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Get Ready to Ride the Nexter Wave

The new kids in the office may have what seems an alien approach, but they are the future. Here's how to be part of it

By John Baldoni

You know that new person who just took the cubicle down the aisle? The one who listens to his iPod and works out rhythms on his keyboard in the late afternoon? Yup, the one who is friends with the guy who wears neon-colored shirts so bright they burn holes in your retina. He's also the one who works with the young lady in programming whose blouse reveals her tummy (flat, of course) and maybe has a tattoo on her upper shoulder.

Live with It

Sound familiar? Get used to it. Generation Next is here and will be with us until you and everyone you know retires. Before you say yikes, remember, these "kids" (the oldest of whom are in their mid to late 20s) are the offspring of the most self-centered, pampered and individualist generation the world has ever seen. Us—the Baby Boomers! [And hey, Gen Xers, you gals and guys in your 30s, get used to it; we thought the same of you, too. And besides: Nexters outnumber you—big time!]

Waves of research are beginning to flood in about this new generation as it makes its first forays into the workplace. First off, they are smart. Way smart. Tech savvy, too. They are intuitive with technology. Cell phones are to them what wind-up phones were to your grandparents' generation. Consider these nuggets culled from the PBS's *Generation Next* series: Google is a way of life, not simply a search engine. It is the source of information for many things global as well as local. Instant communications is a necessity; these folks are connected wirelessly 24/7. Empowerment is an expectation; I can be my own boss. Flexibility is an entitlement. That is, you conform to me, or I'm gone. (For more, see [Newshour](#) from Dec. 14, 2006.)

Where did these attitudes come from? Their parents. That's right, us. We coddled, nurtured and pushed (gently). Such attitudes also emerged from their own personal observations, mostly looking at us. As many Nexters will say, their skepticism about work is born from watching their parents lose jobs through downsizing and offshoring. This generation, it seems, promised itself they would be different. Beholden to no single employer. So what's a middle-aged (or about-to-be-middle-aged) manager to do about all this?

Get used to it. The Baby-Boom generation is fast approaching retirement age. Generation X is hitting its stride and filling middle management roles; some are being slated to take the top slots. Companies that want to remain vital and vibrant must attract newer and younger workers. Though these folks may not appear to be like us, they are our future; we must accept and adapt to them.

Embrace their high horsepower processing power. These young employees are whip-smart, as our grandparents used to say. When it comes to technology, they are in total synchronicity; after all, if you spent your youth playing video games, doing homework on a PC and sending text messages (sometimes simultaneously), you'd be technically intuitive too. Take advantage of their brains and their grasp of technology. Let them apply their brainpower and "techiness" to problems, even big ones, that vex your organization. They have one advantage that you and your more mature team may not possess. All these problems are new to them so they will automatically assume a fresh-eyes approach.

Find a way to tap into their aspirations. "The rich are different from you and me," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, his paean to the Roaring Twenties. Same applies to the young. Like their predecessors the Gen Xers, they are not looking to make linear careers; they like to hop around. Your challenge is to let them explore within your own company. The accounting firm Deloitte USA, for example, is doing just that. It lets younger employees determine their own career paths by taking different jobs within the organization. It is one way to keep workers motivated and engaged.

Roll with the tide. What's wrong with wanting a vacation after three months? Or asking for a flex schedule right away? Or taking a sabbatical after a year or so? I know, our generation didn't do it. But perhaps if we had, we would have worked more productively, or found meaning in new and different ways. Perhaps some of us would not have burned out at 41 and clocked time for a decade or two. Who knows?

Instill discipline. Stand up for the values of your organization. We “oldsters” need not bend to every whim of the younger set. Not every company can give the Gen Nexters everything they want. Nor should it. To do so might set a precedent suggesting that the workplace can be everything you want it to be and more. That’s just not reality. Better to learn that lesson now when you are young than when you are over 40 and saddled with commitments that you cannot shirk.

The Hidden Promise

The youngsters (anyone over 50 can call anyone under 30 by this term) who make up this unique wave of newly minted adults are indeed the future. But as smart and savvy as they may be, they are not wise to the world of work. They need grooming, developing and mentoring. And who better to do it than the grizzled, rumpled souls like us who run our organizations? As aggressive, bright and trend conscious as they may be, these new workers need their elders for guidance and leadership. No way will they admit that, though... any more than we did when we were their ages.

But do what others did for you, or what you wish they had done. Give back to them. How? By setting the right example. Don’t resist change. Embrace it. Don’t fear new things. Learn from them. And there’s one more thing. Be yourself. Hold to your values and virtues. Show the next generation that things that occurred prior to 1980 had meaning too. We live in perilous times. Each generation needs the other if we are to adapt to the modern challenges as well as hold to the values that enabled us to live in freedom. Even when we take it for granted. Loosen up, old guys (and gals). What do we have to lose but our old age?

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