

# Managing Conflict Across Generations in the Workplace

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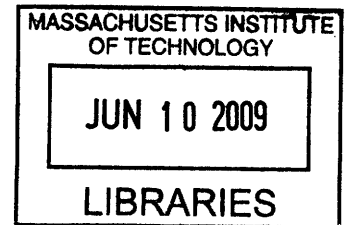
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## ABSTRACT

The current American workplace is made up of members of four distinct generations: “Veterans” (born between 1922-1943), “Boomers” (born between 1943–1960), “Generation X” (born between 1960 – 1980), and “Generation Y” (born between 1980 and 2000). Members of each generation bring to the workplace very distinct assumptions regarding technology, expertise, and rewards. This thesis explores the nature of differences in assumptions across all four generations. It takes the two most relevant to the current work environment, Boomers and Generation Y, and analyzes how their different approaches to technology, expertise and rewards cause conflict in the workplace. After conducting a literature review on conflict and change management at work, I propose a process for preventing and mitigating generational conflict at work.

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## Acknowledgements

Writing a thesis was, for me, the academic equivalent of completing an endurance event like the Ironman Triathlon. The journey started with a dream, an attitude of possibility and boundless enthusiasm. Sometime in the middle of the event one begins to question one's judgment in taking on such an endeavor, and (worse) one's ability to finish.

One does not complete formative events like these without the help a dedicated coach. In that sense I would like to thank John Van Maanen for his constant encouragement, tireless editing, and guidance during the darkest hour of the race. John walked along side me to the finish line, and I am eternally grateful.

In a triathlon the "Ironcrew" is made up of volunteers who cheer you on along the way, who hand you water and food, and whose smiles somehow give your legs energy as you journey down the road. For this thesis, my class of Sloan Fellows (2009) and many close friends played that role. They gave freely of their scarce time, expressed concern, spent hours proofreading, and held impromptu sympathetic listening sessions that got me through the low points. There are too many names to put on one page, but you know who your are. Thanks guys.

Finally, there is the reason we take on "crazy" challenges like a triathlon or a thesis. It is those that give meaning to our lives and those for whom we strive every day to become a better person. I would like to thank my wife Theresa for making the dream of an MIT education possible and for believing in me, even when I did not. I owe my accomplishments to the many sacrifices my parents made to give me the opportunity to study in this country and am here because of the doors they opened for me years ago. To siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents who have been with me along the way (and those that departed too soon), you have always provided me with inspiration. I love you all.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction – Purpose and Method**

The journey that led to this thesis started with a simple observation of what I deemed to be an incongruence in conventional wisdom. In 2002, I started a small software company with a handful of fellow “Generation X’ers.” This small company was acquired in 2005 by a larger, more traditional professional services firm whose ranks were full of Baby Boomers and Veterans. As my team transitioned into our new work environment, I observed the dialogue senior managers were having about “retaining” and “dealing with” this new generation of workers that seemed (to the senior managers) to have no respect for authority, no sense of loyalty, and whose attitude brimmed with a sense of entitlement. The company’s seasoned leaders were genuinely concerned and through email they circulated article after article that reinforced their assumptions of younger workers and prescribed techniques for mitigating the next generation’s shortcomings.

As a member of Generation X, I had been fortunate to earn the trust and respect of some members of this generation of workers when I started my company. The modest success that we achieved was largely in part to behavior and attitudes that were the antithesis of conventional wisdom about our generation. I began to wonder if the conventional wisdom was selling my generation short.

My team was committed to the company’s cause and worked loyally and selflessly to create a new product and nurse an infant company to life. Were we just an

anomaly? Was the conventional wisdom about inter-generational relationships at work inevitable? Senior Managements' email dialogue was contradicted by one young manager, who said in a company-wide email: "We're not lazy, we just look up the management ladder and do not see anyone whom we want to emulate. Our generation merely needs inspiration." Some senior managers saw that email exchange as a slap in the face. The tone of the note reinforced their perception that the younger generation has no respect for its elders. The conflict that ensued was a primary motivation for this work.

### **The generational divide**

In December of 2000, a survey in *The Economist* claimed: "the clash or contrast between youth and age could prove to be one of the defining issues of the 21st century" (Economist, 2000). Eight years into the century, the same publication, citing the recent trend in management books, said today's managers see the youngest generation of workers as "spoiled, narcissistic layabouts who cannot spell and waste too much time on instant messaging and Facebook" (Economist, 2008).

In February 2009, a *Harvard Business Review* Case Study illustrated a stereotypical generational conflict that a manager in today's corporate environment might face. The case is set in a fictitious entertainment company where a team is preparing a promotion, advertising and branding plan for a new film. A 37 year old marketing chief, struggling with work life balance, was having difficulty getting her 23 year old marketing associate "engaged" in the assignments she had laid out for him. The young marketing associate corresponds with his peers in the SMS lingo that marks the generation: RU BRD? - WRUD? TAB? - BRT? ("Are you bored?" "What are you



doing?” “Take a break?” “Be right there”). And, after a chat over coffee, the young associate comes up with a “more effective” marketing strategy, which he presents (unbeknownst to his boss) directly to the CEO in the hall, much to the CEO’s delight. The case highlights the differences in the dynamics of relationships, communication, and conflict resolution that are the heart of today’s intergenerational conflict (Erickson, 2009).

### **A personal interest**

As noted, my interest in the topic came from personally struggling with generational conflicts in my career. Having had to manage, inspire, persuade, sell to, and answer to people across all generations in my career, I found the broad generalizations that often appear in current media shortsighted. I had seen people in all age groups exhibit both desirable and undesirable qualities, and, although I had plenty of theories of my own about the supposed generational divide, I welcomed the idea of further exploring the topic.

### **A point of view**

I began my analysis with a prescribed answer, which explains the conflicts between generations as a fundamental shift in values. In his 1956 book, *“The Organization Man,”* William H. Whyte talked of an ideological shift he observed. One in which the middle class workers of the time took “the organizational vow,” becoming “much more deeply beholden [to the organization] than were their elders.” He wrote of the decline of the Protestant Work Ethic and the rise of the self-perpetuating organization that lures workers from their homes both “spiritually and physically” (Whyte, 1956).

My initial viewpoint was simple. The self-perpetuating organization had broken its promise to the Organization Man with layoffs, “re-engineering” and “right-sizing” in the 1980’s and 1990’s. The Organization Man, whose loyalty drove him to turn a blind eye to incongruence and imperfection in his institution, was eventually betrayed and rewarded with early retirement. This systemic betrayal, witnessed by the younger generations, triggered a shift in values that I believed was at the root of today’s intergenerational conflict.

I believed that this generation of workers would only be loyal to an individual and no longer to an institution as had been true for the Organization Man. However, like its predecessor, I believed the current generation was entirely capable of rising to the challenges at hand. In my mind, the commitment of the young workforce required congruent behavior, transparent communication, and mutual respect from senior managers. The Organization itself, however, could no longer be trusted.

I began this work with the notion of documenting the ideological shift that occurred over the past several decades. I sought to answer the following questions:

- In what ways is today’s workforce entrant different from the 1950’s Organization Man?
- What is the nature of these differences?
- What causes senior managers to react negatively to or simply dismiss the differences?
- Why is the conflict between generations at work so difficult to resolve?
- How suited is the younger generation for the challenges that it will face?

- What can we do to help the workers of tomorrow avoid similar conflicts with the next generation?

As all fruitful exercises in theorizing go, this one uncovered the many errors inherent in my initial assumptions. Following a framework laid out by Argyris and Schon (1974), I set out to inquire into the *espoused theories* and the *theories in use* across the generational divide. My initial study found generational differences observable on the surface. But what I found on deeper analysis was not a drastically changed worker, but one whose fundamental habits and preferences were very similar to his predecessor's.

Humans of all ages, it seems, are motivated by an urge to satisfy the same fundamental needs of survival, belonging and self esteem (Maslow, 1943). When humans are unable to satisfy these fundamental needs, they enter a state of conflict that is marked by anxiety and unease. In this thesis, I will explore the nature of conflicts that arise between members of different generations and how these conflicts are manifested in the workplace.

### **Outline**

For purposes of my analysis, I grouped generations of American workers into four categories. These categories are based on the definitions specified in "*Generations at Work*" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Chapter 2 studies the "Veterans" (born between 1922-1943) and the "Boomers" (born between 1943-1960) while Chapter 3 takes a look at "Generation X", called "Gen X" for short, (born between 1960 - 1980) and "Generation Y", called "Gen Y" for short, (born between 1980 and 2000).

I compare and contrast the two groups using a “Level of Culture” framework, consisting of artifacts, espoused values, and (often unarticulated) assumptions (Schein, 1985).

In Chapter 4, I introduce evidence of conflict across these generations in the American workplace. From well-researched books, current periodicals, and anecdotal information we can analyze the pattern of conflict that emerges across generations as a result of the differences described in Chapter 3. From my observations, it would seem that “Generational Conflict” goes unresolved in the workplace for the same reasons conflict at large between any two differing groups goes unresolved.

Chapter 5 provides a literature review on organizational learning and conflict resolution. Using frameworks originated by Argyris, Schon, Maslow, and McGregor I describe the predominant ways of handling conflict in organizations. It appears there has been little change in the methods and preferences for handling conflict in the workplace over the last 50 years.

Chapter 6 applies conflict resolution theories to conflicts that arise in a work environment because of generational differences in artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. I conclude with a number of suggestions for managers of cross-generational teams in hopes of providing useful ways to both surface and resolve conflict at work.

## Chapter 2 – The Seasoned Workforce: Veterans and Boomers

This chapter describes the artifacts, values, and often-unarticulated assumptions that make up the culture of the two senior generations in today's American workforce. The Veterans (born between 1922-1943) and the Boomers (born between 1943-1960) are, today, at the upper echelons of corporate and civil leadership. They have decision-making authority over major resources and are the guardians of the processes that shape organizational structures and rules.

