and more importantly Millennial’s then they must adapt.
way in which they can adapt is to modify their leadership focus. Transformational leaders are actively engaged in responding to changes in the external environment in an effort to produce revolutionary change\textsuperscript{31} could repeat this in other words in conclusion This external focus is typically reactive and unstable if not chaotic at times. Servant leadership on the other hand is an internally focused change endeavor and is motivated by a sense of mission to grow others which results in a stable culture\textsuperscript{32} and is much more proactive. This approach is a superior match in regard to the psych of the millenial as they have been “desired” and put first from the start. This servant leader approach can also guide them by providing direction, opportunities for learning, spiritual stimulation with regard to a positive work environment, and the ability to be fully engaged in the entirety of the process early on in the relationship.

Table 3 shows how the transformational leadership style preferred by Generation-X leaders can be transformed into a servant leadership style more aligned with Millenials. This approach also speaks to Boomers who are now entering a place in their careers where external motivators no longer suffice.

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<tr>
<th>Generation-X Leadership Behaviors</th>
<th>Adapted to a Servant Leadership Model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Offer an Appealing Version of the Future\textsuperscript{33}</td>
<td>Offer Ennobling Behaviors (Humility, Respectfulness, Honesty, Commitment, Selflessness, Forgiveness)\textsuperscript{34}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat Followers as Unique Individuals\textsuperscript{35}</td>
<td>Value Followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus is on the Organization</td>
<td>Focus is on the Follower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Initiatives determined by Outside Environment</td>
<td>Change Initiatives determined by Follower Needs</td>
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Moving to a Servant Leadership Mindset

An internal focus, not on self, but others allows followers to undertake actions in the best interests of the organization, even though the focus of the leader is not primarily on the organization’s objectives.\textsuperscript{36} So how do we assist the Generation-X leader with altering their focus? How do they make this change?

Patterson\textsuperscript{37} developed a model to assist any leader, specifically the Generation-X leader in adapting to a servant leadership mindset. Figure 1\textsuperscript{38} outlines the model’s concepts from agapao love to service and illustrates the role of the leader in the process.\textsuperscript{39}

In agreement with Winston\textsuperscript{40} the model is incomplete as it does not show how the follower reciprocates the leader’s intentions. This would be especially important in the early stages of the X’ers attempt to move from a transformational leadership style to the servant leadership style. The X’er will need solid feedback to adapt and thus the model will need to provide a feedback loop. Adding the follower’s intended response to the leader’s actions would go a long way in providing this feedback loop.
When the leader provides for the needs of the follower than the reciprocating follower will display respect, a willingness to serve, challenge leader assumptions\(^{41}\), offering solid opinions on courses of action, participate in transformation,\(^{42}\) take ethical action when necessary, and ultimately show commitment and thus the capacity to lead when the time comes. The entire model is provided in figure 2\(^{43}\) below:

This model offers more than just feedback on how the leader is doing. It showcases how the leader cannot lead alone and the X’er will realize this through this cyclic relationship, if they have not done so already. There is no Super Hero Leader, Baby Boomers already tried and failed as evidenced by the increased number of a wide range of health issues, and burnout rates that plagued them throughout their careers. Leaders must develop followers into leaders themselves and this is what servant leadership is designed to accomplish.

Servant Leadership develops followers by empowering them, honoring commitments and building trust and respect within the workplace\(^{44}\). Followers are developed by changing the focus from the external environment and placing it internally on the follower and showing people they have value beyond their ability to provide utility to the leader or the organization.\(^{45}\) Most important servant leadership develops followers by providing the Generation-X leader with what they have been looking for their entire lives; a sense that they are making a difference, they themselves have value, and they are no longer the ignored generation. Servant leadership speaks directly to the basic need of this generation and makes them feel like they matter. The latch-key child will no longer be alone to fend for themselves; they will have willing partners working diligently to accomplish tasks, goals, and perhaps even ennobling missions.

Servant leadership will not only help the X’er become a better leader, one who is capable of meeting the needs of Millennials, it will do something far greater, making the generation worthwhile, not in the eyes of others but in the eyes of the Generation itself.
Of course developing followers is not all about the Gen-X leader it is also very much about the follower and how the servant leadership model can best serve Millenials and Boomers. Servant leadership is also flexible, and it is understood that with the various generational and other types of diversity our global organizations deal with every day a leader with only one leadership style will not be effective. Herein lies a bit of a paradox, when it comes down to it servant leadership is not just a leadership style, it is a way of thinking, feeling, and dealing with everyday situations. If the leader’s first concern is followers then all decisions will be based upon a specific decision making criteria. The first questions will not be how will I make a profit, how might this affect our stock options, or even how this will play in the media? The first questions and concerns will be; what will my followers think? How will this action affect them? Will they be harmed in some way?

What lies ahead for Generation-X is to utilize their resiliency and change agent proclivities to transform their leadership style to meet the needs of all in the organization. This means they must adjust their focus away from the external environment to the follower. We can help them achieve this transformation through the method that serves them best; feedback. Generation-X thrive on feedback the more they receive the better off the follower and ultimately the organization will be. Through these lessons learned and the application therein Generation-X leaders can better serve others in the workplace.

About the Author

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