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Gen-Y not the problem; Baby Boomers threat to workplace stability

Generation Y, often portrayed as difficult to deal with, overly-demanding and the bane of every manager's life, is actually looked upon favourably by most workplace leaders, managers and employees across all generational groups, according to new Leadership Management Australasia (LMA) workplace research.

Gen-Y is also emerging as the driver of cross-generational harmony by calling for more formal structures to connect people of different generations in the workplaces, LMA's Generations L.E.A.D. (Leadership, Employment and Direction) Survey found. (LMA's L.E.A.D. Survey is a continuing 11 year-old research project, now online, examining workplace trends and issues, conducted for LMA by Chase Research.)

Of concern though, LMA concludes, is that large numbers in all generations don't want to work with, or report to Baby Boomers in the future. And that includes Baby Boomers themselves.

"If you believe that Generation Y is the unsolvable challenge when it comes to managing a workforce, think again", said LMA's Executive Chairman, Grant Sexton. "Baby Boomers are now the challenge. While this research suggests a much more harmonious cross-generational landscape in Australian and New Zealand organisations than many would have us believe, especially with the younger generations, Baby Boomers are not in favour."

"These findings cast a shadow over the relationship Baby Boomers have with other generations," he said. "The Baby Boomer issue is a sleeper – an emerging and ongoing challenge for HR departments. It threatens to undermine stability of the workforce into the future because Baby Boomers will continue to occupy most leadership and senior management positions in this decade."

Mr Sexton will present the research at the annual conference of the Australian Human Resources Institute in Sydney on June 7-8.

Among 14 L.E.A.D. Survey questions, participants were asked which generation they would prefer to work with in the future, and which generation they would prefer to report to in the future.

Only 4% of both Gen-X and Gen-Y nominated Baby Boomers in the Work question with 14% and 8% respectively nominating Baby Boomers in the Report question.

Those findings:

In the future, to work with –

- ONLY 17% of Baby Boomers prefer their own generation, **40%** prefer Gen-X, 27% Gen-Y
- **57%** of Gen-X prefer their own generation, 32% Gen-Y, 4% Baby Boomers
- **53%** of Gen-Y prefer their own generation, 29% Gen-X, 4% Baby Boomers

In the future, to report to--

- **41%** of Baby Boomers prefer their own generation, 33% Gen-X, 5% Gen-Y
- **71%** of Gen-X prefer their own generation, 14% Baby Boomers, 6% Gen-Y
- **50%** of Gen-Y prefer Gen-X, 24% their own generation, 8% to Baby Boomers

(Remaining percentages in all categories covered Gen-Z and declarations “not to work with or report to anyone else”.)

Mr Sexton said that while the ramifications of a workforce unwilling and uninterested in working with and being managed by Baby Boomers were profound, the pressure was on Baby Boomers to invent or reinvent themselves so those in their own generation, and the other generations to follow, felt comfortable working with and reporting to them in the future.

At the same time, the challenge for organisations and their HR departments is to better understand what drives effective or ineffective generational relationships and how to improve them. Leaders and managers tapping into the talents, skills and abilities of all generations through communication and connection (respect, understanding and recognition) can deliver highly effective and productive relationships, says LMA in its Generations report.

The key to improvement appears to be heavily related to better cross-generational communication, supported by openness and sharing and for Gen-X and Gen-Y in particular, more planning and direction, LMA says. Managers need to identify the generations that exist within their workplace and explore what drives effective relationships with each generation, look for ways to bring generations closer and into a more harmonious space and keep a finger on the pulse of each generation.

Understanding the motivations of a given generation could be the difference between an organisation keeping and losing some of their best people in the long run, according to Mr Sexton.

“The way is open for a new way of thinking for those leaders and managers currently struggling with cross-generational dysfunction and generational diversity.”

LMA’s L.E.A.D. Survey is a continuing 11 year-old research project (now online) examining workplace trends and issues, conducted for LMA by Chase Research.

This special Generations Survey is the first of its kind conducted within the L.E.A.D. Survey series and involved 774 participants across three key audiences -- Non-Managerial Employees, Frontline Managers / Supervisors, and Business Leaders / Senior Managers.

The results are weighted to reflect the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force data (2011): Pre-boomers (born before 1945) – 2%; Baby-boomers (born 1945-1962) – 26%; Generation X (born 1963-1980) – 39%; Generation Y (born 1981-1995) – 32%; Generation Z (born 1996 or later) – less than 1%.

About the research sample. Comment by Adrian Goldsmith of Chase Research: A sample of 774 respondents provide results that have a maximum margin of sampling error of +/- 4 percentage points. This means we can be 95% confident that the true result, if we were to speak to the full population, lies four percentage points above or below the result obtained from our sample.

About L.E.A.D. (Leadership, Employment and Direction) Survey. Running for 11 years, the L.E.A.D. Survey is Australasia's most authoritative survey of workplace issues and their effect on management and employees. It is now an on-line rolling survey with information released in waves three times each year, constantly updating what is really happening within Australasian organisations. The L.E.A.D. Survey is managed by Adrian Goldsmith of Chase Research. It is commissioned by LMA. Mr Goldsmith designed and conducted previous L.E.A.D. Surveys when a director of Quantum Market Research. Participants are from all sectors, locations and organisation sizes and include employees, frontline managers and supervisors, business leaders and senior management. It draws on previous surveys to analyse changes in the workplace, providing the latest insights, trends and emerging issues affecting business and people management.

About Grant Sexton, Executive Chairman, LMA. Grant Sexton is an expert commentator on workplace issues, having delivered over 1000 presentations on the subject in Australia and overseas.

About Leadership Management Australasia (LMA). LMA was established 39 years ago. It now has 40 independently-owned and run licensees delivering programs to improve productivity, performance and leadership through 70 locations across Australia and New Zealand. LMA has worked with over 110,000 people in small and medium organisations, large corporations and government departments.