Artifacts are symbols, stories, lingo, habits, and rituals that are given meaning by the members of a particular culture (Schein, 1985). Through artifacts, people tacitly and explicitly display and reinforce their commitment to a group's values, thereby satisfying (and displaying) the needs of the generational group to which they belong.

Espoused Values are explicit meanings that members of a given culture give artifacts. They represent values that are articulated readily with little inquiry. An espoused value is one that a person claims to have. It can be congruent or incongruent with cultural assumptions.

Basic Assumptions are fundamental premises that individuals hold about how to successfully navigate the world. These premises prescribe the "right" thing to do in any situation and evolve over time as members of a group solve a recurring challenge in a specific and successful manner. These premises are not usually

articulated. They are implicit. They are deeply rooted and difficult to change (Schein, 1985).

### **The Veterans**

Veterans' generally conservative values emerge from formative events that called for self-sacrifice and collaboration. They are an industrious generation that forged an identity in difficult economic times. In today's workplace veterans, can be seen leading their organization as un-retired employees or consulting as part of "more than one million seniors who have traded in their golf clubs for a Rolodex" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 60). They entered the workforce in the role of the prototypical "Organization Man" and value structure, order, and loyalty in their work interactions. They formed and maintained rigid and impenetrable boundaries between personal and professional matters and "called those above them on the organization chart by their last name, with 'Mr.' in front of it" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 50). This is the generation of John Glenn, Jack Welch, Lee Iacocca, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush.

### **Veteran Artifacts**

Every generation lives through events that, through the sheer magnitude of emotions they elicit, become coordinating devices. These devices can be surfaced with the popular question that begins with "Where were you when..." and concludes with a significant event. For Veterans, this event was the morning of August 7th, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. The country was unified behind a common cause, which resulted in a deep-rooted loyalty to country. This generation supported efforts to "buy American," grew up listening to episodes of the Lone

Ranger on the radio, and witnessed the arrival of an animated mouse named Mickey.

The music that captivated the Veterans was played by Glenn Miller and his band, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Ella Fitzgerald.

#### Veteran Values

To survive in their trying times the Veterans adopted the following set of values

(p30):

- Dedication/sacrifice
- Hard work
- Conformity
- Law and order
- Respect for authority
- Patience
- Delayed rewards
- Duty before pleasure
- Adherence to rules
- Honor

Adhering to this set of espoused values, they navigated the country through the Great Depression and led the effort to defeat fascism during World War 2.

#### Veteran Assumptions

Collaboration was key to survival for this generation. They generally assume that the needs of the individual come second to those of the larger group. Collaboration fosters the assumption of reciprocal loyalty, where one person expects loyalty from the group to which he or she commits his or her loyalty and efforts.

A second assumption places frugality at the center of the generational survival strategy. Growing up in an era of scarcity, Veterans learned to waste nothing. They “used it up, wore it out, made it do, or did without” and reckless allocation of

resources was (and still is) viewed as wrong (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 35).

Veterans, having solved difficult problems in the past, assume that best way to find a solution is to look at what has been done in the past (p. 39). The Veteran view of the world carries the third assumption of the generation that the most effective way to organize and achieve objectives is through a well-ordered hierarchy: “The most enduring workplace legacy of the Veterans is the old-style command-and-control leadership they learned in the war, modified for peacetime, particularly in manufacturing, and which they believe in their hearts is the only sane way to organize work – and society” (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 41).

### **The Boomers**

Coming of age in times of relative prosperity gave the boomers an optimistic outlook on life. Less comfortable with hierarchies, the Boomers, unlike the Veterans, were a generation that learned to question authority, coining the phrase “Don’t trust anyone over 30.” Yet now that they have crossed that “distrust-able” age threshold, however, the phrase seems to have evolved to “Don’t trust anyone under 50.”

Boomers as a group have garnered the attention of the media and, because of the magnitude of their demographic footprint; their stage in life has defined a nation’s economic trends. This is the Generation of Bill and Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates, David Letterman, and Oprah Winfrey.

### **Boomer Artifacts**

The Boomers all remember where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. They witnessed social upheaval with the Vietnam War and the Civil



Rights movement, the technological breakthrough of Neil Armstrong's "small step" on the moon, and the rise and fall of a new politically unifying enemy in the Soviet Union. They enjoyed television as a predominant form of entertainment and developed a sense of teamwork and reflective self-improvement. They can remember "Duck and Cover" jingles that "playfully" taught elementary school kids how to "protect" themselves under a desk in the event of a nuclear attack. They remember the Beatles playing on Ed Sullivan Show and danced to the songs of Elvis, The Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, The Beach Boys, and the Grateful Dead.

#### **Boomer Values**

As a result of the prosperous era in which they were shaped, the Boomers express the following values (p68):

- Optimism
- Team orientation
- Personal gratification
- Health and wellness
- Personal growth
- Youthfulness
- Work (Driven workaholics)
- Involvement

With this set of espoused values they challenged the legitimacy of a War (Vietnam), brought the practical implications of equal rights into play with society, and began to support and apply "Participative Management" in the workplace.

#### **Boomer Assumptions**

Everything is possible to the Boomers because they grew up watching the so-called impossible come into existence. Their assumptions revolve less around survival because survival was not an issue as it was for their predecessors. Their dominant

assumptions revolve more around satisfying their needs for belonging and self-worth.

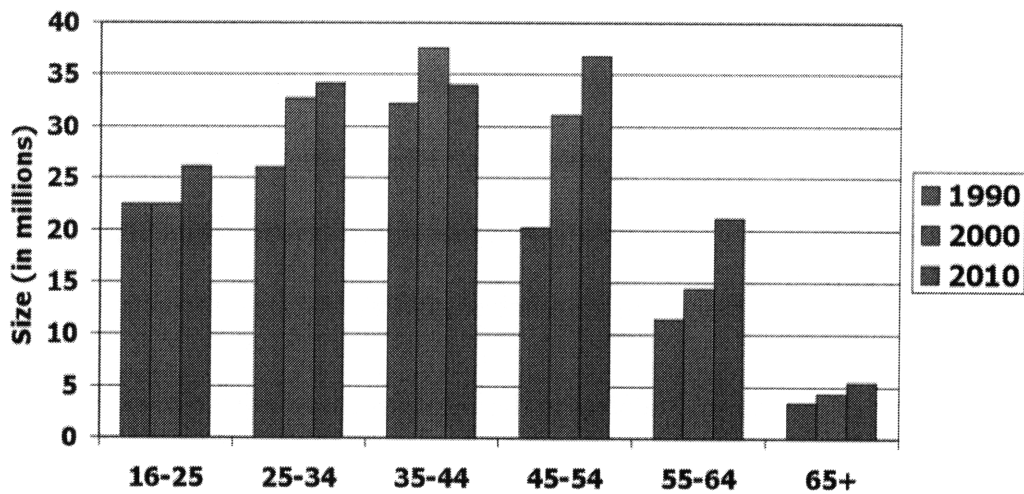
Boomers are group oriented and assume one achieves their goals only by participating in a team. The impossible tasks that they accomplished, from putting a man on the moon to turning the political tide in the country, happened because groups came together to change the status quo. Perhaps because of their sheer numbers when they were going through school and entering the workforce, they had to learn to work together.

Unlike Veterans, Boomers are not apologetic about personal gratification. They did not grow up in an era of scarcity and they “indulge with relative comfort. Boomers enjoy and expect to be the trendsetters at whatever stage of life their generation may be. This assumption is reinforced by the economic realities that their spending trends represent. The Boomers are a significant economic force. And they are constantly reminded of this fact. They expect to be at the forefront of trends.

#### **Boomers in the driver’s seat**

Boomers now far outnumber the Veterans in the upper ranks of management. A 2007 study done by the University of North Carolina Institute on Aging shows the decline of Veterans in the workforce. As shown in Figure 2-1 the percentage of workers over age 65 expected to still be in the workplace in 2010 is slightly above 5%.

Figure 2-1



Sources of data: U.S. Census Bureau, "65+ in the United States: 2005," December 2005;  
U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2007.  
Prepared by the UNC Institute on Aging



Veterans built the companies that Boomers are now running. Although the Veterans that remain may represent "a pain in the backside for action-oriented Boomers and technology crazy X'ers, they are also an irreplaceable repository of lore and wisdom, practical wiliness, and more than a few critical organizational contacts" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 19).

The prominence of Boomers in the workforce is not likely to fade away anytime soon. Boomers tend to work beyond the traditional retirement age. Dychtwald, Erickson, & Morison (2006) document the growing trend of "Flex Retirement" that allows Boomers to continue working past retirement with a reduced work schedule. Legal changes have also made mandatory retirement in many industries a thing of the past.

A recent McKinsey Global Institute report found that:

“There is only one realistic way to prevent aging boomers from experiencing a significant decline in their living standards and becoming a multi-decade drag on US and world economic growth. Boomers will have to continue working beyond the traditional retirement age, and that will require important changes in public policy, business practices, and personal behavior” (Beinhocker, Farrell, & Greenberg, 2008).

Because the larger number of Boomers in the workplace is predicted to extend its tenure past traditional retirement age, this increases the likelihood that members of this generation will be the generation most likely to clash with the younger generation. The remainder of this thesis will address generational conflict from the “Mature” side of the workplace by using artifacts, values, and assumptions that are associated with the Boomers. Chapter 4 will analyze how Boomer artifacts, values, and assumptions are manifested at work, and how these manifestations mix with those of younger generations at work.

## **Chapter 3 – Up and coming workers: Digital, Flat, and Fast**

This chapter describes the artifacts, values, and often-unarticulated assumptions that make up the culture of the two junior generations in today's American workforce. Generation X (born between 1960 – 1980) and Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000) are driving value creation and change at all levels in organizations both large and small. At the same time, some of their contrasting artifacts, values, and assumptions are driving their Veteran and Boomer managers crazy.

