Making Room

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For at least 10 years, pundits have been predicting a “brain drain” in which the volumes of baby boomers in the workforce exit, leaving a vacuous wake behind them of lost talent, experience, and wisdom.

Today, in 2015, we have arrived at the threshold of this eventuality.

The youngest baby boomers turned 50 last year. About 65 percent of workers retire by age 65, and today there are just over 40 million Americans age 65 and older (making up 13 percent of the population). In 2003, 82 percent of boomers were part of the labor force; a decade later, that number has declined to 66 percent, and it will only continue to fall.

Meanwhile, the millennial generation (people born in the 1980’s and 1990’s) have come of age in the workplace. Totaling nearly 98 million, they are almost as large a cohort as the baby boomers, and they are poised to ascend to leadership roles. Though they should be well on their way to taking over jobs as supervisors, managers and even CEO’s or Executive Directors, generally speaking they are not. Why?

There appear to be several factors at play:

1. Retirement trends are changing… and staying the same.

Despite the possibility of retirement at (or close to) age 65, many boomers either can’t afford to, or don’t want to exit the workforce. The instability of our financial system in the last decade put more strain on personal savings and retirement accounts, therefore pushing retirement further away for many people. Simultaneously, growing interest in meaningful work that has a positive impact on the world has led to a budding new trend for boomers: “encore careers.” In increasing numbers, baby boomers are staying at work for more years, and therefore continuing to occupy management and leadership roles.

At the same time, many other boomers are continuing on the traditional path and retiring en masse. In 2013 the Social Security Administration reported, “…By 2015, almost 33 percent of our workforce, including 48 percent of our supervisors, will be eligible to retire. We expect this trend to continue. During this same time frame, the baby boomer retirement wave continues to have a significant effect on our workloads.”

We have reached a dichotomy where boomers at or close to their terminal age for work contribution are either holding onto jobs too long, or leaving them too fast without adequately preparing their successors.

2. Differences in ideas of progression and ladders.

The hierarchal mechanisms of career movement (a linear path from individual contributor, to supervisor, manager, director, VP, C-Suite) are unappealingly
slow to many millennials. They want to contribute meaningfully quickly, rather than waiting until positional power gives them a voice. This generation cares less about their title and salary and more about the contribution and meaning of the work itself.

In their search for making a contribution and for work/life alignment, the incoming professional generation is known for moving more often than their elders from job to job, jumping horizontally rather than staying on a traditional vertical path. Their dynamic career moves prevent typical career laddering, making old-style career pathways, promotions and planning very difficult for companies.

3. Changing currencies affect job interest.

Money, status, and title are not the currencies that attract and retain the millennial generation, but these remain the currencies that senior leaders at companies often still tout to lure young talent. Millennials want different things: work life alignment, flexible time, responsibility, meaningful work, and challenging assignments more than they want the commonly offered packages of their boomer bosses.

If young stars are acknowledged and fast tracked for increased responsibility, but then not actually given challenging and interesting work, they will predictably jump ship and move to another organization. As the recession wanes and more jobs are created, millennials seek and find the work itself that interests them, and are not afraid to leave their current job to do so.

4. Resistance to investing in development.

Much has been written about the differences between baby boomers and millennials at work, and the younger generation has been given a bad rap by many boomers for their supposed lack of “work ethic.” Such widespread bias may be creating hesitance to actually invest in and develop the next generation in a proactive way.

The resistance of boomers to give feedback to help millennials grow, combined with the younger generation’s confidence and independence, can result in a hands-off approach to development, which keeps millennials stagnant in lower responsibility jobs, and does not solve our impending “brain gap.”

Baby boomer leaders would do well to develop practices with millennials that are specifically geared to helping them truly lead. Such as:

- **Challenging assignments** that provide material ways for younger leaders to practice new ways of leading incrementally.

- **Detailed context** to help millennials understand why the work they are doing matters, in both tactical and strategic ways.

- **Mentoring experiences** with more senior individuals committed to their development and growth.

- **International opportunities** to validate the global view of these professionals and to engage them fully in work they love.

- **Looking beyond short-term perceptions** of entitlement or promotion to see motivation, aspiration, and commitment.

- **Planning pathways** for progressive responsibilities that make sense and have clear criterion for behavioral success, but do not take years to unfold.

- **Re framing digital fluency** of millennials as an advantage.

- **Involving millennials in discussions** all the way to the top—this matters more to them than higher
Giving straight feedback, often.

Becoming comfortable with flex schedules.

Considering reverse mentoring to facilitate genuine sharing of diverse skill-sets in two directions.

Establishing time lines for boomers holding senior jobs to actually share the decision making roles they carry, and make visible those decisions to millennials.

Talking about and not ignoring the looming exit of baby boomer professionals—it’s happening, so have a plan.

Net-Net: Exiting boomers are doing a poor job of engaging, inspiring, and developing the very people who will, of necessity, take over the key roles in organizations for the next 10-50 years. The cost of this dynamic is twofold:

1. Young leaders in the workforce are at risk of continued disengagement with traditional corporate structures, resulting in a surge in entrepreneurial growth as they start their own companies, but a decline in the success of existing organizations.

2. Boomers will retire or age out of the workforce without growing adequately skilled, knowledgeable and capable leaders who are ready to inspire followership and ensure great results. This leaves their firms vulnerable to failure.

It is no longer viable for baby boomers to pretend that we can stay young forever and carry the key leadership roles we still hold ad infinitum. The long forecasted “brain drain” in organizations in every sector has fully arrived. Luckily for global business and organizational health, we have a young, dynamic and enthusiastic cohort of professionals eager to carry the mantle forward for sustainable economic success. But in order for them to do so, we must get out of the way via planned, strategic activities that materially engage and create dynamic growth in millennials at work, while sharing knowledge and experience across the board. First and foremost, retiring leaders must make a concerted effort to understand the forces at play for these young professionals (i.e. why they do what they do), and acknowledging that they are the future leaders, and must be groomed as such.

The legacy of the baby boomer generation at work will live on in the degree to which we can fully prepare millennials to lead. This means encouraging them to do it in their own way, while at the same time, ensuring that they get access and exposure to the wisdom gained by their predecessors.

SOURCES:
http://nhpr.org/post/can-millennials-and-baby-boomers-work-together

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