

**Ken Moore Associates Presents**

**Commentary**

**Four Generations Working Together**  
**Recipe for Conflict or Recipe for Opportunity**

**“Children nowadays are tyrants. They gobble their food, contradict their parents, and tyrannize their teachers.”**

**a. Socrates, 425 BC**

**“I just don’t understand this generation.”**

**b. Common leadership complaint, 2008**

**For a few more years now we will have the unique opportunity to see four different generations working together for the same company. Each of these generations brings valuable but often vastly differing experiences, skills and attitudes to the job.**

**Is this a recipe for conflict, or is it a recipe for opportunity? Our challenge as leaders of human capital is to maximize the benefits each generation brings to the workforce and minimize the inherent conflict that each generation also brings with them.**

**Social scientists have grouped these people into categories with reasonably defined boundaries. In this manner, they can examine the influences, achievements, personalities and work values of each generation.**

**➤ Veterans - a.k.a. Traditionalists (born prior to 1946)**

**This is the group that endured the Great Depressions, World Wars I & II, and the Cold War. They returned from a devastated Europe and Asia and gave us durable national infrastructures such as super highways, air transportation systems and electronic communications networks. They developed miracle vaccines that have eradicated, prevented or lessened the impact of, measles, tuberculosis, smallpox and polio. This is the generation that put men on the moon and now holds approximately 75% of all financial assets. They built corporations that were highly productive, profitable.**

**Through the adversity of their formative years, they developed value systems that served them well during their adult lives. They respect authority, are patriotic to their country, and appreciate the value of money and opportunity. They are patient and their gender roles are firmly established. They are hard workers and loyal to their companies. They follow the rules and have faith in their religious, corporate, academic and government institutions.**

**As a result, their personality remains with them to this day. Rank and status are important to them because they confer their position at work and in the community.**

Consistency and uniformity are important to them. They built look-alike hotel chains like Marriott and Hyatt and created McDonalds and similar fast food restaurants. There was a definite sense of right and wrong and they were uncomfortable with the transparency of life and open and frank discussions about sex, politics, religion and feelings. They were conservative in nature – politically, socially and economically. They paid with cash, not credit.

## **2. Baby-boomers (1946-1964)**

By contrast, their children, the so-called “baby-boomers, are those who were born between 1946 and 1964. Even though they grew up in the values-oriented environment of their parents and grandparents, they were becoming a willing partner of major changes in the social fabric of their society. Rock and Roll music dominated the airways and television overtook movies as entertainment. As TV became an electronic baby-sitter, the stars of the show became unwitting role models for that generation, frequently describing an illusory and a mostly incorrect view of reality.

With the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, the American sense of post-war innocence and superiority was shattered and they began to question just about everything. Civil rights and equal rights activities became major social objectives of our people. Their opposition to the Vietnam War forced one president (Lyndon Johnson) to reject reelection and divided the country with violent opposition. Two of our most powerful emotional personalities, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, thus removing effective forces of change from the landscape.

This generation learned to challenge authority and the status quo. Drugs became a more open and popular, an open form of rebellion. For women, the contraceptive pill opened up a whole new realm of exploration into their own sexuality and for examining relationships from new and multiple perspectives. These examinations continue to this day as our society grapples with issues such as male/female wage disparities, the glass ceiling, and same sex marriages.

This generation also became self-absorbed in its own importance. It was the “me first” generation of instant gratification. Where their parents sweated out the Great Depression and did without, the baby-boomers wanted it now – and paid for it with credit. “If it feels good, do it” became their mantra. They learned how to manipulate the rules to satisfy their own needs. Looking out for #1 became their operational motivation.

But what did this generation accomplish? Quite a lot actually.

One hundred years after the American Civil War ended, this generation forced government to enact, and enforce, legislation banning discrimination on a number of areas: race, sex, religion, physical condition, and now gender orientation or preference. They moved electronic technology to the forefront of our industrial

**engines. They saw infinite opportunities to advance the positive causes that they passionately believed in. They helped start the electronics development in companies like IBM, Raytheon and Boeing and provided the platforms from which Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Steven Jobs (Apple) could launch their business revolutions.**

**Their core values became optimism and idealism. The post World War II economic boom gave them a sense that anything was possible. Service to others in the cause of social justice was important and political activism to achieve lofty humanistic goals was a motivating force for good. They believe in and promote equal opportunity for all and are willing to consider all points of view, provided that it contributes to a solution to a problem.**

➤ **Generation X (1964 - 1985)**

**While baby-boomers were wedded to their careers, their children began experiencing other influences. Two-career parents resulted in children left in the care of and influence of baby-sitters or day care centers. Their parents, meanwhile, were divorcing and re-marrying at a higher rate than ever thus creating single parent homes and blended families. Globalization began in earnest during their childhood and computers became a dominant tool in their personal and professional lives. The political issues surrounding Vietnam, Watergate and President Nixon's resignation shattered their belief in government as a respectable and responsive institution. As global competition heated up, corporate mergers and acquisitions became the norm and business models that were so successful for the previous generations began to show signs of decay.**