### **Generation X at a Glance**

This generation grew up in the face of America's relative military, political, economic, and diplomatic decline. Generation X learned that the promises they heard and expectations they held were not always delivered as advertised. They saw relational contracts at work fall apart and the integrity of leaders and organizations questioned. In today's workplace they seek to be measured on their output and not their input. A good number of Gen X'ers expect flexible work schedules that allow for a work-life balance. They harbor skepticism for formal and rigid hierarchies. For many, their confidence comes from the self-reliance that being "latchkey kids" may have taught them. This is the generation of Barak and Michelle Obama, Michael Dell, Michael Jordan, and Brad Pitt.

#### **Gen X Artifacts**

The war that Generation X witnessed was an economic one. Globalization was (and still is) on the rise. The "casualties" in this war were tallied in job losses. Members

of Gen X saw their parents suffer throughout corporate layoffs and restructurings through the 1970's and 1980's. Members of this Generation can tell you where they were when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded. They, more often than previous generations, were raised in single-parent households. As a group, they enjoyed MTV and saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. Generation X listens to the music of U2, Michael Jackson, Bon Jovi, Bruce Springsteen, and Elton John.

#### Gen X Values

Members of Gen X coalesce around the following values (p.98)

- Diversity
- Thinking globally
- Balance
- "Technoliteracy"
- Fun
- Informality
- Self-reliance
- Pragmatism

These values illustrate the changes in technology that have affected the workplace as well as coping mechanisms for dealing with uncertain economic times and broken relational contracts.

#### Gen X Assumptions

Gen X'ers assume that they can rely only on the self for survival (although the threats they "survived" were of a largely symbolic nature than physical as faced by the Veterans). Members of Gen X draw on a deep-rooted self-reliance in the face of ambiguity and new problems. They learned that results matter above all, and that it is possible to achieve results without the rigid and formal structures that their predecessors put in place.

Balance between work and life was not present in their role models. They have parents that “devoted their lives to the religion of work” (p.99) who, in the end, were handed a pink slip. Generation X developed an appreciation for balance between work and personal life carry a skepticism toward authority.

### **Generation Y at a Glance**

Generation Y, like Boomers, grew up in a time of economic expansion. They “are the busiest kids of all time” being escorted around to sports practice, arts lessons and tutoring by dedicated soccer moms and dads (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 133). Tech savvy and collaborative, they have no trouble sharing intimate details with the world on sites like MySpace.com and Facebook.com. Their lack of affinity for long-term employment puzzles employers and their spending power excites marketers. Their artifacts are signs of our times and, as true for any “new” generation, they are the catalysts of change.

### **Gen Y Artifacts**

Generation Y saw the World Trade Center fall. They welcomed the Internet and the “New Social Media.” They do not know a world without cell phones, “crackberries,” twitter, and email. They enjoy television on their own schedule with time-shifting technology such as Tivo. They are accustomed to being catered to and heard. If the children of other generations entertained themselves with toys like model trains that were of little relevance to the businesses of their time, Generation Y grew up playing with the digital technologies that are redefining the way business in contemporary society is done (Tapscott, 2008). Music for this generation is downloaded via the Internet, and they find the definition of “downloading as

criminal” to be as puzzling as it is wrong (Tapscott, 2008). The songs they grew up with are played by Will Smith, Alanis Morissette, Backstreet Boys, and Eminem.

#### Gen Y Values

Generation Y is characterized by the following values (p68):

- Optimism
- Civic duty
- Confidence
- Achievement
- Sociability
- Morality
- Street smarts
- Diversity

#### Gen Y Assumptions

The world that Generation Y knows is highly customizable. They grew up in an era of options, where the menus at fast food restaurants say “Have it your way.” All their media such as web sites, ring tones, online identity, news sources, and entertainment are readily customized because of their digital form. Generation Y expects to be able to change the things they feel do not fit their style.

Media interaction for Generation Y is thought of as a two-way dialogue. They did not grow up in a world of one-way TV broadcasting, like the Boomers, where there was no ability to interact with content creators. This generation likes to give feedback and expects to be heard. They treat TV as “background music” in a world of interactive media.

Mass Collaboration is a way of life for Generation Y. They think nothing of adding their own commentary to an online discussion of their interest. Sites like Wikipedia



are a testament to the widespread collaboration engaged in by this generation. They “collaborate on Facebook, play multiuser video games; text each other incessantly; and share files for school, work, or just for fun” (Tapscott, 2008, p. 35).

Answers to this generation are a mouse click away through any popular Internet search engine. They are accustomed to rapid access to data that they can then scrutinize. Slow processes seem foreign and confusing to them in light of the speed with which they communicate and make decisions in their lives.

#### **Generation Y focus**

In the remainder of this thesis, I focus on the artifacts, values, and assumptions of Generation Y as the “Emerging” side of the workforce. They are the contemporary entrants to the workforce and, as I noted, their numbers are large.

Generation Y has been called the “Echo Boom” (as in the ‘second Baby Boom’) because Gen Y “will weigh in at about 72.9 million total, which is substantially larger than Generation X, but probably falling about 3 million short of the notch the Baby Boom left on the door frame” (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 129). The relative size of Generation Y (compared to Generation X whose size is roughly 46 million members) makes Generation Y an important group for analysis.

Chapter 4 describes the workplace that Generation Y will be entering. This “New Organization” is a slowly morphing version of the more traditional organization that created the “Organization Man.” The New Organization of today is lead primarily by Boomers (with some help from Veterans and Gen X’ers). They, of course, carry different assumptions into the workplace than Gen Y’ers. Chapter 4 looks at how

these differing assumptions may collide in areas that are critical to the New Organization's success.

## Chapter 4 Generational Conflict in the New Organization

This chapter takes the critical generational assumptions that were identified in the literature in Chapter 2 and 3 and examine how they may operate in today's organization.

### The new organization – An Overview

In "*Managing for the Future*" (Ancona, Kochan, Van Maanen, & Westney, 2004), the authors describe a model of the "New Organization." The New Organization's characteristics have evolved from the bureaucratic and hierarchical "Old Organization." The authors describe five dimensions along which the two models – old and new – differ. The Old Organization succeeded by being bounded, hierarchical, fixed, homogeneous, and home based. Today, the business world has been affected by changes in demographics, technology, and the worldwide nature of competition. To cope and succeed in the changed environment organizations are, to varying degrees, adopting networked, flat, flexible, diverse, and global characteristics. Most organizations are, of course, operating at some level between the old and the new. Here we find Boomers managing the growing Gen Y workforce.

"Business schools are increasingly required to change their curricula to produce managers who can act effectively in organizations that are more team-based, more closely linked to customers and suppliers, flatter, quicker to respond to change, more diverse in the composition of their workforce,

and more effective at operating in an increasingly global economy” (Van Maanen, 1997, p. 4).

Peter Drucker (1988) documents three significant periods of change in organizational structure. The first period, he claims, took place between 1895 and 1905. Here management became distinct from ownership. Drucker cites the milestone event in this period as the moment Georg Siemens, head of Deutsche Bank, bailed out his cousin Werner’s electrical apparatus company on the condition that Werner bring in “professional managers” to run the company.

The second period that Drucker identifies began in the early 1920’s and was marked by Pierre du Pont’s restructuring of the family’s business along the same lines that Alfred P. Sloan restructured General Motors during the same period. “This introduced the command and control organization of today, with its emphasis on decentralization, central service staffs, personnel management, the whole apparatus of budgets and controls, and the important distinction between policy and operations” (p. 53). Drucker states that this stage of evolution was finalized in the early 1950’s when General Electric was re-organized and he credits the G.E. re-organization with “perfecting the model most big businesses around the world (including Japanese organizations) still follow” (p.53).

This period coincides with Whyte’s (1956) book about the Organization Man. We may conclude Organization Man’s mindset and skills were best suited for working in this 1950’s command and control environment. As with many innovations,

however, as conditions change, the very solutions of the past can become the problems of tomorrow (Senge, 1990).

Drucker (1988) concluded his article with a description of a third and current phase of organizational change that we are facing. This phase is marked by “information-based and knowledge work.” He predicts this form of work leads to organizational problems of a structural and behavioral sort. It is these challenges that the characteristics of the New Organization address. Like many structural and behavioral change efforts, the degree and speed of adoption varies greatly across organizations.

In the following section, I look at technology, expertise and rewards in the Old and New Organization. I also look to differences in approaching these three organizational domains by members of the Boomer and Generation Y generations. I argue that these are the areas in which generational conflict is most likely to surface.

### **Technology**

Alvin and Heidi Toffler (2006) argue that there have been, historically, three waves of “wealth systems:” the agrarian economy, the industrial economy, and the (current) knowledge economy. In their view, each wealth system has its roots in technology and a change in technology leads to a change in wealth system.

“Each of these three wealth systems imposes different imperatives on societies and the lives of ordinary people. They produce very different forms and amounts of wealth. The wealth systems have utterly different

ecological and cultural consequences. They produce three radically different lifeways” (p. 23).

The plow and other agricultural advancements led to a surplus of goods and time around which the agrarian economy was built. Technology at this stage allowed humans to settle in one region as opposed to being nomads, giving rise to communities and a wealth system that valued the factors of production: land and (peasant or slave) labor. There emerged “rural-elites” who, by virtue of controlling resources, designed the organizational system that revolved around landowners and peasants. This agrarian period also led to the division of labor that became the mark of the following period.

Although the Tofflers acknowledge debate regarding the date, they mark the late 1600’s as the period when industrialism first began to appear. This stage:

“brought factories, urbanization, and secularism. It combined fossil-fuel energy and brute-force technologies requiring rote and repetitive muscle work. It brought mass production, mass education, mass media and mass culture” (p. 21).

The emerging work system, values, family structure, political and religious institutions of the industrial age collided with those of the agrarian age. Much like the technology of today, advances in the technology of the time were driving changes in behavior, values, and assumptions that clashed with those of the past. The changes in behavior led to the rise of a new “industrial elite.” This industrial economy added capital to the agrarian factors of production (land and labor).

