

The ACORN Principles

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and the organization's ties to the Boomer culture of the late 1960s; Veterans who bucked authority see their corporate ideal come to life. Ben and Jerry's employees' organizational disdain for formal corporate culture transcends the generational tensions that arise in other, more staid companies.

Operate from a sophisticated management style.

Generationally friendly managers have little time for circumlocution. They give those who report to them the big picture, specific goals and measures, then they turn their people loose, giving feedback, rewards, and recognition as warranted. There are seven distinctions that characterize their flexibility:

1. **Their supervisory role is not fixed; control and autonomy are a continuum, not solitary options.**
2. **Their leadership style (consensus-based or autonomous) is situationally varied.**
3. **They depend less on positional rather than personal power.**
4. **They know when and how to make exceptions to policies.**
5. **They can thoughtfully match individuals to a team or assignment.**
6. **They balance concern for tasks and concern for people.**
7. **They understand the elements of trust and work to gain it from employees.**

Respect competence and initiative.

Generationally friendly companies assume the best of their people, treating everyone (from the greenest recruit to the most seasoned veteran) as if they have a lot to offer and are motivated to do their best. In the most successful companies, this approach becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Lucent Technologies created IdeaVerse, a training center that allows employees to have the space and time to play with ideas and creativity without having to worry about the understood boundaries or censure of the workplace. In the center, the walls are purple, vice presidents color with crayons, employees attend seminars with titles like "Wholeness in the Workplace" and "Life, Paint, and Passion," and just about anything goes. Company officials readily admit that some Boomers and Veterans may scoff at the idea of sitting side-by-side with colleagues and superiors, painting scenes on a large canvas. That,

officials argue, is the kind of self-censorship they want to break free of at Lucent. When the cross-generational work force gives in and buys into the ideas behind IdeaVerse, true creative energy can be allowed to flow, with resulting improvements in their product development and service innovations.

Nourish retention.

When you think of how difficult it is to find good, conscientious employees in today's job market, you realize why many companies treat work force retention with the same focus as they do finding and retaining customers. Generationally friendly companies concern themselves constantly with retention, and with making their work environments magnets for excellence. They encourage lateral movement throughout the organization and have broadened assignments.

One excellent example is the national restaurant chain TGI Friday's, which encourages employees to enroll in its Passport Program. Under the program, an employee's "home" restaurant gives the employee a "passport" allowing him or her to travel around the country for six months, working at other Friday's restaurants along the way. At the end of the employee's stay at a different restaurant (whether it's a month, a week, or just a shift), the general manager of the restaurant stamps the employee's "passport," freeing the employee to travel off to the next destination. In order to be eligible for the program, employees must have at least six months' tenure, must be well trained, and must have no record of unsatisfactory performance. Through the Passport Program, TGI Friday's allows its best employees to indulge in their wanderlust without losing them in the process. ■

The Future

The authors postulate the following about the future of cross-generational relations in the work force:

- As Veteran executives retire, Boomers will replace them and create for themselves a sort of guru status among decision makers, allowing them to sit quietly atop the corporate mountain and be consulted from time to time for business wisdom.
- The outlook for Xers who want to slide into management positions is hazy right now. Small start-up companies may be the primary sanctuary for Xers who want managerial roles and responsibilities. Then again, the cohort group's propensity for multi-tasking may be perfect for the Fortune 200 companies of the future. As leaders, they will likely be much more concerned about getting work done than just about anything else. ■