



Are You Relevant?

By Katherine Carol

Your team is looking a bit different these days. As you pull up a chair to attend the latest meeting, you find yourself wondering why this team seems so different from those in the past. There's a nagging suspicion that something has changed, but you don't know what.

Perhaps it's the undercurrent of restlessness from the younger members of the team, or maybe a similar but definitely different style of the same energy. One gives a sense of a restless energy to get going, and the other one to get out, with a been-here-done-that kind of attitude. Could it be a subtle changing of the guard?

Whether we like it or not we need to think of engaging and bringing up the next leaders. And, if we aren't yet ready to leave, we need to make sure we aren't doing business the same old way we were ten or fifteen years ago. Are we keeping up with the changing work environment and are we planning for the future adequately?

Did you know that 94 percent of human resource professionals feel their organizations are unprepared for younger generations to take over more senior positions, according to a recent survey that was conducted by DBM, a human resource solutions company, and reported in Entrepreneurial Magazine. Yes, 94 percent! Yet the

average age of most executives and business owners is 59. They are on their way out. In the next fifteen years, sixty million baby boomers will leave the work force. Does your business have an exit strategy for its senior people—and what does the succession plan call for?

The upcoming "brain drain," as it is now being called, is actually happening in many companies and governmental agencies as boomers seek early retirement. Ironically, their companies are encouraging them to retire, thinking the cost savings will justify the lost knowledge. But wisdom comes with experience and with each person who leaves, his or her wisdom must be shared or it is lost. Increasingly we are seeing that the more senior leader becomes resistant to acknowledging his or her eventual departure. Moreover, the organization denies the evidence of this trend and the need for succession planning. Yet, without a succession plan in place, will you be prepared when your people leave unexpectedly? According to the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, 60 percent, in fact, do terminate their jobs unexpectedly.

Now, ask yourself—how relevant can a manager be in the face of denial? The exodus of older workers will have an impact on your organization. Ask yourself also—do you know the average age of your senior people? How do younger folks with



great potential move up in your organization? Or do they get tired of waiting and just leave?

These are the realities that must be addressed in order to provide seamless services where job seekers and cooperating agencies aren't dealing with a revolving door of staff and/or people with lack of knowledge, experience and contacts. How relevant is the experienced staff when the members fear sharing their valuable experience and information because they worry they will be pushed out before they are ready to leave?

Savoring the wisdom and leadership of senior staff must become a value within the organization and so must staying current. Values lead. Strategy follows. Tactics implement and meet needs.

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What can you do to help your company benefit from the transition from experience to youth?

1. Commit to understanding the issue. Have a conversation with your HR people about the impact. Ask them for resources and information and trends in your region. Visit the Department of Labor Web site for workforce trends.
2. Commit to vital business practices. Exit strategies and succession planning are critical management activities. Learn how to do them or invite a consultant to help you create them. People on your team need directions for the future. Without clear direction how does a team become or stay great?
3. Value age diversity. Understand the significant realities of the different experiences and perspectives each generation has.

Here are some interesting statistics just in the last few years:

- In the 1950's when baby boomers were young, there were only three TV stations. Today, there are two hundred.
- There are more magazines today—5,500 consumer titles alone—triple the number of twenty years ago.
- The Web didn't exist when boomers were young. Even Gen X grew up with only a smattering of sites in the early 1990's and today there are over 30 million sites.
- You would have to read 334 books per day, go to 11,000 Web sites per day, peruse 15 magazines and tune into 29 radio sta-

tions every day for a year to stay current with all the information out there.

•With all this—people have gone to word-of-mouth sharing to find information from people they trust. Large scale marketing has poisoned the well of trust with so many false claims. People are savvy enough now not to believe everything they hear unless someone whose reputation they trust gives an endorsement. How this affects managers is in effect the same as in the market place. Executives often don't have the same trust level as a trusted co-worker or supervisor. Who do people go to for the most accurate information in your organization? It is usually through our more informal networks. Transferring information through written means and or through human resources is largely inadequate. People trust information they hear from a trusted co-worker or can see and experience a situation. (According to Keller and Berry's book, *The Influentials*.)

The relevance of the above information is helpful when developing a succession plan. A paper plan will fail without understanding it needs to be personalized through the informal networks with a guided tour of job responsibilities from more senior staff. This information plays out in leadership and management everyday. Conversation becomes a relevant management tool. Drive-by communication, like catching some on in the all on a Friday afternoon at closing time to convey important information might seem effective

but it is not. It competes with the plethora of information we are bombarded with and apparently don't trust and tune out. Intimacy, depth—that is, getting a deep appreciation and understanding of issues and responsibilities—and relationships are the fertile ground for creating the meaningful dialogue for relevance. They also need to become part of the values and guiding principles of your team and organization. Without them, you miss the truth and manage on the surface of what you think is happening, not on what you know is happening.

Strategies for relevant communication include:

- Put multigenerational teams together in presentations, driving to appointments and attending conferences. Informal time typically leads to great dialogue and excellent sharing of experiences, relationships and perspective.
- Mentor and groom younger employees. Set up informal coaching and mentoring situations with more senior people. Ground rules and guidance need to be given here. Have goals in mind for the mentorship, make sure the younger employee has latitude to create his or her job using the knowledge, contacts and other resources more senior people have developed.
- Ensure that senior people feel secure that they aren't working themselves out of a job until they are ready to leave.
- Pull your team together for a staff retreat with the focus on succession planning. Use it as setting the stage for younger tal-

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ent to move up in the organization and senior people to start moving out of the day-to-day into project management and innovation. Include some of the following in your plan:

- Identify key staff that potentially will be leaving in the next few years.
- Evaluate your entire talent pool. Look at attitudes and aptitudes for the job. What are their strengths and unique contributions? How will those skills potentially build on the foundation set by the departing person?
- Set career paths for potential candidates. If they have most of what you need can you create

educational and training opportunities to build their skill sets.

- Keep in mind, some succession planning will occur due to internal promotions.
- Consider establishing a more formal approach to eliminate brain drain. Include the transfer of information as an objective in the professional development plan for staff. Then in performance evaluation (done at least once a year) you can measure the progress and the effectiveness of the objective.

Finally, accept the unpredictability of supervision and management. Honestly, does any day go as you

planned it? The path to greatness means following best practices, building on the experience and wisdom of senior staff and allowing for the innovation and new perspectives that younger workers bring to an organization.

A final word: as you work on your succession and exit planning, it is a good idea to not only look at the relevance of other people and their job skills, attitudes and behaviors, but, equally important, ask yourself, am I relevant? Do the skills I bring match the tasks needed to meet the goals of my organization and my clients?