Further, it created amounts of wealth previously unimaginable. Organizations were built that had “common principles of standardization, specialization, synchronization, concentration, centralization and maximization of scale” (p. 21). These emerging organizations were hierarchical in nature and operated like the production machines on which they depended.

Similar to Drucker’s (1988) description of the environment in which the New Organization thrives, the Toffler’s depict the current era of wealth as one where the vertical hierarchies that were so successful in the industrial era are now being replaced by flatter, faster, networked organizations. The main driver in this “third wave” is knowledge, rather than land, labor, or capital. Knowledge is a different type of economic good. The Tofflers predict we are witnessing the coming of a new world. They note we are in a period marked by:

“innovation and experiment as old institutions become dysfunctional and people try out new ways of life, new values, new belief systems, new family structures, new political forms, new types of art, literature and music; new relations between the genders” (p. 23).

Emerging new technologies, then, are the first feature of the world inhabited by Boomers and Gen Y’ers. Technology is changing rapidly and so too are the organizations that must operate in a new technologically changed world. And, I will later show, there are different assumptions surrounding the role of technology in organizations and this leads to generational conflict.

## Expertise

Who controls the critical factors of production? In the agrarian economy, land and labor were critical, and the aristocracy controlled land and labor. In the industrial economy, the factors expanded to land, labor, and capital. Power was wielded by those who controlled the allocation of capital resources. If knowledge is the differentiating factor today, it is important to understand the nature of knowledge, where it comes from, what makes it powerful, and how it is controlled.

Knowledge as a wealth creation mechanism is different than traditional factors. The mere fact that it is a “non-rival” good gives it perplexing characteristics. Unlike land, labor, and capital, the utility of knowledge is not exhausted as more people use it.

The Tofflers (2006:100) spell out how knowledge as an economic good differs from traditional economic goods.

- Knowledge is inherently non-rival: its value does not diminish with increasing users
- Knowledge is intangible: you can't touch it but you can manipulate it
- Knowledge is non-linear: small insights can yield large outputs
- Knowledge is relational: it gathers its meaning in the context of other knowledge
- Knowledge mates with other knowledge
- Knowledge is more portable than any other product
- Knowledge can be compressed into symbols or abstractions
- Knowledge can be stored in smaller and smaller spaces
- Knowledge can be explicit or implicit, expressed or not expressed, shared or tacit

The Tofflers refer to knowledge as “Tomorrow’s oil” implying that knowledge will be the “fuel” of the future. Unlike oil, however, there is not a finite amount of knowledge as it is constantly being created. Richard Florida (2002) describes the emergence of a class of workers (that he calls “The Creative Class”) that benefits from the creative application of knowledge and ideas: “Their property – which



stems from their creative capacity – is an intangible because it is literally in their heads” (p. 68). The intangible nature of intellectual property poses a challenge to organizations (and legal systems) that were built to protect physical assets. The challenges in enforcing intellectual property rights are evident in the current debate about digital rights management over downloadable music.

The Tofflers (2006) claim there is so much knowledge being generated, disseminated, and stored that we find ourselves flooded by obsolete knowledge or “obsoledge.” The inability to ascertain the truthfulness or relevance of a bit of knowledge becomes its constraint. Knowledge becomes “obsoledge” because the increasing rate of change in our environment limits the shelf life of any one bit of knowledge. To counteract its effects, we must continue to learn.

Because organizational members need knowledge to make good decisions in today’s business environment, the smartest ones the Tofflers say (p. 125) “know what they don’t know” and can defer to content experts who represent the “authorities” on a topic. Content experts in today’s business environment come in all shapes, colors, sizes, and nationalities. This is a challenge to the Old Organization’s assumption that the right answer always resides higher up the hierarchy.

As knowledge is used to create products and services, a limiting phenomenon comes into play. The complexity that is characteristic of knowledge economy products and services can quickly surpass the capacity with which the human mind can easily process it (p. 227). Complexity and our inability to fully understand can be an opportunity or a constraint.

Because knowledge and expertise are crucial for business organizations in the new economy, what different generations assume about knowledge and expertise produce conflict in this domain.

### **Reward Systems**

It is in the heads of employees that a company's knowledge resides. When those employees leave, a company's knowledge does as well. Managers today are struggling to keep talent from leaving. "Americans now change jobs on average every 3.5 years – a figure that has been declining steadily for every age group" (Florida, 2002, p. 104). Reward systems must adapt to the changing needs of the workforce if companies are to keep their most valuable assets from leaving.

Drucker (1999:93) identified this challenge. He notes:

"Within a fairly short period of time, we will face the problem of the governance of corporations again. We will have to redefine the purpose of the employing organization and of its management as both satisfying the legal owners (such as shareholders) and satisfying the owners of the human capital that gives the organization its wealth-producing power—that is, satisfying the knowledge workers."

He spells out the following six major challenges of motivating the knowledge worker. These are the challenges that managers face in the New Organization:

- Management must be clear on what the task is
- The worker must have autonomy
- The worker must be responsible for continuous innovation
- The worker must constantly learn as well as teach
- Management must measure quality of output

- Knowledge workers must want to work for the organization in preference to all other opportunities

Rewards in the New Organization rely in part on the intrinsic reward of the work itself. According to Ancona et al (2004), motivating the knowledge worker must rest on more than the traditional extrinsic rewards of salary and job security. An “intrinsic reward” is defined by Florida (2002:103) as the pride one feels in having “ideas, putting them into action, and seeing the rewards.” Florida writes of the tension between creativity and organization to make the point that a creative economy still needs some traditional organizational processes to survive. This is recognition that New Organization still needs need some characteristics of the Old Organization. Yet creative knowledge workers may detest the rigid structures in place to help the business move forward. These collisions are perhaps necessary. They may, in fact, result in waves of “creative destruction” that “annihilate old backward technologies and industries to make way for the new and disruptive ones” (Toffler & Toffler, 2006, p. 43).

Florida traces the roots of the creative economy to the very R&D departments that were first designed and used by the prototypical Old Organizations. Successful R&D labs created an environment similar to that of university research labs where talented (and somewhat oddball, and eccentric) researchers could feel at home inventing and testing out their ideas. Creative individuals are not cut from the same thread as mainstream employees. Florida (2002) specifies the values of the Creative Class as Individuality, Meritocracy, and Diversity/Openness. These values are in

contrast to the Organization Man's values of hierarchical order, standardized career paths, and homogeneity. Today's Gen Y creative professionals demand considerable flexibility of schedule, dress, assignment, etc. These demands challenge Boomers for they see such "flexibility" as a violation of proven success tactics.

### **Generational assumptions that lead to conflict in organizations**

This section will demonstrate through personal anecdotes and literature citations how the assumptions that Boomers and Gen Y'ers bring to the workplace can cause conflict in interpersonal interactions. I focus specifically on assumptions germane to technology, expertise, and reward systems. I analyze how the following assumptions play out in the New Organization and illustrate friction points to which I propose corrective actions in Chapter 6.

I chose to focus on a limited set of generational assumptions. I look at the ones with which I have the most personal experience. They are also evident in the dominant intergenerational conflicts that were documented in the literature that I reviewed.

#### **Boomers Assumptions**

My analysis will focus on the following Boomer assumptions.

- Commitment is a function of work hours spent in the office
- One way broadcasting is best (authority broadcasts "right answer")
- Face to face relationships are best

The term “workaholic” was coined to describe the Boomer parents of Generation X and Y. “Boomers think working an 80-hour workweek demonstrates commitment to the job” (Harris, 2005, p. 44). The work habits that Boomers adhered to in building their companies and careers involved long hours at work.

“They [Boomers] have tended to define themselves through their jobs and achieve their identity by the work they perform. For this generation ‘work ethic’ and ‘worth ethic’ are synonyms” (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 77).

They are convinced that long hours equate to success in business and expect others to show their commitment in a similar manner.

Boomers grew up in an era of “one way broadcasting” (Tapscott, 2008). The media in which they grew up did not allow for a dialogue, rather it was a one-way flow of ideas and information. Although Boomers certainly learned to question authority, the institutions in which they grew up and the ones they inherited and now lead are in tune with veteran values of hierarchical command-and-control (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

Close relationships came naturally for Boomers. This is the “love generation.” They also learned to leverage close relationships to get ahead in business and in life.

“They have taken connecting to a fine art – internally and externally. We think of the ‘man in the gray flannel suit’ as a networker, but he could not

hold a candle to the Boomers. They took the adage ‘It’s not what you know but who you know’ and made it, if not a science, a high art form” (p. 89).

The relationships they built relied heavily on “face time.” At work, face time is connected to how rewards are parceled out; the more face time put in, the more rewards gathered in.

#### Generation Y Assumptions

My analysis will focus on the following Generation Y Assumptions.

- Commitment is getting things done (solving a problem, creating something)
- Two way broadcasting is best (customizing, penchant for giving feedback)
- Distant, fast, loose connections are best

Generation Y’ers like to solve problems for their employers, but they do not like to be restricted by constraints on where or how they solve these problems (Tapscott, 2008, p. 162). “Their dream job is something like this: a job with a problem or dilemma no one knows how to solve and lots of great people to work with”. For Boomers, this type of role would require long hours in the office. For Gen Y’ers, as long as the work gets done, it does not matter where it gets done.

Generation Y is accustomed to customizing its environment. “They have grown up getting what media they want, when they want it, and being able to change it” (Tapscott, 2008, p. 34). They have also experienced a high level of interactivity with the products they consume (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Gen Y’ers have been known to

frustrate their managers by their incessant need for feedback; a manifestation of their assumption that a two way dialogue is essential (Economist, 2008).

As can be seen above, Generation Y assumptions collide with those of the Boomers in the New Organization. The following section illustrates how these different assumptions result in interpersonal conflict in the domains of Technology, Expertise, and Reward Systems.

