

Solve Anything with Dr. Mark

Career Advice
for the
Working Class

Gen X-plosive

Q: I'm a Generation Xer and "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more!" You see, it's not so much what I am angry about, but who I'm angry at. I am mad at the greedy Baby Boomers, who just won't move over to give my generation our shot, and at their spoiled, bailed out, entitled Millennial children who I can't get a decent day's work out of.

I am in a management position and have to deal with aging Boomers and Millennial children. Now you may say that I am complaining or even blaming, but I'm not. What I am doing is going ballistic.

Whew! Okay, I'm a little better, a little calmer and maybe even a little more willing to hear what you have to say about how to best manage being between a rock (greedy Baby Boomers) and a mushy (Millennials that can't toughen up) place.

A: Amy Hirsh Robinson, generational expert and thought leader on today's workplace issues, and her firm, the Interchange Group, gets companies to pull their generations together instead of apart. Amy offers these insights into the generations at work.

Generational influences play a huge role in shaping our values, motivations and behaviors. Nowhere are those influences more apparent and the behavior more divergent than in the workplace. Take the Baby Boomers. Boomers came of age during America's era of post-war prosperity. They grew up in a world of infinite possibility as rock 'n' roll ruled the planet and humans walked on the moon. But Boomers experienced the Vietnam War and other divisive social movements that shaped their worldview. Their large numbers also drove them to be competitive in all parts of life, including work. In their push to get ahead Boomers added a full month's worth of work per year to their schedule. Now that they are ready to recalibrate work and life things have gotten complicated. Past spending habits and recent drops in retirement portfolios have made the prospects of even gradual retirement obsolete for many.

In contrast to the Boomers, Gen Xers grew up during a time when life seemed to be falling apart. They were "latchkey kids" who felt the brunt of tripled divorce rates and dual-income parents. As kids, they watched the events of the energy crisis, Watergate, corporate downsizing, and AIDS unfold.



Consequently Gen Xers have a strong survival instinct and are skeptical of institutions, be they financial, political or corporate. Dwarfed by media coverage of Boomers and Millennials, Gen Xers have grown up to feel marginalized and ignored. This trend has continued in the workplace, as the needs of Gen Xers are consistently overshadowed. Massive layoffs and pay freezes have only fueled existing resentments, causing engagement levels among high performing Gen Xers to plummet.

Aggressively nipping at the ankles of Generation X are members of the Millennial generation. Born into the world of the internet, cell phones and video games, Millennials are technologically savvy with short attention spans.

Raised by "helicopter" Boomer parents who pushed them to excel, Millennials are natural multi-taskers brimming with confidence. They see opportunity in adversity and are ready to bypass any red tape that gets in their way. Due to their large numbers and ambitious life goals, Millennials are predicted to do well for themselves and the communities they will enthusiastically serve.

So what's a Gen Xer to do? Many suggest waiting until the economy recovers and then jumping ship for better prospects. But those career opportunities, Amy wisely cautions, may not materialize if hungry Boomers and Millennials are also standing in line. Instead, Amy offers the following advice: Man up, Gen Xers! If you really want Boomers to get out of your way then help them to retool. Teach Boomers time management and delegation skills that force them to work smarter instead of more and you will help them reach the other side of the mountain much quicker.

On the flipside, if you want Millennials to "toughen up" you will need to do a better job of managing their expectations.

Invest your limited time in beefing up your company's interviewing, orientation and career development initiatives. Millennials who know what is expected of them and what it takes to get to the next level will surprise you with their productivity and loyalty.

And lastly, Gen Xers, we know you value your autonomy but even you could use a little help. Seek out the training you deserve to boost your own communication and leadership skills. And make just a little bit of effort to care at work. Otherwise I'm going to start quoting Office Space, a film revered by your generation, in which the lead character famously remarks, "It's not that I'm lazy, it's that I just don't care."

Ask Mark • Mark Goulston, M.D., is a Santa Monica-based business psychiatrist, executive coach and author of "Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone." Ask him questions at mgoulston@markgoulston.com.