

## WORKPLACE

### Alley Uneasy Boomer/Gen X 'Alliance'



Linda Dini Jenkins

The American workplace is at a crossroads relating to the diversity of two groups: Boomers, born somewhere between 1945 and 1960, and Gen Xers, born between 1961 and 1975. The result is a potential for infighting that can be a problem for productivity and collaboration.

By having a clearer understanding of how each group thinks, works and responds, the most positive experiences of both populations can be harnessed and used to build and sustain organizational health.

When questioned, Boomers and Gen Xers display significant differences of opinion about key workplace topics:

- Jobs vs. careers,
- Expectations around work life,
- Relationships with employers,
- Sacrifices vs. choices,
- Role models and mentoring,
- Dealing with conflict,
- Personal fears and values,
- Perceptions about the "other" group of women and the ease with which they can work together.

The generation that said women could have it all is frequently burned out, bitter and left wanting in today's marketplace. And their children, today's Gen Xers, are moving right past them, armed with the skills and credentials Boomers most often lacked. There's little appreciation for the other side, and that spells trouble.

For example, both groups consistently report having both male and female mentors and role models. But Boomer women report being positively influenced by a mother or father rather than by professional colleagues. At the same time, Boomers seem surprised and grateful for any mentoring they receive on the job, while Gen Xers seem to expect it, expressing great disappointment when it is not forthcoming.

Neither Boomers nor Gen Xers seem to have actively embraced the concept of being mentors themselves in the workplace, although they recognize its importance in career development and speak glowingly about their companies' mentoring initiatives. Both groups talk about being role models simply by being "good" at their jobs and trying to be good managers and leaders.

Beyond mentoring, critical issues such as collaboration, entitlements, loyalty and life balance are being seriously challenged in the current interactions between these two groups of women. Ignoring the conflicts could be costly.

There are several action steps that companies can take to open new possibilities within their organizations, including the following.

- Create regular conversations with mixed groups of Boomer and Gen X women to formulate an open dialogue followed by problem solving. The Boomer-Gen Xer topic appears to be an organizational "unspeakable" that can create a negative mood, sapping energy and affecting productivity.
- Institute a program of team/peer coaching with women from both groups to create a model for finding increasingly productive ways of working together.
- Hire an objective executive coach for mid-level women to support/accelerate their professional growth and help them deal with related issues, such as effectively managing older workers.
- Create a program of workshops in which Boomer women can explore the stories they have about their work and life experiences, harnessing their energy for the sake of organizational effectiveness.

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