### **Technology Friction**

Technology when mixed with differing assumptions about work becomes a domain of conflict because:

1. Technology is native to one cohort and not the other, giving the “Digital Native” Gen Y a functional advantage over the “Digitally Naïve” Boomers.
2. Technology facilitates higher productivity, which can be intimidating to the Boomers, and, because a given task takes less time to complete, may reduce “in office” hours.
3. Technology facilitates relationships at a distance. Gen Y is comfortable connecting virtually. Boomers value face time and build relationships the “old fashioned way.” Neither generation gives much validity to the other generation’s assumptions.
4. Technology facilitates work away from the office. This challenges boomer’s assumption about the importance of time spent at work, and supports Gen Y assumption that results matter, no matter where they are generated.
5. Technology allows easy two way broadcasting, working against the Boomers norm of one way (top down, one to many, from person of authority) broadcasting.

An example is useful here. I was a freshly minted Mechanical Engineer, starting my job in manufacturing at a major consumer goods company. My comfort level with technology was akin to that of the current Generation Y “Digital Natives” who grew up with sophisticated, user-friendly technologies and cannot fathom what life without that technology was like (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). My comfort with technology promptly landed me a position on an implementation team of the Enterprise Resource Planning software SAP. Within months, I was fluent with the operation’s financial management system and, given that I did not have to unlearn the legacy system that was being replaced, I loved the new system. I became a site “Super User.” This thrust me into the role of teacher and mentor to a group of Boomers who were none too keen to adopt SAP. “The old system works fine,” they would argue. “This new system is too complicated,” they said. I sensed that my command of the technology posed a threat to the more tenured employees.

Tapscott (2008) says the differing technological literacy is behind the fundamental power shift that some Boomers resent, allowing Gen Y to be productive by effectively using new tools, and doing so while not necessarily having to be at the office. I discovered that an SAP system administrator can be just as productive in the office or logged in remotely from home. This was not taken well by Boomers who I was out to convince to use the new system in the office.

Technology is also changing the way people communicate. For example, Boomers are comfortable and effective at building relationships face to face at the water cooler or at the corner tavern, Gen Y’ers move these water cooler or corner tavern



conversations on-line (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Because Gen Y can replace face-to-face contact with virtual interaction, there is conflict with the Boomers about the appropriateness of online social network usage (such as spending time on Facebook in the office). In this regard, consider the following examples of these conflicts drawn from Tapscott (2008, p. 165):

“The debate over banning Facebook is a typical case of the Boomer employers just not getting it. I remember when employers banned e-mail; they thought it was totally unproductive and that managers shouldn’t be typing. I remember when companies refused to give their employees PCs. Then they banned the Internet; employers were apparently worried that employees would look at porn on the company premises or that they would be wasting their time.”

Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak (2000, p. 54) provide another example:

“Jeez, learn how to use your email, man!” goes younger generation’s critique of the older generations ability, illustrating the lack of credibility that people who are unfamiliar with technology have (to those that are familiar).

Electronic communication has added a speedy option to communicate words at the expense of any given message’s clarity. This may also lead to trouble. While an email or a brief text message might convey information to a colleague, the disintermediation effect of not being able to read visual cues (such as body language) and aural ones (such as tone of voice) makes such communication prone to misinterpretation. Conflict in email dialogue can escalate quickly.

“Flaming” is the term given to the act of communicating via email in an unfriendly, hostile, or intimidating way (Turnage, 2007). Turnage goes on to suggest that Boomer assumptions about informality and appropriate interaction within an organization combine with the speed and impersonal characteristic of email to exacerbate conflict with Gen Y’ers. When one generation (Boomers) prefers face-to-face contact that the other (Gen Y’ers) does not, miscommunications and conflict across generations is likely.

In sum, new technologies are at the core of the New Organization. But generational differences in assumptions about the proper use, value, and utility of technology seem often to lead to misunderstandings and conflict. How these might be resolved will be addressed in the next two chapters.

### **Expertise Friction**

Expertise is treated differently across generations because assumptions differ.

1. For Boomers, expertise comes from experience. Boomer expertise is suspect to Gen Y’ers because “Boomers can’t use email.”
2. Legitimacy for Boomers comes from people who have proven experience.
3. The feedback/dialogue penchant of Gen Y frustrates Boomers, Gen Y’ers want to say what they think and expect others to listen. Boomers listen only to those with experience and proven track records

At the age of 22, I was hired to manage a team of 14 technicians, all Boomers, at a manufacturing facility for a large consumer goods company. On my first day, I had

positional power granted by the box with my name on the organization chart. But I quickly learned that I had no legitimacy in the organization. Walking towards the manufacturing control room I could make out the faces of six of my team members chatting comfortably at the conference room table. The silence that greeted me when I walked into the room implicitly said: "You may be the new boss, but we do not trust you."

It took the better part of 18 months for me to demonstrate to them that indeed I valued their decades of experience. I later learned that "bungee bosses," managers who came and went in the span of a year, were common in the department and the coping mechanism of choice among those in the department was simply to out-last them. The belief was that bungee bosses would be gone soon, only to be replaced with yet another up-and-comer. These bungee bosses were always "young" and often did not value the important experience and expertise carried by technicians with years on the job. I learned from them the history and intricacies of the operation and, perhaps, earned their respect by taking the time to teach them about my own area of expertise.

The knowledge organization depends on expertise to grow and deliver its goods and services. This expertise is stored both in the minds of those who know a company's history and the minds of those who can manage the company's tools and systems. The relevance of younger workers' technology skills as they enter the workforce can be a source of intimidation for seasoned managers who may not understand the new technologies already mastered by Gen Y'ers. At the same time, these "digital

natives” grew up and developed skills they take for granted and this may frustrate older workers. The credibility of seasoned workers suffers in the eyes of younger workers when the seasoned workers cannot perform technological tasks the younger workers deem simple. “A lot of times, the tools kids are using in their bedroom are more sophisticated than those used by Fortune 500 companies” (Tapscott, 2008, p. 154). Conflicts arise because of differences in generations in interests and skills.

### **Reward Friction**

Rewards, both intrinsic and explicit, are part of people’s motivation to perform at work. Different generational assumptions about rewards lead to conflict across generations because:

1. Boomers networked and played politics to climb the corporate ladder. They have assumptions about what behavior shows commitment and thus should be rewarded. Gen Y’ers are not interested in the corporate ladder. They are not interested in spending time at the office, rather they like to get things done on their own schedule
2. Boomers see “paying dues” as necessary. Gen Y expects work to be fun. Because of their preference for two way broadcasting, Gen Y’ers enjoy solving a problem by collaborating, finding reward in the connections, the creative process, and the learning.
3. Gen Y’ers expect to be promoted rapidly if they are producing results. But those Boomers who have paid their dues do not look upon the “fast track” kindly.

“Ok, if you want to get ahead, you’ve got to get here BEFORE your boss does and leave AFTER he does.” This is the advice I received from a mentor when I once moved into a role in an Old Organization. Although I laughed when I heard it, his expression told me he was serious. It was probably good advice but I did not understand it. I found the statement perplexing because I did not see much point in sitting around waiting for my boss to leave if I had completed all my assigned work on a given day. At the time, the company did not allow employees to access the (scary) public Internet, so I could not pass the time on a browser at work as I could at home.

Managing perception is an art. My managers saw long hours at work as a sign of one’s commitment, a trait to be rewarded. It was not a surprise when I received feedback that my disregard for norms that had served the previous generation was seen as an act of irreverence. “But my work is done. It is on time and it is delivering the specified results” was my defense. The results were overshadowed by what amounted to my act of disrespect. Apparently, people before me had “put in their time” and, if I expected a promotion, I had to follow suit.

Within 3 years of starting my role as a Level 1 manager in this organization, I found that my responsibilities increased and my peers were now all Level 2 managers whose performance I was at least matching. When I approached my boss, a Boomer, about a promotion based on the responsibilities I now held and the results I was delivering, he reacted with outrage. “It was unheard of for someone to be promoted to Level 2 in just 3 years.” I would have to wait my turn for and should check back

in a year or two. At the time I was unaware of the assumption that many of his generation shared. You get ahead by “paying your dues.” Frustrated by what I saw as unnecessary, if informal, rule, I decided to go back to school to get a Masters degree. I would later come to appreciate the value of the system that the company had in place, and the role that system has played in the longevity of the company. My departure became another data point in the company’s “Generational Retention Problem” file.

Boomers see the endgame of a career in an organization as climbing a ladder and sitting atop a large organization, experiencing personal pride and power by having more and more people report to them. The younger generation does not share this reward assumption. Gen Y believes in collaboration and the rewards of building something together. This is a difference in work style and provides yet another friction point across generations. Generation Y prefers “achieving something with other people, experiencing power through other people, not by ordering a gaggle of followers to do your bidding” (Tapscott, 2008, p. 162). This is an intrinsic reward of the sort that follows when a team of which one is a part solves a difficult problem.

Gen Y also values flexibility in work schedules. This collides with the value Boomer’s place on face time at work.

“This emerging workforce is just not willing to make the traditional trade-offs, which they perceive as sacrificing too much of their family and personal lives. They insist on both meaningful work and meaningful personal lives” (Smith, 2008, p. 80)

However this change can provide managers in the New Organization a potential motivational lever. If managers show respect for the assumptions held by the Gen Y workforce and are clear that they expect quality work, they have an effective tool beyond salary and bonuses to motivate and reward employees. Deloitte Consulting, for example, has implemented what they call “Flexible Work Arrangements” with undoubted success (Smith, 2008). They have found a way to meet business needs while meeting the needs of the employees.

Interpersonal conflict arises in the workplace as a result of many interdependent factors. In this chapter, I have tried to summarize what I believe are the most relevant contributing factors to interpersonal conflict that arises between members of different generations when navigating the domains of Technology, Expertise, and Reward Systems in the organizations, Old and New.

