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Leaders in Waiting

On January 1, 2011, the first Baby Boomers turned 65 years old. Every day since, 10,000 Boomers have turned 65. This will continue for the next 14 years.



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And then, one December night in 2029, the very last Baby Boomer will reach that once traditional retirement age. And if he or she is employed, he or she may think like many Boomers before: “Well, I’m not retiring just yet.”

In a 2014 Gallup poll, approximately half of Boomers reported that they were not planning on retiring until well past the age of 65. In fact, 1 in 10 Boomers said they would never retire. However, a second poll doesn’t support this data. Even in the post-recession era, Boomers were not staying in the workplace at the high rates previously anticipated. By 67 and 68 years old, only one in three Boomers was still employed.

THE WAITING GAME

So where does that leave the generations behind them, in particular the Millennials?

In the not-too-distant past, Boomer leaders would have continued the trends of their predecessors — retiring by 65 and handing over the reins to someone younger, qualified, appropriately trained and adequately prepared to tackle the job. But now, these leaders and their human resources teams report that while there are some Gen Xers with the ability to take the reins of leadership (many of whom already have), it’s that pesky generation behind them that lacks both the interest and skills to become leaders.

Now, there is some truth behind that. According to a recent survey, Millennials are less interested than their older colleagues in taking on positions of power. The survey found that only 31 percent of Millennials aspired to become C-level executives in their organization. So yes, fewer Millennials are interested in filling traditional leadership roles in their organizations.

But the story doesn’t end there.

While there are many Gen Xers ready to take over leadership roles, there are far fewer Gen Xers than there are either Millennials or Boomers.

First, many Millennials are already leaders. Deloitte recently surveyed Millennials across the globe. It found that 50 percent of Millennial respondents were already in leadership positions, with 41

percent of them having four or more direct reports.

Second, Baby Boomers are retiring. And while there are many Gen Xers ready to take over leadership roles, there are far fewer Gen Xers than there are either Millennials or Boomers. Millennials will have to fill leadership roles, sooner or later.

There are two ways we can approach the issue. We can despair that Millennials will never become the leaders in our organizations that we want them to be and leave the problem for someone else to deal with eventually. Or we can try to determine what it is that Millennials want out of leadership and figure out what skills they want and need to get them there.

START THE CONVERSATION

“But Millennials aren’t trainable,” the detractors will say. “They are impatient, disloyal, narcissistic and entitled.”

But as numerous studies and anecdotal evidence will tell you, Millennials want to work for an organization that, generally speaking, is meaningful and purposeful — one where they can do interesting work. Moreover, Millennials seek to become influencers — to have what they do matter to the larger organization. Are those really traits that don’t befit a leader?

The disconnect might be in the way leadership is traditionally seen. Maybe Millennials don’t want to lead the organization in the way the leaders of the organization currently do. Maybe top-down hierarchy doesn’t inspire them; collaborative teamwork with co-leads does. Maybe the career ladder isn’t what they want; a career lattice would be preferable.

We won’t know the answers until we start the conversation. So talk to your Millennial employees. Find out how they envision themselves as leaders.

As many surveys attest, Millennials want to be leaders who are approachable, open, visionary, transparent, ethical, fair, honest and trustworthy. They want to encourage, inspire and motivate their employees. They want to treat their employees with respect and dignity, and to foster an inclusive workplace. Aren’t those leadership traits that we all want to encourage?

Of course there are other traits you may think are necessary that Millennials may not acknowledge — hard work and commitment, for a start. But the only way to get there is to listen and learn, then to teach and lead.

So let’s start the conversation. And maybe on December 31, 2029, the last 65-year-old Baby Boomer can retire knowing she has left her career legacy in capable hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Silverthorn is the Diversity and Education Director for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Through the Commission’s online platform, *2Civility*, Silverthorn works on blog posts, social networking sites, and online discussion groups focusing on legal education, diversity and young lawyers. She also works with law schools, law students and other legal groups, developing education courses and workshops.

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