**They saw their parents, who fought valiantly for their careers, laid-off as companies cut costs in order to improve shareholder value or, in some cases, to remain in business. Loyalty of employers to their employees, and employees to their company was lost. After the swinging sexual revolution of the 1960's, AIDS became a major concern for all players. Cable television was providing more and more programming, some with questionable content. While their parents focused on their two-income careers in order to pay for the self gratification needs that were important to them, Gen X became self-reliant at an earlier age. They are casual about authority and formal hierarchies. They are not against authority, just unimpressed by it.**

**Most importantly, Generation X developed a strong desire to build relationships. They believe that treating people with respect and dignity is often just as important as organizational goals. Since they could not count on company loyalty to them, they developed as free agents who would offer their services to those organizations that are people oriented, have strong commitments to social responsibility and allow them to develop their life/work balance. Team work and a sense of community became important to them. Teams and groups often posed as the surrogate family that they did not have growing up.**

➤ **Generation Y** (1985 – 2000)

**This generation reaped the benefit of the social activism of their parents and grandparents. They were born into a diverse society and were raised with a computer in their crib. The shock of 9/11, the dot-com bubble and bust, and terrorism were influences that are ingrained in their memories. To older generations, Gen Y seems to display a sense of entitlement to wealth, happiness, good grades in school and free government services without earning them. Many do have a high level of impatience and expect the rewards of their work to come earlier. But in reality they are no different than previous generations.**

**Yet they exhibit a strong degree of optimism and realism and work to develop solutions to problems rather than talk about them. They are technologically savvy and are comfortable with the fast pace of change. They are street smart, practical, and impatient with delay. With the temporary nature of employment, they are nomadic, often changing careers as quickly as they change jobs. They are inquisitive and are thirsty for knowledge, skills and experiences – and for something that they can add to their résumé. They are frequently smarter than their employers, but often lack the social skills necessary to be effective at first.**

**With the advent of the Internet, they have access to multiple sources of information and can challenge conventional thought easily and quickly, although not often accurately. Corporate accounting scandals have caused organizations to become more and more transparent, making it easier to challenge leadership and force them to justify their decisions. Diversity and civic duty are a constant in their lives and they will go to those organizations who embrace these values. They value feedback, input and mentoring, but abhor micro-management.**

➤ **Why is this important?**

**As the Baby-Boomer generation approaches retirement age, there are not enough replacements in the pipeline to take their place. Transferring valuable knowledge from one generation to the other is difficult. Concepts like age discrimination and elder care become more compelling. Government and private pensions and health care costs for retirees are rising alarmingly with little success in controlling costs.**

**The resulting shock to organizational systems is that job functions are expanding beyond the scope of individual disciplines like human resources and marketing. Not only are HR people expected to be masters of HR, they are now expected to be knowledgeable in marketing, finance and production in order to operate in a multi-discipline team setting so that they can work on and solve complex problems. The search for talent is global, but the cost of recruiting, hiring and keeping good people is also increasing, thus putting pressure on corporate economics and business models.**

➤ **How can we bridge the generational gap?**

**It is not easy, but the benefits of working together far outweigh the difficulties. It begins with each generation taking responsibility for successful integration. One must consider the environment in which each generation was value programmed. While the North American baby-boomers (1946 – 1964) were experiencing the Beatles and the sexual revolution, their brothers and sisters in China were experiencing Mao's Cultural Revolution. They are the same age group, but are in two completely different worlds.**

**Here are some successful approaches to managing generational differences:**

- **Recognize and appreciate the differences each generation brings to the workplace. This requires aggressive communications, training and a willingness to listen. It also calls for a transparency of operations so that everyone knows what the end goal looks like. Once you have determined the goal, putting together an action plan to achieve the goal is much simpler;**
- **Find and appreciate commonalities. Everyone wants the company to succeed and conflict is inevitable. The trick is to turn destructive conflict into creative conflict that benefits the employees, the company, and the customers;**
- **Acknowledge the interdependency of generational differences and approaches. In today's compressed business world, no one can work alone. It takes multiple skills and a team orientation to accomplish the work that needs to be done in any organization;**
- **Operate from a sophisticated management style. New managers are adept at moving from one leadership style to another based upon the situation. Problem solving tactics that are tried and true may work in certain situation, but may be ineffective on others. Embrace new ideas, study them, and use those that work;**
- **Always keep a strong eye on your customers and their needs. Customers and clients are what keep you in business. They are experiencing the same generational issues that you are. Share your concepts with them so that they can succeed as well. They will remember you.**

**Word Count - 2007**