In the next chapter I look to the literature on conflict and change management at work. The ideas presented in Chapter 5 will be applied in Chapter 6 where I contrast conventional wisdom about handling generational conflict to a general approach for conflict resolution - - whether the conflict is generationally based or not.

## **Chapter 5 Concepts and Frameworks in Conflict and Resolution**

I have tried to establish in preceding chapters that today's workplace is susceptible to interpersonal conflicts that arise from the different unarticulated assumptions held by members of different generations. The Oxford American Dictionary (2005) defines conflict as

- *a serious disagreement or argument*
- *an incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests*

In this chapter I describe several theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain why interpersonal conflicts are so difficult to resolve. These conflicts may be generation based or not. These frameworks come from the academic fields of psychology and organizational behavior. The frameworks provide insight into needs that are common across generations. They further describe mechanisms that are used to suppress and leave conflict unresolved and also describe ways to surface and resolve such conflict. The goal of this chapter is to provide a common vocabulary and set of concepts that I can, in Chapter 6, apply to generational conflict at work.

### **Maslow - A Theory of Human Motivation**

As I sought to understand what drives human behavior, I chose Maslow's 1943 framework. This is detailed in his paper "*A Theory of Human Motivation.*" Maslow deals specifically with needs that determine motivation. Our species, according to Maslow, is "a perpetually wanting animal." We have a relatively consistent and universal set of needs that we strive to satisfy.



Maslow's theory assumes that humans are driven by a set of needs that are hierarchically ordered. Maslow hypothesizes that these needs exist in all. The needs are categorized below in order of importance:

**The physiological needs:** These are the most basic needs and the ones that take precedence before other needs are addressed. The need for food, water, sleep and oxygen are physiological needs. If any one of these is not met, as displayed by a starving person or by a sleep-deprived individual, all attention will be directed at satisfying them.

**The safety needs:** These needs relate to shelter from physical threats (e.g. wild animals, extreme temperatures, crime, tyranny, etc). If all physiological needs are met, the safety needs take precedence. Maslow also alludes to certain neuroses where individuals feel a threat to their safety in reaction to "unknown, psychological dangers in a world that is perceived to be hostile, overwhelming and threatening. Such a person behaves as if a great catastrophe were almost always impending" (Maslow, 1943, p. 379). These first two needs can be attributed to our evolutionary adaptation for survival. Human nature has programmed survival instincts.

**The love (belonging) needs:** With the two previous categories of needs satisfied, Maslow states that a craving for affection, affiliation, and belonging is the next in importance. Social ties with others emerge as an important need to satisfy. While belonging needs are secondary if one fears for their life, when survival is insured attention becomes focused on the need to belong.

**The esteem needs:** The fourth basic need revolves around self-esteem. This is self-oriented but rests on the validation from others. Humans have a need for the respect and admiration of their peers. Thus the meeting of esteem needs allow one to feel distinct and valuable as an individual.

Belonging and esteem can be attributed to insuring the propagation of the species. Both needs foster a natural preference for surrounding oneself with similar others who support one another. Taken together, meeting these needs means the person can identify with a group (presumably by being similar) and still feel unique and important.

**The need for self-actualization:** If the four basic needs are met, humans then become driven by the need to reach their own potential. The first four needs are referred to by Maslow as the "Deficiency Needs." They generate anxiety when any one of them is not satisfied. Self-actualization is a different sort of need. It deals with creativity. As an unsatisfied need, self-actualization drives curiosity, exploration and learning. Maslow says that it is only from fully satisfied (healthy) individuals (i.e. whose physiological, safety, love and esteem needs are met) that we can expect creativity. He goes on to say, however, in society, "satisfied people are the exception."

Maslow's theory is, I think, a good and time tested one. It is not bounded by time or place. What varies perhaps is how particular groups and individuals attempt to keep anxiety at bay and how they attempt to satisfy the fundamental human needs.

In Chapter 6, I explore how different generations try to satisfy the higher-order needs of Maslow.

### **Theory in Practice: Argyris Schon**

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, in their 1974 book, "*Theory in Practice*," introduce the concept of "theories of action." In their writing they distinguish two theories of action. The first they call the individual's "espoused theory," and the second they call the individual's "theory in use." From an analysis of these theories of action they develop an approach to "the theories of action that determine the actual behavior of professional practitioners" (Argyris & Schon, 1974, p. 4).

Theories, as they define them, are interconnected propositions held by individuals that "are vehicles for prediction, explanation, or control" (p. 5). A sound theory, in their sense, must be general, relevant, consistent, complete, testable, central to a topic, and simple. When theories are about human behavior, they have the additional characteristics of being observable and attributable.

A critical aspect of a theory of action is the stated or unstated assumptions on which it depends. A complete theory of action includes all possible stated and unstated assumptions; a condition, which the authors admit, is not likely. They define the schema of a full theory of action as follows:

*"In situation S if you want to achieve consequence C under assumptions a1 . . . an, do A" (p.6)*

They go on to define a theory of practice as "a set of interrelated theories of action that specify for the situations of the practice, the actions that will, under the relevant assumptions, yield intended consequences."

**Espoused theories** are the reasons that an individual gives when asked why he or she would or did behave in a certain way. Espoused theories are the normative "should's" and "ought to's" that we learn and accept. They serve as a basic premise for operating as a "member" in our respective communities.

A **Theory in Use** is the actual theory that governs an individual's behavior in a given situation. A theory in use is obscure because often the individual engaging in a specific behavior is not necessarily aware of the theory in use that governs his or her actions.

When there is a difference between what a person says they will do in a given situation and the observable behavior that that person exhibits, they are said to be working under a theory in use that is at odds with their espoused theory. If a person's theory in use matches their espoused theory then they are said to be **congruent**. If the two theories do not match, they are **incongruent**.

Argyris and Schon state that to discover a person's theory in use, one cannot simply ask. Theories in use are constructed by using an individual's **observable behavior**. But they caution that constructing a theory of use from observable behavior should be treated as a scientific hypothesis to be tested. Constructed theories of use can be "inaccurate representations of the behavior they claim to describe" (p. 7). In other words, the attributions we ascribe to the behavior of others are often wrong.

An inquiry process aimed at surfacing assumptions and testing theories in use provides the basis for uncovering the informal beliefs that drive human behavior. Uncovering tacit knowledge is challenging. The construction of theories of use is an iterative process by which tacit knowledge is elicited from a subject. This skill requires patience and the ability to ask good questions, a mechanism that Argyris refers to as "public testing."

A good question is one that elicits tacit knowledge from an individual without also eliciting a sense of fear, threat, or defensiveness in that same person. When an observer is evaluating an individual subject's theory in use, the observer needs to recognize that the subject may not be able to articulate the assumptions under which he or she is operating. But, as I earlier tried to show in Chapters Two and Three, these assumptions differ across generations.

#### **Model 1 and Model 2**

After analyzing theories of action Argyris and Schon propose what they believe is the predominant management theory in use. A professional, operating under Model 1, seeks to satisfy the following goals:

- Define objectives and try and try to achieve them
- Maximize winning and minimize losing
- Minimize generating or expressing negative feelings
- Be rational

To meet these goals the manager, following Model 1, adopts the following strategies:

- Design and manage the environment
- Own and control the task
- Unilaterally protect yourself
- Unilaterally protect others from being hurt

The following assumptions underlie these strategies:

- It is a win/lose world
- Other people behave according to the assumptions of Model 1
- Rational behavior is most effective
- Public testing of assumptions is intolerably risky

A preference for Model 1 manifests itself in society's "safety valves of repression, containment, and deviousness" (p. 81). Such a preference leads to faulty attributions (unilaterally assigning intentions to others without public testing) and equally faulty social evaluations (the pattern by which individuals privately compare themselves to others without public testing) (p. 82). People who adhere to Model 1 engage in perpetuating behavior that suppresses testing their own and other's attributions and social evaluations. Feedback is essential if a person is to better understand his or her theory in use and modify it to better reflect the world in which he or she operates.

As a counter to Model 1, Argyris and Schon propose Model 2 that seeks to satisfy the following goals:

- Maximize valid information
- Maximize free and informed choice
- Maximize internal commitment to decisions made

To meet these goals, a manager would adopt the following strategies:

- Make designing and maintaining a work or social environment a bilateral task
- Make the protection of self or other a joint operation
- Speak in directly observable categories

The following assumptions underlie these strategies:

- It is not a win/lose world
- Public testing of assumptions is essential and possible
- Free and informed choice underlies commitment

Model 2, Argyris argues, is idealistic. He observes that it is not the naturally occurring model held by people in organizations. In his 1985 work, "*Action Science*," Argyris elaborates suggestions for encouraging Model 2 behavior. I examine some of these in the following sections.

### **Double Loop Learning**

Typically the underlying cause of a long-standing problem is not readily evident.

Humans are wired best to observe and react to situations where cause and effect are close together (Senge, 1990). We build theories of action rapidly by learning in a linear, "single loop," fashion. For example, if I touch the stove and I get burned, I will immediately learn that touching the stove is painful. However, most of life is far more complex than touching a hot stove. There are multiple dimensions at work and these are not always evident as we build our theories of action and accept them as accurate (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).

Argyris and Schon would call the knob that turns on the stove a "governing variable." To realize that my burned finger or hand was a result of the knob's

position and not as result of simply touching the stove, I would have to engage in what they call “double loop” learning. That is, I would have to suspend my initial assumption that touching the stove will burn me and inquire as to the reason the stove was hot.

We live our daily lives around theories of action that are manifestations of simple observations. To go about questioning every single assumption that is built into our daily lives would be impractical as well as impossible. However, double loop learning has a place for those problems that do not seem to go away and engaging in double loop learning can yield valuable insights into the root cause of our problems. Yet because double loop learning is not part of our daily lives, it does not come naturally. One must make a conscious effort to seek governing variables. Moreover, the English language, with its linear structure, may perpetuate single loop learning. Cialdini (2001) states, sometimes just the word “because” is enough to convince another individual that a given statement is true.

