

Mentoring Gen X Managers: Tomorrow's Library Leadership is Already Here

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For the past several years, as shown in studies ranging from Stanley Wilder's 2000 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) assessment of the librarianship population to a recent book about tomorrow's library leadership (*The Next Library Generation*) by Hernon, Powell, and Young, there has been a growing concern about the graying of the profession and challenges of retaining and developing future librarians, especially in administrative roles.¹ Unfortunately, the response by so-called Generation X librarians, especially to Hernon, Powell, and Young's assertions and their subsequent summarization in *American Libraries*, shows that there is significant potential for serious miscommunication between the current senior administrators in librarianship and the Generation X librarians and young managers in the field who, ready or not, will be the eventual recipients of the mantle of leadership.² This article attempts to acquaint readers with the possible affect of Generation X librarians coming into managerial responsibilities and offers suggestions on issues related to effective cross-generational mentoring and minimizing organizational conflict during this transitional period. It will give current and future Generation X managers and Baby Boomer or Silent Generation administrators mutual insights into the source of potential conflicts and will offer suggestions on how to develop effective mentoring relationships through understanding and acceptance of each others' management styles.

Where Are the Generation X Librarians in the Profession?

There is not a large body of library literature exploring generational issues and their effect in the context of the workplace, although there is relevant material that can be derived from the business literature on learning to mentor, manage, work with, and ultimately be managed by Generation Xers. Much of the generational research in librarianship has focused on marketing and providing library services to Generation X as patrons, not on interacting with them as colleagues. One of the first articles on this topic was published in 1998 in *Illinois Libraries*, and it identified the effects and the potential for conflict that could occur with the entrance of Generation X into the profession.³ Another recent issue of *Indiana Libraries* included a brief article about the challenges of managing Generation X staff and the forthcoming Millennials.⁴

An insightful article by Bonnie Osif provided a look at Generation X and some of its characteristics by contrasting two library articles on similar topics that are written from different generational perspectives.⁵ The most substantive recent insights into Generation X librarians can be found in the NextGen column in *Library Journal* by Rachel Singer Gordon.⁶ Generally, the tone and opinions expressed by Generation X librarians in response to the *Library Journal* column represent similar attitudes to those described in the business literature. These can be found in a Reader's Forum that appeared in the August 2004 *American Libraries* and in a feature article in the September 2004 *American Libraries*.⁷ Likewise, many Generation X librarians perceived Hernon, Powell, and Young's *The Next Library Leadership* and some of the assumptions of its authors as patronizing and lacking respect for what Generation X can bring to leadership positions.

Very little of the literature of librarianship or programs on intergenerational workplace issues have focused on the Generation X librarian in a managerial role. Several programs at the 2002 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference and the 2003 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) eleventh national conference looked at generational issues and cast the Generation X librarian as relatively new to the profession, for example, as an entry-level cataloger, reference librarian, or subject bibliographer.⁸ This typecasting was reiterated in both the *American Libraries* articles and Hernon, Powell, and Young's book, which represented Generation Xers as still some distance away from administrative and leadership responsibilities. But is this an entirely accurate picture? Looking at current library middle managers and program heads might lead to a different conclusion. There are anecdotal examples that they are moving into management. A couple of years ago, in a diversity workshop for library managers at a major ARL member institution, the facilitator went through a labeling exercise, "Please stand up if you are . . ." When she reached ". . . less than forty years of age," the director of access services stood up. Halfway across the country, a librarian born in early Generation X

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left her position as a branch head at one of the country's venerable east coast universities to become an associate director for a large public institution in the southwest. In June 2002, during an ALA program on Generation X librarians entering the profession, a young manager, who identified himself as the head of cataloging at an ARL institution in the northeast, came to the microphone to ask a question about motivating staff members older than he. On the opposite coast, a California State University system library has a thirty-something associate university librarian for public services. At the 2003 ACRL conference, a Generation X library director from a small private institution led a round table discussion. These examples refute a common misperception of Generation X librarians. Today, they are not strictly entry level and new to the profession. Instead, they are already assuming leadership and managerial roles at institutions, thereby introducing new variables into library management dynamics with tremendous potential for success or conflict.

