

Generation X

HOW UNDERSTANDING THIS POPULATION LEADS TO BETTER SAFETY PROGRAMS

By **SHAWN J. ADAMS**

Over time, the workplace and workforce change. While many factors drive these changes—such as the graying of the workforce and the increasing percentage of female and minority workers—one must also consider the influence of the members of Generation X (referred to as Xers).

Today, Xers—those aged 20 to 34 in 1995, according to the Census Bureau—make up approximately 34 percent of the workforce, and that number is growing (Maltby D1). Do differences exist between Xers and Baby Boomers (referred to as Boomers)? Some 91 percent of respondents to a recent poll of members of the Illinois CPA Society believe that workplace attitudes are different between Xer and Boomer employees (Maltby D1).

What experiences, ideas and values make Xers unique? What differentiates

them from the Boomers, who currently control the workplace as well as the government? While one must be careful about creating stereotypes, certain factors have shaped the members of Generation X—factors to which other generations often cannot easily relate. Much like the Great Depression left an indelible impression on one generation, or Vietnam and Woodstock shaped Boomers, experiences unique to Xers can be identified. Once these factors are understood, safety professionals can work to better communicate the importance of accident causation and prevention to this group.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO SAFETY

Recent research on the roles of safety professionals has identified several strong needs. Key among them is the need to effectively communicate with others. After surveying certified safety professionals regarding how students in

safety programs should be trained, Ferguson concluded, "Communication skills cannot be overemphasized" (82). Certainly, safety professionals must possess technical skills, but if they cannot communicate with management and workers, those skills will do little good.

The communication process is comprised of three components: sender, receiver and message. At any point, this process can break down. Since the receiver is a key element of the process, the sender must know who the receiver is and his/her experiences, ideas and values. This article examines what experiences, ideas and values make Xers a unique subgroup worthy of study and understanding.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS AROUND

The perception that others hold about Generation X have helped define it. A review of the literature reveals some stark, disturbing attitudes toward Xers. A 1989 Gallup Poll that compared public perceptions of young people in 1969 to perceptions of young people in 1989 reported some negative trends. Young people of 1989 were considered to be more selfish (82 percent in 1989 vs. 5 percent in 1969); materialistic (79 percent vs. 15 percent); reckless (73 percent vs. 14 percent); and less patriotic (24 percent vs. 65 percent) (Howe and Strauss 43+).

Other descriptions include immature (Smith and Thompson 22); cocky or arrogant (Ratan 56+; Sunoo 118); disloyal cynics with short attention spans (Sunoo 118); slackers and whiners (Hogarty 27+); unwilling to pay their dues (Ratan 56+); in need of immediate gratification (Smith and Thompson 22); not committed to work (Ratan 56+); and psychologically damaged children of divorce (Hogarty 27+). Other literature describes Xers as "bored, lost, disoriented, futureless" (McNamara 12+) and as "unmotivated, unskilled spoiled brats who watch the clock and never miss a chance to take time off work" (Salsbury 4+). Such statements would never be made about minorities, females, the disabled or numerous other groups.

One of the most ironic stereotypes is that Xers refuse to accept authority. Ratan explains, "The Boomer generation that came of age rejecting authority charges the next generation . . . with being unwilling to show appropriate deference to their authority" (56+).

How deeply held are these negative stereotypes? One can only guess, but if

they are as deeply rooted as they appear, they are likely spilling over (at least subliminally) into the attitudes held by safety professionals. As a result, the communication process is impeded.

In fairness, it must be noted that many of these stereotypes are cited in articles which flatly state that Xers are misunderstood. For progress to occur, many authors conclude, Xers must be understood and Xer-friendly management techniques adopted.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS GO BOTH WAYS

In addition to the widespread negative attitudes toward Xers, the literature also shows that Xers have equally negative attitudes toward Boomers. Together, these equal a recipe for disaster. As Ratan states, "Twentysomethings train their resentments on Boomers, whom [they] see as having coasted through life . . . without ever having built anything" (58).

Many Boomers consider their generation to be progressive—they view themselves as trendsetters. Xers agree, but do not view the trends in a positive light. In *13th Generation*, Howe and Strauss state:

America's 70 million Boomers might prefer to think of their generation as the halcyon of social progress, but the facts show otherwise. Yes, the Boom is a generation of trends, but all those trends are negative. The eldest Boomers (those born in the middle 1940s) had relatively low rates of social pathology and high rates of academic achievement. The youngest Boomers (born in the late 1950s) had precisely the opposite: high pathology, low achievement (43+).

The authors (both Xers) then list a wide array of social problems—divorce, crime, poverty, sexually transmitted disease, drug abuse, broken homes, child abuse, declining wages—all traced (at least in part) to the 1960s (start of the Boomer era). If Howe and Strauss are correct, 22 percent of the population are not thrilled with their elders, much like Boomers were not thrilled with theirs.

The purpose of this discussion is not to choose sides. Rather, the goal is to answer this question: If Boomers and Xers, who together make up nearly one-half of the population and the majority of the workforce, have these attitudes toward each other, how can business improve, succeed and excel? For the safety profession, the question concerns how these underlying negative attitudes adversely affect the communication process needed to build an effective safety program.