### **The Ladder of Inference**

Humans naturally engage in single loop learning. The theories of action that emerge from this type of learning and make up our current reality are rarely tested. When we observe something occurring in the world, we are quite likely to interpret our observation in a manner that is congruent with and supports our previously held beliefs. The process by which people observe “data”, attribute meaning or intent to the “data”, inquire or not inquire about their observation, and reinforce or change



previously held beliefs is labeled the “Ladder of Inference” by Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985:58). They describe the ladder as having the following three rungs:

- First Rung: relatively observable data (such as a statement or a gesture)
- Second Rung: the cultural meaning of the data observed in the first rung
- Third Rung: the meaning imposed by the observer to the same data

Argyris cautions, “the likelihood of differences in the interpretation of different observers increases the higher one goes up the ladder” (p. 58). Because people can attribute different meanings to the same observable behavior as a result of their deeply held, yet unarticulated assumptions, two people may interpret the same observed behavior in completely different ways. The problem with the difference in interpretation is twofold. The “climb” up the ladder of influence happens almost instantly and the assumptions that are used to attribute intent are rarely articulated.

### **Self-Sealing Theory in Use**

Argyris describes a specific type of theory in use that has the characteristics of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Argyris & Schon, 1974). For example, a teacher who believes his students are lazy and below par will treat his students as such. The students, in response to demeaning and uninspiring behavior on the teacher’s part, may not feel motivated to perform or may actively resist the teacher’s efforts to help them learn. In accordance with the teacher’s initial assumption, the students will not perform well and, notwithstanding that their poor performance was due in part to the teacher’s unarticulated assumptions, the teacher will have evidence to support his or her initial theory about the students. Those using a self-sealing

theory-in-use seek data to support their initial assumptions and do not want to test the validity of their assumptions.

#### **Conflict: Action Science**

Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985:292) observe that when people are faced with a conflict they follow a first order response that usually is expressed as withdrawal, negative reactions, defensive attributions, face-saving behavior and/or acting unilaterally.

These first order responses do not involve the giving and receiving of feedback.

There is no dialogue that occurs between those in conflict that might surface the assumptions one holds of the other. To avoid first order responses, Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985:297) suggest the following: (1) make reasoning public, (2) initiate experiments and lines of inquiry, and (3) publicly reflect on the reactions of others.

Beyond the pressure to avoid first order protective strategies, Argyris (p. 305) notes an even deeper problem: “Second order” protective strategies. These are described as one or all of the following conversational moves:

1. Couch attributions as feelings and claim a right to them
2. Use fancy footwork, that is, switch to whatever view will defend your position and act as if you are not switching
3. Cover up the cover up
4. Seek and offer rescuing moves

Everyone has a right to his feelings/reactions, but “the question is whether the inferences embedded in them are accurate descriptions of others and whether

individuals have a right to impose them as if they were.” Reactions must be expressed in “ways that trigger rather than close off a process of inquiry” (p. 306).

While it is obvious that second-order defensive strategies are unlikely to resolve conflicts or lead to productive dialogue, it is not obvious what ought to be done.

Argyris et al (p. 312) suggest the following moves as useful:

1. Publicly identify and inquire into dilemmas and apparent inconsistencies
2. Reflect on actions and redesign them
3. Publicly examine one’s own as well as others’ responsibility for actions and outcomes

It is natural for people to feel vulnerable in a process that involves inquiry into one’s own un-surfaced assumptions. Argyris et al (p. 336) suggest that, in organizations, managers adopt the following assumptions to guide their inquiry and make salient their feelings of vulnerability:

1. Participants all make mistakes
2. The consequences their actions yield are necessary but unintended
3. Errors are puzzles to be engaged

### **McGregor Theory X and Theory Y**

A third framework that helped me understand what might be done to reduce conflict across generations rests on McGregor's (1958) well known distinction between Theory X and Theory Y management.

Theory X is a simplifying label coined by McGregor. The theory states that the following three propositions make up a manager’s conventional strategy for "harnessing human energy to organizational requirements." The three propositions are:

- Management is responsible for organizing the elements of productive enterprise - money, materials, equipment, people - in the interest of economic ends
- With respect to people, management is a process of directing their efforts, motivating them, controlling their actions, modifying their behavior to fit the needs of the organization.
- Without this active intervention by management, people would be passive - even resistant- to organizational needs. They must therefore be persuaded, rewarded, punished, controlled - their activities must be directed.

He states that the following beliefs are implied by Theory X:

- The average man is, by nature, indolent - he works as little as possible
- He lacks ambition, dislikes responsibility, and prefers to be led.
- He is inherently self centered, indifferent to organizational needs
- He is by nature resistant to change
- He is gullible, not very bright, the ready dupe of the charlatan and the demagogue

McGregor argues that these beliefs are implied in the policies that govern organizations (at least those he observed at the time). He is inferring that these beliefs are the assumptions behind the codified theories in use (management policies) of his time. But, he goes on to propose a counter theory, aptly called Theory Y. This theory rests on a different set of propositions:

- Management is responsible for organizing the elements of productive enterprise money, materials, equipment, people - in the interest of economic ends
- People are not by nature passive or resistant to organizational needs. They have become so as a result of experience in organizations.
- The motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behavior toward organizational goals are all present in people. Management does not put them there. It is a responsibility of management to make it possible for people to recognize and develop these human characteristics for themselves.

- The essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so that people can achieve their own goals best by directing their own efforts toward organizational objectives

McGregor's two theories have long been a point of debate and discussion management circles. Ed Schein (1974), for example, supports McGregor's Theory Y assumptions about human nature, but disagrees with McGregor's implied "value position that it was management's obligation to create opportunities for self-actualization" (Schein, 1974). Schein deemed McGregor's Theory Y as a "management Utopia" that should be tempered with what he calls a "situational pragmatism." Schein says it is not always possible for the manager, whose responsibility is to create economic returns, to create an environment that leads to self-fulfillment for all employees.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the next chapter, I look back to the intergenerational troubles I described in Chapter 4. I then use the concepts explored in this chapter to suggest ways to resolve intergeneration misunderstandings and conflicts. Maslow's Hierarchy gives me a common set of needs that transcends generations. These common needs can provide a common ground from which to base conflict resolution methods. McGregor gives insight into general managerial assumptions about human nature that come into play and clearly have relevance to generational assumptions. Articulation of needs and assumption becomes the focus of the conversational tools

that Argyris et al. believe can help resolve conflicts. With these ideas and theories in hand, I outline some steps managers and employees in the organization can take to mitigate and manage inter-generational conflict.

## Chapter 6: An approach to Generational Conflict at Work

Generational artifacts draw the most attention from experts trying to troubleshoot and address generational conflict. It is the clash of artifacts that is most visible in the workplace. From different uses of technology to different claims (and expectations) about expertise and reward mechanisms, it is often only the tangible artifacts that are involved in the discussion of “what to change.” Schein (1985) argues that these artifacts are only the top, superficial layer of culture and hide the deeper elements of values and assumptions that individuals bring to the workplace.

Wikipedia (2009) defines “Conventional Wisdom” as follows:

“A term used to describe ideas or explanations that are generally accepted as true by the public or by experts in a field. The term implies that the ideas or explanations, though widely held, are unexamined and, hence, may be reevaluated upon further examination or as events unfold ... In a more general sense, it is used to refer to the accepted truth about something which nearly no-one would argue about.”

When conventional wisdom about addressing generational conflicts attributes the source of such conflict to artifacts alone, it misses a deeper and more sustainable solution to conflict.

In this chapter, I provide a few examples of when “conventional wisdom” about generational conflict fails to resolve intergenerational conflict and often deepens the

divide. I will conclude the chapter and the thesis with suggestions for how Boomers and Gen Y'ers might mitigate and resolve interpersonal conflict. These suggestions spring from the material covered in Chapter 5.

#### **Conventional wisdom: A focus on artifacts**

The following are three pieces of conventional Boomer wisdom about Generation Y at work that dominated the literature and current press I examined in the course of my reading about generational conflict:

1. They (Gen Y'ers) are addicted to technology (so give them technology)
2. They are informal and disrespectful of tradition (so let them dress as they want)
3. They are lazy and have a sense of entitlement (so let them work from home)

A widespread piece of conventional wisdom about Gen Y'ers is that they are addicted to technology and that this addiction must be addressed at work to get productivity from Gen Y'ers. Management questions about allowing the use of Facebook at work, allowing the use of iPods, or allowing the use of instant messaging or using Twitter to communicate illustrate the focus on artifacts of the conventional approaches (Tapscott, 2008). These questions deal with only a symptom of an underlying problem. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the generations have different assumptions about the use of technology and the artifacts of technology have different meaning in the lives of Boomers and Gen Y'ers.

To think that a policy addressing the use of such technology will somehow prevent or assuage intergenerational conflict would be to engage in what Argyris (1974) calls single loop learning. One of the governing variables at play is the fundamental need for humans to belong (Maslow, 1943). However very little time is spent on



understanding that primal need. How it is satisfied differs across generations.

Building relationships virtually instead of face-to-face is not right or wrong it is just different. Perhaps because Facebook, iPods, and instant messages are tangible, they quickly become the focus of conflict (Banjo, 2008).

When Boomers block access to Facebook, they are blocking one of Gen Y'ers' mechanisms of satisfying the need to belong. Gen Y'ers feel alienated and misunderstood. It is not surprising that they resist management efforts to block their use of Facebook.

On the other hand, online communications does present real risks to the organization. Since digital data is portable, companies can easily lose track of valuable information. Their computer networks are susceptible to attack. Because Boomers are not as comfortable with technology and because they do not satisfy their need to belong via online tools, they sometimes think nothing of blocking access to such tools and are surprised at the negative backlash they receive from Gen Y'ers.