Libraries may be instinctively better prepared for the introduction of Generation Xers into the workforce than the private business sector. The constant association with young people might tend to keep librarians more in touch with a younger generation's viewpoints. A few years ago, academic librarians saw Generation Xers in their user communities and student workers. However, the process of serving Generation Xers as students fifteen years ago and now accepting and integrating them into an institution's managerial ranks offers more of a challenge. Further, the opportunities for misunderstandings and intergenerational conflict can be exacerbated when the organization itself is going through extensive changes, as are many libraries.

Learning about Generation X

There is extensive literature on contemporary generational identity and interaction. Though the specific years defining each group will vary slightly, the current workplace generations include Millennials as student workers (born 1982–2002), Generation Xers (1961–1981), Baby Boomers (1943–1960), and to a diminishing degree the Silent Generation (1925–1942). The various resources on intergenerational dynamics use qualitative research techniques from the liberal arts and education disciplines, combined with case studies and anecdotes from the business world. However, this does not mean that the topic of generational characteristics is without controversy. As with any statement about a group, these characteristics are generalized across a large population and will not represent some individuals within that population. Similarly, some may perceive these characteristics as simply reflecting the inexperience associated with youth and feel that they are normal behaviors that will evolve into the status quo with maturation, acculturation, and environmental adaptation. Finally, the forming of a generational identity is a transi-

tional process and early Generation Xers, born in the early and mid-1960s, will have more in common with the Baby Boomers than core Generation Xers born during the 1970s. It is the author's premise and the basis of this paper that Generation Xers are different from previous and subsequent generations in their personal value systems, career expectations, and responses to organizational culture—something library administrators will need to consider when putting them into preestablished managerial roles.

The classic scholarly work that defines and characterizes the population by generational groups is *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* by William Strauss and Neil Howe.⁹ One of the early authors on issues relevant to Generation X was Bruce Tulgan, whose book, *Managing Generation X: How to Bring out the Best in Young Talent*, has been revised and updated, and remains one of the primary recommended works on Generation X employees.¹⁰ Another recognized expert on intergenerational management issues who has written several books is Claire Raines. Coauthored with Lawrence Bradford, her book *Twentysomething: Managing and Motivating Today's New Workforce*, is an excellent resource on understanding the Generation Xers as an employee.¹¹ Her subsequent book, *Beyond Generation X: A Practical Guide for Managers*, gives some quick tips on directing and integrating them into the workplace environment.¹² Also, her next collaborative work with Ron Zemke and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, provides extensive insights into the intergenerational dynamics in the office environment.¹³ For those wanting quicker reads, there has also been an extensive selection of articles published in personnel management serials on coping with and motivating Generation X. For example, the December 1997 issue of *Public Management* and articles by Neil Stroul and Bob Nelson provide good overviews of workplace intergenerational issues.¹⁴ An article by the previously referenced Bruce Tulgan in the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* addresses some frequent misconceptions of Generation X.¹⁵

Using concepts and examples from the aforementioned references, it is possible to arrive at some broad generalizations on the source of conflicts between Generation X and their Boomer and Silent Generation predecessors. Generation Xers spent their childhood in the culturally turbulent 1960s and 1970s, then came to adulthood during the late 1980s and 1990s. Generation Xers saw family members ensnared by inadequate pensions, corporate high jinks and layoffs; they lost confidence in corporate executives, organizational loyalty, and stability. As explained by Losyk, one socioeconomic aspect of this is that “the loyalty and commitment to the workplace that previous generations had is gone.”¹⁶ Bradford and Raines further expound how many Generation Xers grew up as the original latchkey children and came from nontraditional family environments, and how this influenced their determination

to be self-reliant.¹⁷ Generation Xers also entered school at a time when education practices were undergoing radical changes. Rather than experiencing traditional rote learning with its strict behavioral discipline, they were challenged with interactive exercises, self-paced learning modules, open classroom environments, and they were encouraged to express themselves. Their basic reading and math were based on phonics and “new math,” and their general learning process was more visual in nature.

