Multigenerational Health & Safety

Not only are we Americans living longer, all projections are that we will be working longer as well. This, on top of the more typical training required for new, younger employees adds a level of complexity to Health & Safety programs that is beyond the experience of most safety professionals. What this means to the Health & Safety leader is that, as the workforce diversity increases, so must the range of approaches to training and development in order for the program to be effective. The manager becomes a "change agent" that must understand and appreciate the differences in learning styles and values that each of the generations brings into the work environment. With four or five generations in the workplace, communications skills become paramount, the same safety message may need to be imparted in several different ways to ensure that it is heard and acted upon.

The business environment for most companies has become more intense, focusing on productivity and flexibility as never before. The challenge for the safety professional is to insure a safe work place using education and encouragement with a workforce that is expected to work at an accelerated pace and looks at learning differently than previous generations have. They may also view risk differently due to the differences in work/life experience. The opportunity is to connect with people in the organization in a way that enables their contribution and enthusiasm toward improving safety and reducing injuries.

Accept the Differences

The fundamental issue underlying the differences one encounters is that of values – values acquired at an early age by an individual that influences how that person sees and relates to the world at work. This is the subject of a multitude of studies in recent years that have been used to differentiate groups of people that have a shared experience that may influence how they approach their work. It is intended as a way to help the manager understand how best to lead the generationally-diverse organization.

For our purpose, we describe the generations as follows:

- Traditionalists: Ages 55-65 years, they were raised in an environment that placed value on good manners hard work, loyalty, duty and respect for authority and the chain of command.
- Boomers: Ages 40-60 years, they were taught that they could be whatever they wanted to be. They tend to be optimistic, confident, competitive and to value team work.
- Gen X: Ages 25-40 years, they tend to be unimpressed with authority and ask "why?" more often than "how?", are reluctant to commit, are skeptical, more often straightforward than diplomatic, prefer flexibility and self-management and appreciate technology.
- Gen Y: Ages 18-30 years, they are future-oriented, positive, interested in social and environmental issues, with a value for collaboration and learning, they are

more likely to seek responsibilities. They appreciate variety and take technology for granted.

These differences will not only influence how individuals receive information but also how they deliver it. For a subject as important as safety, understanding and accommodating the differences can be critical to success of communication, education and training. As difficult a challenge as this may be for the safety professional, expecting older, more experienced employees to train younger workers has some serious pitfalls, given the dissimilarities in learning style and values. This is true for the method as well as for the content of communication and training materials.

Considering only the learning preferences that are implicit in this description of values, the following communication guidelines may be helpful for the safety leader.

Traditionalists:

- Prefer face-to-face communication with written documentation.
- Need to be encouraged, drawn into discussion and will be slow to share their thoughts and judgements.
- Want to feel that time spent is of value.
- Want clarity about expectations at the start, they understand and appreciate rules, standards, deadlines.

Boomers:

- Expect an open, direct communication style, but do not appreciate controlling language.
- Are the “Show me” generation, and are sensitive to body language of the trainer.
- Will question until satisfied they have the details they need to complete the big picture.
- Want to know what options they have, how much flexibility there is.

Gen X:

- Prefer informal communication style, expect feedback – both ways.
- Want to manage their own time and look for ways to optimize – entrepreneurial.
- Expect to be kept “in the loop” with regular communications, prefer e-mail.
- Want to manage assignments and deadlines and dislike being micro-managed.

Gen Y:

- Prefer a learning environment that is challenging, with an element of “fun”.
- Want autonomy, input into learning process and prefer variety in methods in order to hold their attention. (Think “cyber generation”).
- Will seek out alternatives that appear to be better.
- Respond to action words, dislike lectures, accustomed to instant messaging.

- Appreciate positive reinforcement and want to know what success looks like to the leader of the endeavor.

Lastly, different birth dates imply more than learning preferences. The generations differ in physical capabilities as well which will affect training programs that involve work assignments that require dexterity, flexibility, strength and endurance. The mature employee may be very sensitive to physical demands, the younger counterpart insensitive or unmindful to them. The problem this poses for the trainer is obvious, the opportunity it presents may not be – create the environment to engage the employees in collaborative efforts. Use the skills and interests of the training group to develop the "best" approach for the task at hand, marrying the knowledge of the experienced employee with the enthusiasm of the newer employee. This co-creation of a safety training component will carry with it benefits to the larger organization, as the employees find ways to work together more safely, this will carry over into other aspects of their day-to-day work.

Implications for the Safety Manager

Consider one more factor, turnover, facing the safety manager. "Gen Y employees are significantly more likely (70% somewhat or very likely) to plan to leave their current employer than their age counterparts…" The workforce of today requires more attention to training in general which includes an element on retention. People development is more critical than ever before. Workers who are well-rounded, who retain their expertise and are able to build on it, can respond quickly to different challenges encountered by the business. This idea appeals to the Gen X's and Gen Y's. Our view is that safety is a tremendous vehicle for a training program that can both improve performance and develop cohesiveness among people in the organization that will play out in other business activities. Workers of all ages have an intrinsic value for safety and most understand the need to prevent injury to co-worker and will act on it when needed.