OK, THAT'S THE PROBLEM. ANY SOLUTIONS?

Now that the problem is defined, attention can be turned to solutions. How can Xers be understood? What steps can be taken to help effectively manage this new generation with respect to safety?

In the author's opinion, Boomers hold the key. These individuals are the parents of Xers; they hold superior social positions, and have more money and power. Boomers also will increasingly rely on Xers for the success of safety programs. Like it or not, the future binds these groups together.

Therefore, these groups must develop a mutual understanding. For example, regarding the social problems tied to the 1960s, Howe and Strauss note that not all of these ills were caused by Boomers since they "are products of their times and of older generations who nurtured them in certain ways." In effect, every generation has its problems, strengths and weaknesses.

To better understand Xers, one must closely examine the criticism of them and consider things from their perspective. For example, Xers have been labeled as "unwilling to pay their dues," "disloyal" and "not committed to work." While one might find some truth in these stereotypes, is it possible that some genuine reasons drive these attitudes and actions?

Boomers certainly can understand the effect of downsizing, as many were affected by this trend. Xers watched and learned.

As for work, neither the easy money of the 1980s nor the burnout and widespread layoffs of the 1990s have done much to convince Xers that patience and corporate loyalty are the keys to success (Hogarty 27+).

In other words, Xers look at downsized and burnt-out Boomers and wonder, "What will loyalty and dues-paying get us?" (Ratan 56+). Xers contend that they are not disloyal, merely "skeptical of institutions and cautious about investing [their] creative energy without any promised return" (Sunoo 118). Others suggest that managers should discourage a dues-paying culture since "Xers don't want to pay dues for a club that no longer exists" ("Generation X's Horoscope" 22).

Considering their experience with downsizing, perhaps Boomers can understand—and even empathize with—such reasoning. For any program (including safety) to succeed with Xers, the short-term benefits must be emphasized. For exam-

ple, stressing the need to keep insurance costs low so savings can be shared with the workforce may be effective when speaking to older employees. Xers want to know the short-term benefits of such efforts.

Now, consider the “unmotivated, unskilled, spoiled brats who . . . never miss a chance to take time off work” label. Might there be a reason for this that Boomers can understand?

It is a known fact that divorce rates have skyrocketed since the 1960s. Consequently, many see Xers as the “psychologically damaged children of divorce.” However, the literature shows that Xers are not really unmotivated, they simply look at corporate downsizing and fail to see a return for loyalty. In fact, they see a diminishing return on both higher education and career. As a result, their loyalty lies (understandably) elsewhere.

Furthermore, Xers are “busy watching the clock” because they have different values.

Home life and family are more important for twentysomethings than for older generations When young workers want to leave ‘early’ . . . they’re not running from work, they’re running to their families (Salsbury 4+).

Can Boomers understand this point of view? If family and family values are positive and divorce is negative, perhaps Xers have a valid point. Certainly, safety professionals can tap into their belief that the job is expendable in order to emphasize the fact that no job is worth a life.

Labels such as cocky, arrogant, selfish and needing immediate gratification are also common. According to Sunoo:

Xers’ determined individualism and entrepreneurial style shouldn’t be mistaken for arrogance. Managers should try to remember that Xers were the latchkey kids. We’re used to taking care of ourselves and finding original solutions to intractable problems (118).

Regarding Xers’ influence into management, Ainsworth states:

Compared with their Boomer co-workers, Generation Xers are generally more open to new ways of doing things Like many young people in generations before them, they have little patience for bureaucracy. But what sets them apart is their willingness to speak out against it (43).

If independence, an entrepreneurial spirit and flexibility are positive attributes, then Xers indeed have something to offer. Perhaps their perceived arrogance can be related to their being latchkey kids or any number of other rea-

sons. One thing is certain: The negative stereotypes and labels are largely undeserved and counterproductive.

Safety professionals can tap into this independence in order to improve safety efforts. Most safety and health professionals have dealt with managers who can cite myriad reasons not to have a safe workplace. “Too expensive,” they reason. “Too time-consuming.”

Xers flatly reject such attitudes. They believe no job is worth a life; they not only want safety, they demand it. Turn-of-the-century workers did not expect safety. Workers in the 1950s wanted safety, but were often too timid to demand it; they had grown up during the Depression and feared losing their jobs. Boomers expect safety, but do not always demand it. Xers expect safety and if told, “Accept things as they are (unsafe) or leave,” most will leave to seek other employment.

Therefore, to keep the best workers, managers must sincerely strive to establish a safe workplace. Failure to do so will cause workers to be unhappy and unmotivated—and thanks to their independence, they will likely seek employment elsewhere. The end results will be much time and money spent on recruitment and training, as well as lower productivity and quality.

How else can Boomers manage, teach and lead Xers? The literature offers several suggestions.

For example, managers should give Xers responsibility by recruiting them to be active participants in the safety program. Current safety philosophy holds that safety professionals should be consultants, not doers. Many Xers grew up taking care of themselves. Sally Ford, president of HR Managers Inc., says that Xers are independent and “don’t want to be hovered over. Once goals are set, leave them alone to get things done” (Maltby). Perhaps through Xers, safety professionals can truly become onsite consultants.