As a consequence of these and other influences, the members of Generation X tend to be independent and self-sufficient. They think in terms of problem solving, asking “why,” and giving anything a try. They work best when they are given an objective and a deadline but are also allowed the freedom to execute the task as they wish. They focus on improving and investing in what they feel they can count on, which is themselves. As explained by Raines, “Many actually think of themselves as marketable commodities . . . [they] want to become more marketable by learning new skills and developing expertise in specialized areas.”¹⁸ They seek balance and personal enjoyment during their younger years, not wanting to defer personal interests and freedom until retirement. In addition to interests outside of work, they want work to be interesting and “fun, not routine,” and their job to be one that “gives their life meaning” as well.¹⁹ Often ignored in large classrooms or double-income families, they crave attention and have a desperate need to be a part of a team that makes things happen.

Generation Xers are extremely computer-literate, seeing technology as a routine tool, not a mysterious, easily broken device. In contrasting the different generations, Stroul observes that “a larger percentage of Gen Xers are at higher levels of mastery with the new work tools, such as technology, and can help ‘infomate’ a variety of work processes. Their challenge is to avoid becoming slaves to gadgetry.”²⁰ As the video generation, they multitask without even thinking about it and have subtle expectations that every problem has a solution. Many Generation Xers accomplish tasks efficiently, but with an appearance of absolute chaos. The flip side of their ability to multitask with low or moderate intensity is that Generation Xers exhibit a unique ability to focus exclusively on something as the situation warrants, without regard to external distractions, and often seem to work in short bursts of intense effort followed by periods of coasting. This behavior can contribute to the perception that they are slackers, even though the level of overall productivity often is consistent or exceeds that of their older colleagues.

Having grown up at the end of the civil rights movement, and having experienced integrated education and a mobile society, Generation Xers are more diverse themselves and more tolerant of diversity than any previous generation. As Losyk explains, “Generation X includes more African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians than previous generations. . . . These diverse young people will

play, study, work, and grow up together . . . this development will be the key to less prejudice and better racial harmony.”²¹ Because they expect diversity and alternative ways of doing things, they often lose patience with dictated initiatives, perceiving them as token or grandstanding efforts. Generation Xers have an extremely low tolerance for anything resembling hypocrisy, phoniness, and unnecessary bureaucracy. They measure value to the organization as what one is contributing now and have little patience for seniority-based reward systems or waiting for promotion opportunities based on length of time in a job. They are quick to move when a situation does not live up to their expectations, and they do not invest heavily their personal identities into any specific job or company. As Tulgan explains, Xers are willing to start at the bottom and do entry-level grunt work, if it is necessary to achieve work-related goals or to produce valuable end products.²² However, they are not willing to go along with the idea of paying dues based on seniority. Unlike a young Boomer who might have responded to organizational culture by saying in effect, “This is stupid but I will go along with it and pay my dues for the sake of future stability,” Generation Xers say, “This is stupid busy work and if you make me do it, I will leave,” and then they will.

Generation X As Managers

During the past ten years, the business community has had the opportunity to observe the issues associated with the introduction of these challenging employees into management. Do Generation Xers undergo a significant change and become more like previous generations when faced with managerial responsibilities? The answer is that they will adapt to some degree, but not entirely. Even as they mature into successful managers, they will have communication styles, approaches to objectives, and value systems different from their predecessors. Additionally, they will face different challenges from previous generations because of their background experiences. Given that libraries tend to be part of larger hierarchical entities, such as state or municipal governments or higher education, and are not generally perceived as agile organizations, the challenges in engaging, motivating, and retaining Generation Xers and promoting them into managerial and administrative roles are likely to be significant. Several underlying problems seem to be mentioned repeatedly as sources of conflict in the literature, but there are also avenues of connecting effectively.

