COMPARING THE LEVELS OF INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM BETWEEN BABY BOOMERS AND GENERATION X AND ITS IMPACT ON TEAMWORK

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ABSTRACT

Today's work force is composed of Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1962, who place a strong emphasis on team-based learning, decision-making, and reward systems, and Generation X, born between 1963 and 1982, who value less socially supportive environments, have a higher-tech emphasis, a clear bottom-line mentality, and above all, a need for independence. The present study measured the levels of individualism/collectivism in these two groups and found that Gen Xers are more individualistic than Baby Boomers. The findings suggest that an updated paradigm for team building needs to be developed that encourages individual identity and personal values as well as those of the group.

THE BABY BOOMERS AND GENERATION X: WORKING TOGETHER

The Baby Boomers hold the greatest number of positions of influence in most of today's organizations. Keay (1997) points out that within the millennium, fast approaching, it is the Baby Boomer generation which dominates business and politics. Even more important, most of these leaders and managers will continue in these positions of influence longer than preceding generations because of massive organizational restructuring. Downsizing, mergers, and reengineering have recently reduced the availability of many higher level positions in all types of organizations. This has contributed to people reaching their career plateaus at much younger ages than ever before (Bardwick, 1988). As baby boomers become more influential in their organizations, they begin to implement team-based structures.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that this current group of young (potential) managers i.e., Generation X, (A.k.a. GenX, Xers, and the Baby Busters) is a generation that appears to be significantly different from its predecessors. Because they have been raised in the milieu of such things as computer-training, latch-key social conditions, the shopping mall, MTV, video games, and myriad other contributing environmental factors, or current literature suggests that the Xers have demands, expectations, values, and ways of working that are quite different from those who make up the current strata of management, particularly the Baby Boomers.

The major problem is not just that the generations may be quite different from each other, in terms of values and objectives, but rather that these differences hold a high potential for conflict erupting between them in the workplace. Flynn (1996: 87) points out that "Baby Boomers are staying in the workforce longer - - and they are on a collision course with the Generation X kids now flooding into offices. These two very different groups can start an all-out war . . ." Bertsch (1996) concurs with this by suggesting that Baby Boomer values clash with those of their Generation X employees which is causing tension in the work place. King (1997) is of the opinion that generational issues are bound to crop up between Baby Boomers and Generation X in today's team-oriented work hard/play hard corporate cultures. Filipczak (1994) sees a

strong antagonism between the generations in the work place. According to his perspective, Boomers see Xers as lazy, cynical, and all-but-illiterate whiners. The Xers see the preceding generation as smug workaholics who play corporate politics, and who are out of touch with the economic realities of today. Kennedy (1996) states that Baby Boomers feel invincible as part of a team, but Baby Busters work best alone. Koretz (1998: 24) states that, "in spite of their smaller numbers, most of today's young adults seem to have a harder time making it in the work place than their Boomer parents did." The perceived differences between the two generations have prompted authors to suggest new approaches to manage Generation Xers. Tulgan (1995) suggests that, "managers who cannot understand youthful employees should consider giving them the necessary information, autonomy, and responsibility to do their jobs as they see fit

TEAMWORK AND GENERATION X

In today's business environment, cooperation among employees--particularly those operating in a teamwork environment–is essential. The search for those factors that influence an individual's level of cooperation has led to speculation that the degree to which a person's orientation is individualistic or collectivistic may affect cooperative behavior (Wagner, 1995; Chen, Chen & Meindl, 1998). The dimension of individualism-collectivism is a multifaceted concept. Intepreted in a broad perspective, people within a single society can be seen as varying in the degree to which they are self-oriented or collectively-oriented. Wagner has taken this perspective in testing his hypothesis that individualism-collectivism influences cooperation in groups. This model is further developed by researchers such as Chen et al. who look at the mechanisms involved in cooperation. As Generation Xers take their places in the workforce, their ability to work effectively in teams will contribute directly to the success of their organizations. Yet, a common thread in the literature is that Generation Xers are considered to be highly individualistic people, more so than the Baby Boomers of the preceding generation. It would seem that individualism might block a smooth process in a team setting. The effectiveness of a team depends on a number of factors, among which are team composition and team process (Stewart, Manz & Sims, 1999). In order to perform at a high level of functioning, team members must be able to provide both task and socioemotional inputs to the team process. While highly individualistic people may be competent in providing task inputs, socioemotional inputs rely on the interpersonal skills of the team members. Inputs such as conflict resolution, collaborative problem solving, communication networks and personality traits are critical in developing the socioemotional framework of the team. We might suspect that people with a collectivist orientation are more sensitive to the socioemotional aspects of team process than those with an individualistic orientation.