Blocking Facebook for Gen Y'ers is the equivalent of banning conversations at the water cooler with a policy that would say "The water cooler is only for drinking water, all other behavior at the water cooler is contrary to company policy, poses a real risk to the security of the company. Casual conversation around the water cooler must cease immediately."

Boomers would be well served if they could understand the value that social networks can bring to their businesses while, at the same time, being transparent

about the valid concerns they have about online security. Engaging Gen Y'ers in a dialogue and getting Gen Y'ers to understand Boomer concerns would be engaging in double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

#### **Less formality: Hawaiian shirt Fridays**

Assumptions about the role formality plays in the workplace also differ across generations. The second piece of conventional Boomer wisdom revolves around these differences. The dress code in the New Organization, as a result of trying to create a more innovative and flat environment, does not follow the traditional Old Organization dress code. Boomer assumptions about formality are often challenged by Gen Y'ers who do not see the value that a traditional dress code adds to business.

Judge (1999) in the movie "Office Space" illustrates the conventional approach to a "relaxed dress code" in a scene where an "out of touch" Boomer boss awkwardly announces:

"... Remember, next Friday is Hawaiian shirt day! So, y'know, if you want to, go ahead and, uh, wear a Hawaiian shirt and jeans."

This forced attempt at informality is another example of an artifact (office dress) being modified without a complete understanding of the governing assumptions that give meaning to the artifact. Because a company allows jeans and Hawaiian shirts on Fridays does not mean that the company has transformed itself into a networked, high performing, flat, fast New Organization. Although many such New Organizations do indeed have relaxed dress codes, the relaxed dress code does not itself bring about an organizational change. Rather the dress code is more a symbol

of the organization's progressiveness, a symbol to Gen Y'ers of the collaborative and open environment in which they prefer to work (Banjo, 2008). Again, I think it is important to note that a formal or informal dress code is not right or wrong; it is just different. However, imposing an informal dress code program without inquiry and understanding its nature and significance can do more harm than good.

### **Flexible work arrangements**

The work ethic that each generation espouses contrast because there are different assumptions about the nature of work. Whereas Boomers were known to be workaholics of the sort that could spend 80 hours a week in the office, Gen Y'ers have different assumptions about how work gets done. Because Gen Y'ers can work from anywhere and are used to collaborating at a distance, they think nothing of working from their cubicle at work, their bedroom at home, or a table at a coffee shop. Gen Y'ers show their commitment to the work by being available 24/7 (through their technology artifacts) and working until the problem is solved and the job is done.

Companies are beginning to adopt flexible work arrangements in response to this Gen Y penchant for working anywhere anytime (Smith, 2008). While the flexible schedule is one the most visible artifacts of the Gen Y preferences, Boomer managers should delve into the assumptions behind this preference in order to maximize productivity and actually solve the problem behind the generational difference.

Gen Y'ers also have a curious complement to their detached work practices. They have a high need for feedback (Economist, 2008). Tapscott (2008) traces the root of this need for instant feedback generated by Gen Y artifacts such as video games or digital media. Gen Y'ers grew up with the ability to customize these artifacts and are accustomed, for example, to having a score tracker (on video games) and friend counter (on social media) that instantly and accurately lets them know how they are doing. When feedback at work comes formally once per year, Gen Y'ers grow frustrated. Their work ethic is one of "winning" through collaboration. Many of the popular team-based video games illustrate this preference. These games can be played via the Internet by multiple team members collaborating to achieve a common goal.

The preference for collaboration at a distance and need for clear and immediate feedback on performance and progress can be leveraged by designers of flexible work arrangements. Any such arrangement that does not take into account this underlying assumption of Gen Y's work ethic may not be effective. In a worse case scenario, lack of feedback and respect for collaboration at a distance confirms Gen Y'ers belief that the Boomer managers are out of touch.

Because artifacts are visible and relatively easy to manipulate, they further an illusion of control, allowing Boomer managers to think that if they just 'change this' or 'allow that', they can solve a pressing intergenerational problem. Conventional wisdom is built around artifacts whose visibility and prominence makes them easy to accept as "proof" of a given point of view. This rapid acceptance of a given

meaning for an artifact prevents inquiry, and allows one to skip steps on the Ladder of Inference discussed earlier (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).

Inquiry into assumptions begins by looking closely at artifacts and trying carefully to determine what they mean to those who value the artifact. Such dialogue can lead to better understandings and creative solutions to intergenerational problems. When Boomer managers do not probe beyond the surface when addressing generational conflict, they leave critical assumptions unarticulated (their own and those of others) and avoid reaching a satisfactory resolution. Quick artifact tweaks such as casual Fridays, “work from home” schemes, or the allowing/banning of specific technology, if deployed without a thorough understanding of underlying assumptions, are, at best, awkward short-term solutions. At worst, they communicate that Boomer managers do not understand and value Gen Y’ers and solidify the perception by Gen Y’ers that the Boomers “just don’t get it.”

#### **Addressing generational conflict**

To address generational conflict I propose that individuals from each generation take part in a process in introspection and inquiry that first surfaces their own assumptions and then sets the stage for constructive inquiry. This type of endeavor would require support at the highest level of management to give it credibility. Such inquiry is often viewed as “touchy feely” (behavior that openly expresses emotions and assumptions) and thus labeled “soft” and, as such, irrelevant in the “hard-nosed” business world. Top management support is critical.

This introspection could be held when Gen Y employees come into the organization, and then periodically (across different generation cohorts). The setting for these periodic sessions could be an offsite meeting or a half-day, on-site retreat with the intention of exploring the organization's health. While the investment of time may seem steep, the Boomer managers would be investing in what many companies like to call their "most valuable asset" and learning a good deal more about their recent hires. After creating a "safe environment" for discussion (the feasibility of which will vary with a company's existing culture), Boomer managers could follow this six-step process:

1. Clarify the goal (what transcends each and every employees individual mission?)  
that the company exists to achieve (what is the greater good?)
2. Articulate individual assumptions about generations
3. Articulate your assumptions about the best way to get work done
4. After articulating and stating your own assumptions, listen to and then articulate back those of the other generation's
5. Return to consider the organizational goal
6. Then, being creative, use each other's strengths and come up with a way of working together that meets the goal.

The process begins with a conversation of the purpose of the organization and quickly moves toward the articulation of one's assumptions. Codifying this tacit knowledge on a whiteboard or large notepads for everyone to see provides a visible representation of the critical assumptions that are typically invisible. Once assumptions are visible, and people realize that it is acceptable to carry such

assumptions, the assumptions are open to inquiry, discussion, and, quite possibly, change.

Although one is entitled to his or her assumptions, members of a given generation should realize that they are also responsible for testing the validity of their assumptions on an ongoing basis rather than acting as if these assumptions were true (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). It is acting on an untested assumption or treating an untested assumption as valid that leads to unresolved conflict.

Assumptions build on each other, and once an individual has taken multiple trips up the Ladder of Inference, skipping steps on the way, it becomes difficult to unwind untested generalizations. The process should rest on the following principle:

***Acting on untested assumptions is not acceptable. While testing assumptions may be unpleasant, leaving them untested can be disastrous to the organization.***

With assumptions surfaced and articulated, thoughtful discussion of the data (or lack thereof) on which the assumptions rest can occur. Of course, such discussion can only occur in a safe environment that encourages interpersonal risk taking. If managers and employees realize that they have the same basic needs of belonging and self-esteem that, if not satisfied, cause individual anxiety, they are then free to explore ways in which they can satisfy these needs. McGregor (1966) identified the workplace as an environment where individuals can meet not only basic needs but also higher level needs.

Often managers and employees are not aware of how they satisfy their belonging and esteem needs and this lack of awareness leads to confusion about the behavior of others. I propose that there are both constructive and detrimental ways of satisfying the belonging and esteem needs. But without articulating the means by which individuals currently meet these needs, it is impossible to assess the efficacy of the means. Every interaction between generations at work provides an opportunity to test one's assumptions about the other.

In work organizations, Boomer managers need to lead by example. They should set the stage for open and direct dialogue by first understanding their own assumptions and articulating them. Boomers should seek to set the example as role models in inquiry by fostering the six-step process I illustrated above. Boomers must realize also that their assumptions of Gen Y need to be expressed and tested. This is, in effect, asking Boomers to take a step-by-step journey up the Ladder of Inference.

Gen Y'ers must also realize that they are in a privileged position. They can act both as student and teacher in the workplace. Since many Boomers do not understand the technology that Gen Y'ers use instinctively, the young can help the old. Gen Y'ers may handle computers and technology with ease but they do not have the people skills that often come easily to Boomers. An exchange of knowledge – technical skills for people management skills – would give Gen Y'ers an advantage as they grow into management roles.

Gen Y'ers are currently entering the workforce and will eventually rise to leadership roles within their organizations. At some point, Gen Y'ers must welcome yet



another generation of workers into the workforce. To the extent that Gen Y'ers are able to articulate their own assumptions and explore the assumptions of others, they will be better suited to mitigate generational clashes in the workplace. They too must learn to deliberately and consciously navigate each step up the Ladder of Inference.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Generational label account to interpersonal conflict is convenient. But, such a label stops inquiry and has a self-sealing effect. It drives a wedge between generations and each may adhere more strongly to the identity attached to their generation out of annoyance toward the other and loyalty to one's own age cohort. I have tried to show in this thesis that although each generation differs in terms of how they see the world, the underlying needs that govern people's behavior are overwhelmingly similar. In a business where goals can be articulated and the "greater good" identified, managers can break through the Generational gap and tap into the strengths that each generation brings to the workplace. Generational conflict is thus one type of interpersonal conflict to which the general principles of inquiry and the surfacing of assumptions can be applied. I hope that the frameworks I put forth here can be of use to managers and workers who, by articulating their own assumptions and preferred methods of basic need

satisfaction, can move on to the higher order task of growing a business in a fashion that makes the most of all the generations involved.

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