In her article about developing new managers, McDermott provides insight into some of the special challenges Generation Xers face as managers. As she explains, “They’re expected to be the boss and act like the boss despite little or no firsthand exposure to the facts of corporate life . . . [and] face a steep learning curve in developing rudimentary project—and people management skills.”²³ In

order to assist them in leadership development, it is important to understand how Generation Xers' management styles differ from those of their predecessors and which traits or expectations will likely persist as they transition from employees to managers. For example, Generation X managers tend to continue seeking open communication in the form of insights, reassurance, and positive reinforcement from their administrators, peer managers, direct reports, and customers. Unfortunately, they often seriously underestimate how prepared they are in the art of dealing with problematic interpersonal and motivational issues and without guidance tend to come into their managerial roles like a "bull in a china shop," as described in articles from *Harvard Business Review* and *Management Review*.²⁴ Also, making decisions based on the try-fail-and-try-again model is normal for Generation X managers. They focus less on the end result or bottom line than on the process development and the lessons learned in the endeavor. They often appear quite confident, almost egotistical, until the point of failure. Even then, due to their self-reliant backgrounds, they are accustomed to picking up and moving on rather than belaboring past mistakes.

As they become managers, Generation Xers still put significant value on the balance between their work and personal lives, both for themselves and their employees. Simons comments that "Young managers tend to have a more humanitarian view of running companies."²⁵ They are concerned and caring toward those whom they supervise and highly tolerant of issues such as family demands and flexible schedules. They also tend to get more involved in the personal lives of their employees, which can lead to later problems when disciplinary issues arise. They see those they supervise as part of an overall team and often adopt a casual and interpersonal communication style; for example, by forgoing status-based dress codes and interacting on a first name (or even a nickname) basis. Seldom will they have a hidden agenda or interest in creating a power aura about themselves, since they prefer a direct, straightforward approach to management. In *Generations at Work*, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak observe that a Generation X manager functions first as a team member, only putting on the "boss" hat when explicitly needed.²⁶

One trait that Generation X managers seem to carry intact as they move into management is a high level of intolerance for bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations and a cynicism toward the status quo. They tend to say what they think about an issue, often undiplomatically. While money itself may not be a specific motivating factor, Generation Xers perceive their salaries as an affirmation of their additional responsibilities and their value to the organization. They equate compensation with what they are accomplishing. They are frustrated by perceived inequities between themselves and peers that are based solely on "experience" or time in rank. This is especially true when the managerial responsibilities are similar, or when the manager with seniority is perceived as less effective within the organization.

It is important for administrators to be aware that in promoting young managers, one gives them increased responsibility without the cushion of past performance to rely upon. As a consequence of their self-directed focus in setting priorities and their expectations of personal challenge and stimulation in their jobs, traditional motivators such as small impact projects, routine management responsibilities, incremental and longevity-based financial rewards, or potential for "long term" managerial growth will not meet the needs of Generation X managers. Offering honest and straightforward support, personal growth opportunities, an abundance of patient mentoring, and encouraging them to learn from their inevitable mistakes, provide the key to keeping Generation X managers engaged during the growth and maturation process. Their communication styles and motivational needs are so sufficiently different from the prior generation that senior managers must develop new coaching skills and find a balance in giving them enough challenges to keep them engaged, without yielding excessive control or setting them up for failure. For example, based on a study of the mutual funds industry, Epstein reported evidence of a double standard whereby the more experienced Baby Boomers could make mistakes without suffering a significant loss of confidence on the part of an executive, but that the same mistakes made by younger managers had more serious repercussions on their careers and were perceived as indicators of overall inadequacies. As he put it, older managers "can get away with the kind of bad performance that routinely gets young managers fired."²⁷

Without guidance, there are other distinct areas where Generation X managers may flounder in their new responsibilities and contribute to the generational stereotype. These include supervisory stylistic issues, such as in understanding and managing employees who are significantly older than themselves. Another concern is their tendency to downplay their managerial responsibilities. For example, they can find it difficult to document and follow through on formal disciplinary action because of a tendency to personalize staff relationships. Yet another area that can lead to problems is the Generation Xer's attitude toward leadership. Generation X managers often encounter problems in developing a tolerance for organizational tradition and hierarchical administration. Finally, it is essential for them to maintain a sense of connectivity to those around them and be recognized in a way that they feel they are effectively contributing to the organization's success.