The present study was designed to measure the levels of individualism/collectivism in Gen Xers and Baby Boomers to determine if there are any differences. The Individualism-Collectivism Scale (ICS) instrument, consisting of 20 items (Wagner, 1995), was chosen for this study. The ICS instrument measures five independent variables: self-reliance, competitiveness, solitary work preference, supremacy of group interests, and supremacy of group goals. Items in the instrument are in Table 1. For more details, see Ramamoorthy & Carroll (1998). In addition to the I/C, demographic variables were collected to similar to the ones used in the first study. Our hypothesis was that Generation Xers would be significantly more individualistic than Baby boomer across the five variables as measured by the I/C instrument.

Hypothesis 1: Generation X will be significantly more self-reliant than boomers.
Hypothesis 2: Generation X will be significantly more competitive than boomers.
Hypothesis 3: Generation X will prefer to work solitarily significantly more than boomers.
Hypothesis 4: Boomers are more prone to sacrificing personal pursuits than Generation X.
Hypothesis 5: Generation X will perceive that enlightened self-interest is a positive force for

group productivity significantly more than Boomers.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The total sample for this study included eight organizations. The number of surveys totaled 500 but only 437 that included data exclusively from baby boomers and generation Xers were part of the analysis.

A factor analysis was performed to verify that items loaded in the expected factors. The results confirmed the literature findings and items loaded as expected to form the following factors: self-reliance; level of competitiveness; solitary work preference; supremacy of group interest, supremacy of group goals. The last factor was of special interest for this research because it reveals a different point of view about what conditions are needed to have a good team, which is that individualistic people's tendencies would be to take care of their personal concerns first. This tendency appears to be a prerequisite to a highly effective team.

Following the factor analysis, factor scores were calculated and analyzed to see the direction of the difference. In all cases, the average factor scores for Generation Xers were higher, indicating higher level of individualism than those of baby boomers. The next step was to use factor scores to perform individual analysis of covariance using four variables as covariates: organization where the subject works, highest level of education, gender, and current position. The analysis compares Baby boomers vs. Generation Xers along the five variables measured in the individualism-collectivism instrument. The analysis indicates that two factors are statistically significant: self-reliance and supremacy of group goals, which are related to hypothesis 1 and 5. This supports the hypothesis that at least in two specific variables, Generation Xers are significantly more individualistic than baby boomers.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The main result of this research is to provide support for the notion that Gen Xers are more individualistic than Baby Boomers. Does it mean that Gen Xers are not capable of working in teams? To answer this question, it is helpful to examine carefully the meaning of the two factors that were found to be significant in this study (Competitiveness and Supremacy of group goal).

Competitiveness may be a problem for team process if teams are structured using an approach that promotes unhealthy competition. For example, a team where members are competing for a scarce resource, such as money or promotion, may result in conflicts, resentment, and politicking. However, well-directed competition can have a positive impact on teams and be a driving force to achieve ambitious goals. Gen Xers' high level of competitiveness should not be an obstacle to successful teambuilding.

The second factor, supremacy of group goals, is extremely important because it basically reflects a perception as to how teams should operate. One positions claims that self-sacrifice is needed to ensure team success. In contrast, an alternative viewpoint suggests that to have team success, individual satisfaction is a prerequisite. According to the results of this research, Gen Xers consider that for a team to be effective, individual satisfaction should come first. In other words, a team is as strong as the individual satisfaction of all its members. A potential explanation for the conflicts observed between Baby boomer and Xers is not that Xers do not value teams, but instead that the current paradigm for team building is outdated. These findings suggest that an updated, if not different, paradigm for team building needs to be developed that encourages individual identity and personal values as well as those of the group. Effective team functioning is a matter of truly integrating the individual into the group rather than subordinating him or her to it.