According to Florence Johnson, director of staffing and recruiting for Travelers Insurance:

[Xers] relish diverse job responsibilities, particularly where high risk is involved. They expect to have clear, measurable goals against which their progress can be measured and appropriately rewarded (Sunoo 118).

Safety professionals could look at experience modification rates, OSHA incidence rates and loss ratios as quantitative benchmarks that could serve as “clear,

measurable goals” (Adams 33+). Xer independence—as opposed to apathy—may well energize a safety program.

In addition, Xers’ “quest to acquire skills and expertise” must be supported, and safety professionals must strive to give them “creative responsibilities for projects” (“Generation X’s Horoscope” 22). What is wrong with a group that is independent, seeks responsibility and strives to acquire skills and be creative? Such a group should be a dream come true for any manager.

Safety professionals must also provide “constant feedback” and keep communication lines open (“Generation X’s Horoscope” 22). Remember, Xers have grown up during the information age; they are used to receiving information on demand. Boomer managers should also vary assignments and “keep [Xers] in the loop” (Hogarty 27+). Spending time with Xer employees so they can confirm that what they are doing “right now is making them more marketable” is also key (Solomon 53+).

Another suggestion can be classified simply as “competent leadership.” Xers have watched the pillars of society (family, government) crumble due to divorce and scandal. Thus, safety professionals must “be coaches” and “walk the talk” (“Generation X’s Horoscope”). Skeptical Xers want supportive leaders and disdain hypocrites.

In the author’s opinion, Xers will also usher in the day when all safety professionals are *trained* professionals. In the past, many companies have given responsibility for safety to an individual with little relevant training or experience. This indicates lack of commitment to safety or lack of understanding about safety’s scope and complexity. The message to workers is “Safety isn’t really important.” Xers will not tolerate such an approach, and business must listen. After all, young, skilled workers are, and will continue to be, a prized commodity.

Managers must also keep Xer culture in mind and try to “keep work fun” (Hogarty 27+). Most people have heard, “Work is not supposed to be fun.” But does that mean the workplace should be hated?

The days of career-long employment in return for loyalty and quality work are gone. As a result, managers must develop new methods of motivation. While safety might not necessarily make work “fun,” one can certainly argue that lack of safety

10 Tips for Managing Generation X

Reality: Sharp differences exist between Baby Boomers and Generation X.

Tip: Managers frequently talk about properly managing diversity. Diversity encompasses more than different races and genders. Therefore, managers must acknowledge these differences.

Reality: Xers are latchkey kids; as a result, they are very independent.

Tip: Since Xers are not afraid to seek employment elsewhere, managers must create different ways to manage them. Otherwise, turnover rates and retraining will become problems. Both factors increase accident rates.

Reality: Due to layoffs, Xers have a low sense of corporate loyalty.

Tip: Poor workplace safety will result in high turnover. Xers are not lazy, they simply don't feel a job is worth one's life or health. Good safety can increase loyalty, thus reducing turnover and its associated costs.

Reality: Xers have seen their Boomer parents become burned out and laid off. As a result, they are more family oriented.

Tip: Xers value family over career and materialism. Xers are less likely to tolerate an unsafe working environment. The old "Safe to go home to loved ones" theme has never been more important.

Reality: Xers demand competent leaders.

Tip: A safety professional not only needs to ensure his/her competency, management needs to view safety as an extension of employee benefits—similar to a good medical plan. An effective safety manager is the cornerstone of safety efforts and a testament to management's commitment to the well-being of a company's workers.

Reality: Xers want responsibility.

Tip: Xers must be active participants in the safety program. If unsafe acts truly cause most accidents, worker participation is paramount.

Reality: Xers want current skills.

Tip: Safety is a "hot" skill. Many business professionals have received little or no training in safety. Safety managers can use the independent Xers as leaders in the effort to educate these professionals. Xers can be the start of workers truly managing their own safety today and, as tomorrow's managers, valuing safety for the future.

Reality: Xers need regular communication and feedback.

Tip: Use quantitative benchmarks, such as incidence rates and loss ratios, to show progress in safety efforts.

Reality: Xers want work to be fun—they desire a sense of accomplishment.

Tip: Safety professionals find satisfaction in declining incident rates. Xers will find similar satisfaction.

Reality: Generation Y has 78 million members, compared to Generation X's 52.4 million (Chan).

Tip: Safety managers must start implementing new management techniques now to better influence the next generation.

will make the workplace anything but fun—and will likely lead to high turnover. Perhaps by involving Xers in safety programs, safety professionals can share with them the satisfaction experienced by creating effective programs that achieve a real purpose—keeping people safe.

Clearly, much misunderstanding separates these two generations. If these groups continue to be adversaries—perpetuating the negative attitudes and stereotypes—safety, business and society in general will suffer. By developing better understanding of each other, however, new management techniques will emerge—techniques that will help busi-

nesses improve, succeed and excel. Safety managers who can adapt and implement these techniques are sure to succeed in the future. ■

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