Organizational Intervention

Supporting the Gen X manager

An awareness of the challenges frequently faced by Generation X managers can help senior managers and administrators assist them in developing managerial skills they may

not even acknowledge that they need. One obvious way is through continuing education opportunities and actively engaged mentoring. As expressed by Beh, "Mentors stop rising stars from making stupid mistakes."²⁸ Since many academic libraries emphasize professional development of personnel, they may already have a mentoring infrastructure for new librarians, especially those in tenure-track settings. The key for administrators and senior managers is to modify that mentoring relationship for Generation Xers in a way that takes their generational characteristics into consideration. However, intergenerational mentoring, especially that of Generation Xers by Boomers, requires special flexibility and tolerance. It can be challenging for executives and administrators to do effectively.

Taking into account the value they place on self-investment, it is important that Generation X managers have opportunities and support to gain foundational skills. Providing release time and financial support demonstrates to Generation Xers that the institution is invested in developing them as managers. Because Generation Xers tend to place higher value on structured development opportunities that can be documented and used to build a vita, human resources-style courses, ALA/ACRL preconferences, and multiday immersion leadership programs not only offer opportunities to gain demonstrable benefits but also can contribute to a desired sense of community. These kinds of opportunities convey to Generation X managers that they are not alone and establish the idea that others have encountered similar problems and can offer experience-based advice. They also open the door for local mentoring efforts within a particular organization.

Mentoring the Generation X manager frequently requires flexibility and adaptive communication styles, primarily on the part of the mentor. The traditional concept of mentoring is to guide new managers through the same challenges that more experienced persons had confronted in their careers. The implicit assumption is that the challenges and difficulties would be perceived in the same way. Because of generational identity differences and the rate of change in libraries and society, this assumption may no longer be valid. Some of the things that Boomers found most challenging about their transition into management during the latter half of the twentieth century are shrugged away as "no big deal" by Generation X managers. Part of this is due to an overall change in the style of management from the top-down control typical in the 1970s to the collaborative decision making, multitasking, cross-training, and new service models of the past decade. For example, when Boomers were new middle managers, control of office supplies, monitoring timesheets, and limiting abuse of photocopiers were serious management issues in many workplaces. Additionally, a person's position in the organizational hierarchy defined many workplace privileges, such as office size or location. Generation Xers are coming into management where those details pale in significance to big-picture issues of meeting customer ser-

vice expectations, developing new programs and initiatives, restructuring organizations for more efficient workflow, and dealing with an increasingly litigious workforce and society. Conversely, things that Generation X managers may be anguishing over, such as confronting problems involving staff with whom they have built a relationship or dealing with a grievance by a disgruntled employee, are things that the Boomer administrators may have difficulty understanding or not have personally encountered until later in their careers, when they had more experience upon which to draw.

In these cases, it is any mentor's responsibility to listen to the Generation X managers and try to understand what they find difficult or frustrating. The mentor must consider the situation from a different perspective and offer experience-based insights and ideas without using rebuttals or comments that would seem to be patronizing and dismissive, for example, "In my day . . .," "You are worried about nothing . . .," and "That's just the way it is . . ." are all phrases that will destroy an intergenerational mentoring relationship. In some cases, the most appropriate response is simply one that confirms that the Generation X manager is confronted with a difficult situation and there may not be an easy answer or clear solution. Offering a variety of possible approaches can also be important.

Maintaining a mentor relationship requires considerable flexibility by both parties, including discussion, goal setting, and constructive, appropriately timed feedback. In the literature, this need for feedback usually comes with the caveat that there is no such thing as too much. A typical Generation Xer attitude is "My boss sees me as hyper and kind of insecure because I'm always asking for feedback. . . . But our library is undergoing drastic change right now. I can handle anything as long as my boss lets me know what's going on and where I stand."²⁹ Another important responsibility of the mentor is to protect young managers from themselves and the sharp criticism of others. This reflects the Generation Xers' deep need for reassurance and positive reinforcement, although at the same time they may be hiding behind an independent or rebellious façade. It is important to build the mentoring relationship as a safe environment. Generation Xers tend to be direct communicators who "call it like they see it," so for a mentor to falsely praise an idea, speak in euphemisms, or give noncommittal answers only blurs issues and often diffuses effective understanding of underlying problems. At the same time, the mentor should curb harsh expressions or strongly negative reactions to sincerely offered ideas. The mentor needs to explore topics that move beyond the simple hypothetical or generic case studies into more realistic and complex situations. Sometimes, scenario specific discussions are necessary to give a sense of the bigger picture.