Recent statistics reinforce the importance of training for the youngest generation. Young workers have a disproportionate number of injuries, especially during their first year in the workforce," as stated by Carol Merry Stephenson of the NIOSH Training Research and Evaluation Branch. The youngest workers have the highest percentage of injuries overall, "… more than double the mean worker injury rate." according to John Palassis of the NIOSH Education and Information Division. It is clear that the safety manager must pay special attention to training of the youngest, to overcome the sense of invulnerability that can result in bad judgments due to inexperience. Health and safety training for older workers must also continue as they face obstacles associated with changing physical limitations.

The safety leader role is evolving into more of a change leader, to act as a facilitator for understanding and appreciating the diversity of employees while finding ways to use that diversity of experience, values and abilities to foster a safe working environment. They will need to broadcast the same safety message in several different ways and be able to audit the effectiveness of that message, which will require establishing communication channels that go beyond the chain of command. The need for compliance to safety rules

won't diminish, but younger employees especially will expect to be empowered, so leadership will have to exist at several levels in order for the safety process to work most effectively.

Flatter organizations require that leadership practices evolve – and this is as true for safety as any other element of the business. Organizations require a durable vision for safety that is voiced from top to bottom. "GEN Y's respond best to training that solicits information from employees and incorporates that feedback into the training. This is paramount for Gen Y – but it also makes sense for the other generations as well," notes Joanne Sujansky of KEYgroup.

Generations at Work

The discussion so far has been about the responsibility for the safety leader to adapt and adopt, to evolve from a compliance monitor and champion to a change agent and process manager, a diplomat and communicator *extraordinaire*. In this section we will explore the roles that people can play in this evolutionary process, by looking at the generational interactions, according to a study published by the Duke University Office of Institutional Equity.

"Traditionalists and Boomers may have a tendency not to challenge authority or the status quo. This may cause confusion and resentment among the [Gen] Xers and Millenials [Gen Y] who have been taught to speak up.

[Gen] Xers and Millenials [Gen Y] who have had different life experiences and communicate with people differently, may fail to actively listen to Boomers and Traditionalists thereby missing valuable information and guidance."

Furthermore, information can flow up and down and across the organization, it is a natural tendency that people will follow, if allowed. The most successful leaders will discover how to let every generation in the organization be heard and recognized to provide constructive feedback into the safety improvement process. Some cautions on feed back:

- The Traditionalists have been taught to find the "appropriate" time and place for feed back, the younger generations may be unaware of this "rule" and may seem to rush to judgment.
- A restrained feedback style that is intended to be informative and helpful may come across as "preachy" to a younger person.
- Feed back from a Gen Xer that is immediate and honest may seem hasty or poorly thought out to another.
- A Traditionalist will expect subtle recognition for their contribution, not applause.
- A Boomer will more often provide feedback than receive it, especially positive feedback.
- Gen Xers have a need for the reassurance of positive feedback.

- Gen Yers may be accustomed to positive feedback and mistake silence for dissatisfaction.

We see four areas of concentration for the safety leader faced with a multigenerational workforce:

- **Team conversations** which engage team members in frictionless debates that cross-examine multiple, often competing realities in a way that will result in the best decisions for the organization.
- **Coaching conversations** that engage individuals to improve clarity, provide understanding and provide impetus for change which will result in professional development and a bias for action and results.
- **Confrontation conversations** that confront and resolve performance and behavioral issues while also enriching relationships.
- **Delegation** to create an environment of accountability with clear roles and responsibilities.

Safety Leadership

The role of the safety professional is clearly in transition as the workforce evolves and diversifies. The leader can be expected to multitask as never before, needs good coaching skills and learn how to be consultative, credible and persuasive. The safety leader position becomes an advocate at the strategic business level for a safe, healthy workplace and a voice for a diverse workforce. Today's business environment of intensity, speed and flexibility mirrors the adoption of competitiveness on a global scale. The challenge is to connect with the people in the organization on a human level in a way that enables their contribution to and enthusiasm for improvements.

The safety leader is well aware that exemplary safety performance requires more than compliance, it needs full, active support for the safety improvement efforts by everyone in the organization. This level of performance can be achieved with through a variety of team processes and conversations that reveal the real current state of safety in the organization and identify key areas of opportunity for improvement. For success to emerge, people from all levels in the organization must be engaged in *co-creating* the safety effort. As people co-create the safety effort, their commitment and excitement emerge and the organization becomes "leaderful." This application of a safety leadership process in the diverse organization leverages the strengths of the multigenerational workforce by embracing the differences to create an adaptive safety culture.