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BLB ARTICLE

Shira Harrington on Bridging Generation Gaps Within Associations

Special to Bottom Line Briefing

Shira Harrington has been a senior recruiting consultant with Washington, D.C.-based placement firm [Positions Inc.](#) since 1994. In that time, she has helped staff numerous associations and become an expert on managing the multigenerational workforce. An outgrowth of her successful recruiting career, Harrington is a regular consultant to trade associations and other organizations on the differences in life values, work-life expectations, communication styles and relationship to authority among the generations. She believes she has the right formula to bring the various age groups together to propel workplaces forward with a better understanding and appreciation of one another.



"First and foremost," she stated during a recent interview with Bottom Line Briefing, "I believe we should avoid stereotyping people. There is a big tendency in generational circles to over-generalize, and we need to move beyond that. Generational diversity and age diversity are only two types of diversities. People are individuals. They are made up of onion layers. We must be very careful not to pigeon-hole people, to say: 'If you are a Generation Xer, you must behave like this.' Instead, what I prefer to say is this: 'If your coworker exhibits behavior that is different from yours, it may be because of generational or age diversity. If that is the case, here are some ways you can help build bridges of understanding to walk a mile in their shoes.'"

Birth rates are how the generations are generally defined. Baby Boomers, for instance, were born between 1946 and 1964. Harrington, though, was quick to note, "But if you were born in 1946 and you try and compare your generational identity to someone who was born in 1964, there might be some commonalities. But there will probably be a lot of differences. So, what we say is people who were born where generations traditionally start--in this case, 1940 to 1945, or 1960 to 1965--become 'cuspers,' or someone who bridges both sides. So, those born from '60 to '64 ... depending on how you were raised or who you socialize with, you might relate more to the Boomers or more to the Gen Xers. Those people tend not to relate classically to either generation. On the other hand, they tend to be good bridge builders because they understand both generations very well."

What Harrington tries to do in her presentations is foster understanding for the purposes of a productive work environment. Harrington regularly presents her findings to human resources audiences, as well as to staff members of every level. Her client list includes such groups as the Adhesive and Sealant Council, the American Association of Community Colleges, the National Association of African-Americans in Human Resources and the National Association of Funeral Directors.

From her presentations, it is clear that communication is one of the keys to

greater understanding. She illustrated, "There is a phrase I now like to use. 'Seek first to understand, then to be understood'. For instance, it is helpful to understand that a member of the Veteran generation [someone born pre-WWII] is going to want more formality in how he/she is addressed, a Millennial a lot less. In fact, a sign of endearment for Millennials [or members of Generation Y] is to be called 'dude.' Even for Boomers and some Gen-Xer managers, that is a little off-putting. It happened last year. I placed a Millennial at a trade association. The first week on the job, the executive director went by his office, said 'Hello,' and the Millennial replied: 'Hey dude!' without even thinking. It wasn't that one thing solely, but he didn't make it there. His casual style didn't fit in with their conservative culture. Now, they are targeting only Gen Xers for their lower-level management positions. They no longer want to hire Millennials because senior management doesn't 'get' their culture. That is exactly the reason I conduct awareness training with many organizations. We need to move beyond generational stereotyping and hire based on the candidate's unique qualifications and workplace fit."

She continued, "When you get into a mindset and say, 'A whole generation does not act like me, talk like me, walk like me and because of that I am not going to recruit them or retain them,' you are cutting yourself and your association off from a huge part of the population. There are about 80 million Baby Boomers, approximately 46 million Gen Xers and approximately 78 million Millennials. Here's the problem: if Xers are about half the size of the Boomers, what happens if the Boomers start to retire? There are not enough Xers to backfill those management positions, and the Millennials are too young to take over at the higher levels. So, you need to retain your Gen Xers and promote your Millennials at a faster rate than you normally would have."

At the same time, Harrington and those in the generational community have been witnessing some surprising attitudes from Boomers as they get closer to retirement age. A lot of them are not projecting to leave the workforce as they have planned. "Many Boomers are going to be hanging on for a variety of reasons," Harrington said. "This current economy is only a small part of it. They couldn't afford to retire even before the economy took a turn. The financial services company, Allstate, illustrates it best in their ad: 'The generation that never trusted anyone over the age of 30, never planned on a 30 year retirement.' Boomers are forever young. They're healthy. They're vibrant. Most importantly, work is their identity. It's one of the classic Baby Boomer values. For Generation Xers, it's the opposite. Xers do not live to work. They work to live. As a result, when it comes time for succession planning, part of the problem is trying to promote Gen Xers to executive-level positions. Many regard those roles as too stressful. Their view is, 'Getting promoted just isn't worth the sacrifice to my work-life balance.'"

To this end, Harrington calls on associations and other employers to be more flexible. One of the keys to retaining Baby Boomers, particularly those "Sandwich Boomers" (currently in their late 40s - mid 50s, caring for young children and elderly parents) is to offer more flex time. "Not just for them," she remarked, "but offer it to all four generations for different reasons. For instance, Veterans want to spend time their grandkids and Gen Xers have always insisted on it. In fact, Xers were the first to demand flexible hours with a focus on performance not face time. Their perspective is: 'Why should I clock in and out from 9 to 5? Let me come in a little later, work a little later. I can do my work on my laptop at 2 o'clock in the morning. Why should you care as long as I get the work done?'" Millennials just assume that it will be part of their work experience.

Harrington concluded by laying out a map for associations to follow in bridging the generational gap. The first step is to create awareness that such a gap exists and is hindering productivity. To develop a culture of inclusion, she urges organizations to bring in a trainer like her. She stated, "It's about going beyond just simply not judging your coworker because they are of a different generation. We need to proactively say, 'Let me appreciate you for your uniqueness; I also want you to appreciate me for mine. To do that, I'll be a little transparent with

you, so you can understand why I may be behaving differently.’ One of the exercises I conduct in my workshops is literally called ‘I Appreciate You For...’ In small groups, participants are asked to write on separate sheets of paper one characteristic they truly value about a person in the group. At the end of the exercise, the person to their right reads aloud all of the wonderful things about them. It’s like a big Kudos Party! Now, with everyone feeling encouraged, we move on to another exercise called ‘Please Forgive Me,’ where participants become more vulnerable by sharing with the table something about their behavior that they want people to better understand. For example, maybe they become stressed around deadlines and want to apologize for being occasionally abrupt.”

She concluded, “It’s about asking questions and truly listening to the responses. If you are an executive serious about developing your team, a diversity trainer can help start the dialogue. You will be amazed at the culture of receptivity and open-mindedness you will generate, not to mention the addition to the bottom line as your newly engaged and inspired workforce unites to focus on what really matters: your association’s mission.”

To learn more about Harrington’s work, just log onto her site www.shiraharrington.com.

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Two Democracy Plaza • 6707 Democracy Boulevard
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