Because Generation Xers learn from experiential trial-and-error and problem solving, mentors must provide them with the opportunity to engage in this type of development. For them, change is "normal," so trying an

idea and having it not work out quite as planned and then subsequently trying something else is not emotionally difficult. This generally differs from the approach of Baby Boomers, who tend to stay on a linear implementation track that focuses on a stable end product rather than the process. Thus, at first Generation Xers should be given projects that have minimal external affect so that if the results do not go as anticipated, the mentor can curb the tendency to intervene and let them engage in the discovery and analysis themselves. However, these projects must have relevance, as the Generation X manager's tolerance for busy work is minimal. If the Generation X managers do flounder, it is important that feedback and insights be specific and focused in a way that allows them to learn from the experience. Offering a generic "Just try to do better next time," without explicitly identifying where the correction needs to be made, is often useless and frustrating to Generation X managers and damages their confidence in the mentor's support.

A particular area in which most Baby Boomer mentors may not be able to provide examples from personal experience, but nevertheless can coach Generation Xers, is the dynamics between the Generation X managers and those who report to them. Generation X managers usually seek a challenge with significant self-motivation and have difficulty relating to staff that have reached a performance plateau. Their high comfort level with technology and expectation of ongoing change can create stressful situations for the older employees they supervise. This is an area mentioned repeatedly in the business literature.³⁰ For example, Zetlin explains, "The most unnerving task for many young managers is overseeing, evaluating, and occasionally firing or hiring subordinates who are substantially older than they are."³¹ Recognition and respect for an older employee's individual perspective is one of the keys to the Generation X manager's success, but it is often something they will have to be coached on in order to be effective. While it may be somewhat typical of Generation Xers to demand the support of the older employee, mentors should encourage them to create buy-in by recognizing the contributions the older employees can make and the mutual benefits of helping each other.

The role of the mentor is to help Generation X managers understand why older employees have the perspective on change that they do and what motivates them. Generation Xers often need to be coached on listening to older employees so as to better understand their fears and concerns. It is important for Generation X managers to be assertive, but not aggressive or hostile, and to avoid personalizing a natural reluctance to change as a challenge to their authority. Inevitably, the Generation X manager will have an employee say, "We tried this years ago and it did not work then so it will not work now." Here the mentor can provide coaching so that rather than become defensive, demanding, or exasperated (which may be the Generation Xer's common response) the young manager can learn how

to explain why this new effort is important, using examples such as a different environment, changing user expectations, or other organizational factors, and to continue encouraging the employee resistant to change.

Because of their tendency to establish a sense of community within their organizations and their own need for peer reassurance, Generation X managers sometimes find it difficult to give negative feedback and follow through on disciplinary actions, especially if it involves an employee with whom they feel they have established a relationship. They tend to personalize their relationships with their staff and may need to be coached by their mentor in establishing emotional distance and compartmentalizing their work. When faced with a real performance problem, the Generation X manager must depersonalize the matter and take care to identify the specific performance issues that are related to business operations.

The Generation Xer's inherent dislike of bureaucracy often requires intervention and coaching that focuses on managing different communication styles, diplomacy, organizational dynamics, and basic psychology. The concepts that the best decision may be a nondecision or that time can resolve an issue are often difficult for Generation X managers to grasp. The mentor needs to be aware of this and coach with regard toward creating long-term solutions and analyzing the cost and benefit tradeoffs of immediate versus delayed action. Related to their desire to try new things, Generation X managers quickly can become frustrated when faced with hierarchical restrictions or slow progress within an organization. Their understanding of authoritative structures and leadership is often limited, and they may perceive administrators as ineffective or unsupportive. In some extreme cases, they may even begin to feel that they have been set up to fail, especially if they have placed more personal importance on the accomplishment than their administration. Depending on an individual's own expectations—administrative or self-imposed—and their real-world experience, this frustration can lead to disenfranchisement and burn-out if not addressed effectively.

Finally, the mentor also may need to explain issues related to ethical behavior. In a sobering article, Badaracco and Webb point out how Generation X has received mixed messages about ethical behavior and organizational priorities.³² Recent corporate scandals in the news—such as Enron, Arthur Andersen, and others—have underscored this delicate ethical balance. Although libraries do not operate under standards that apply to the business sector, many do have institutional or governmental regulations regarding such matters as financial handling, interactions with vendors, and professional conduct. The mentor should seek to ensure that the Generation X manager has a good understanding of these obligations.

Mentoring a Generation X manager can be like walking a tightrope. Push too hard and the Generation Xers will feel squashed and lose confidence in themselves and their potential. Be too tentative and the Generation Xers

will make serious mistakes, feel confused and unsupported, and will disengage and start looking elsewhere. However, with appropriate guidance, the Generation Xers will give back to the organization enthusiasm, energy, and creativity.

Retention and Leadership Growth

No matter how much mentoring an organization invests in the Generation X manager, retention will likely always be an issue. Generation X managers will not identify job stability as an objective. They generally think in terms of near-term success and expect to move and work at different institutions. Granted, if they find an ideal fit, they are more likely to stay; however, corporations have recognized that finding a successful Generation X manager who wishes to remain with a company can be a rarity and that it may depend on lifestyle issues and personal satisfaction tangential to the job. The ability to recognize a bad fit between their expectations and the organizational objectives, and the willingness to cut ties quickly may actually save the organization from having to address long-term disaffected leadership or negative performance issues. Similarly, Generation X managers who have switched jobs may have a better understanding of what they are looking for in an organization. Being honest with them will allow the organization to avoid making bad hires and result in successful matches.

Another aspect of retention involves developing these individuals for future administrative responsibilities as library directors. For Generation Xers “companies . . . are finding that promotion into management lacks the appeal it had a decade ago.”³³ Here, the mentor must convince Generation X managers with budding leadership potential of why this is a desirable aspiration. To many Generation Xers, because of their lack of tolerance for bureaucracy and hierarchies, being a library director is not a presumed goal. While they do want to have an effect on their environments and futures, many Generation Xers, including managers, do not have the desire for control, recognition, and responsibility that goes with top-level jobs. They are more likely to see assuming administrative roles as a sacrifice that brings a burden of responsibility and negatively impinges on the personal relaxation and family time. In order to entice them into upper administrative roles, current administrators are going to have to provide solid incentives for doing so, such as restructuring organizations for a more team-oriented environment that provides a realistic work and life balance. Generation Xers are not afraid to walk away from a job that is not living up to their expectations. However, this is something the librarianship profession cannot afford. Conforming or not, Generation X is the future of the profession, and is already making inroads into middle management with varying degrees of success.

Conclusion

Generation Xers may be interested in taking on leadership roles, but they will do so on their own terms. One could speculate on what a future library run by Generation Xers might look like. It would probably be a constant work-in-progress, characterized by a willingness to try new services or organizational approaches with little preimplementation planning. Individual initiative and self-reliance would be encouraged, with cross-organizational communication an imperative. Formal meetings would be minimal, with more time spent in small and impromptu working groups. All aspects of the organization would be permeated with technology. Rather than being hierarchical, the organization would have more of a flat structure with different individuals responsible for various projects or functions. There would be more flexibility in individual schedules and an increase in working from home. Similarly, the administrative and management corps would consist of a larger number of individuals, who rotate roles on a periodic basis, so managers and administrators have a better work and life balance, avoid boredom and fatigue, introduce fresh viewpoints, and enable development of the next generation of managers.

The integration of Generation X managers into upper levels of librarianship may not necessarily be smooth. Library administrators must be prepared to meet the challenges, frustrations, and rewards that come from including them into the managerial and administrative ranks. The Generation X library managers bring energy, enthusiasm, and a wide range of new talents to a library's management team. At the same time, they do need guidance, and in general are not an easy group to mentor. The act of bridging the generational schism to create an effective library environment can require significant time and patience. The care and feeding of a Generation X manager can be a challenge, but when realized, gives hope and direction to the future of libraries and librarianship.

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