

**MANAGING THE IMPACT OF "GENERATION X" ON
THE LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSION BY THE
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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

MANAGING THE IMPACT OF "GENERATION X"
ON THE
LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSION

The law enforcement profession is in the midst of perhaps one of the most sweeping changes in its history. A "changing of the guard" is taking place, not just in this profession, but in all that we do. This change marks the exodus of the post-war "baby-boomer" generation and the emergence of a new workforce. Described in many ways, most of them unflattering, this new generation is faced with problems both inherited from their predecessors and brought to the table by themselves.

The most broadly used and common term for the future of our world is "Generation X." Any study of a specific generation and its impact must first begin with a definition of who they are and who they represent in our society. In a book entitled, ETC.: A Review of General Semantics, written by R. Gozzi, Jr. and published in 1995, the term Generation X is first attributed to the name of a rock-n-roll band on the early 1970's. The term has come to mean many things to many people. Most commonly, this term is used to describe the generation which followed the post-world war II generation, known as "baby boomers."

Most executives and managers in place today in the law enforcement profession fall into the "baby boomer" category. Specifically, they are individuals born

between the years 1946 and 1962, numbering somewhere in the neighborhood of 72 million.

Generation X spans births from 1963 through 1981. There are more than 40 million Generation Xer's currently in the workforce. Most of the material written about this group focuses on negative traits, such as arrogance, impatience, cynicism, apolitical, and obnoxious. It should be noted, however, that until just recently, most of the authors of material regarding Gen Xers were themselves baby boomers, and their views were filtered through the eyes of another generation entirely. Gen Xer's are the product of the baby boomer generation. Many of the traits associated with Gen Xer's stem from their association with that same baby boomer group.

To best understand Generation X, we must first take a good look at ourselves, the baby boomers. Born out of the prosperity of the post-war phenomenon, boomers would come to be known as the "yuppie" generation. Boomers were categorized as materialistic. The work ethic of the "boomer" was grounded in the idea that gaining all one can gain in worldly possessions was the defining nature of mankind. "Trust no one," was the battle cry of the boomers, learning to rely on their individual ability to survive, yet dependent upon one another for continued success. After the war, the United States enjoyed unprecedented levels of prosperity. In the fifties, per capita income grew by 48 percent. A full 60 percent of the working class fit into the category of "middle class."

The best way to understand "Generation X" and develop a strategy for managing it in the law enforcement profession is to examine some of the more common assumptions made about this group and how they may be used to a manager's advantage. There are several traits associated with Gen Xers, such as loyalty (more accurately, a perceived lack thereof), fear of change, short attention spans, and apathy. Of these, the perceived lack of loyalty, to both individuals and organizations, creates the largest fear in law enforcement managers.

More commonly, this trait is referred to as an unwillingness to pay dues before experiencing career advancement and recognition. The complaints center on matters of principle more so than an articulated inability to perform any given function. "Boomers" were raised on the notions that respect for elders equate to a willingness to remain subordinate, even in a situation where the "superior" individual is lacking, in some way, the knowledge or ability to accomplish the task at hand.

"Xer's," on the other hand, are a product of a much different environment. The experience of growing up in the seventies and eighties has created a profound sense of self-reliance. As mentioned earlier, the "latch key" generation was forced to rely on their own wits at a much younger age than their predecessors. They learned to accomplish whatever was necessary to function individually, without the constant, watchful eye of their parental figures. In most cases, there was no Mr. Douglas of My Three Sons fame to be there to lead them back onto the beaten path. "Xer's" learned to

experiment,-- to test the waters on their own. This has manifested itself into a generation that is no longer dependent on the experiences of the past. In fact, "Xer's" prefer to generate their own experiences. They are willing, much more so than "boomers" to work long hours without the thought of additional compensation being the focus of their motivation. They are willing to do so in order to gain the experience and knowledge necessary to take on more challenging tasks as soon as the opportunities present themselves. What Xer's seem less willing to do is pay dues simply for the sake of doing so. No longer is the adage, "that's just the way things are" sufficient to satisfy the worker of tomorrow. Logically and practically explain the need for these process and the Xer will respond by giving the task 100 percent effort, if not more. Fail to do so, the Xer loses interest and quickly finds something else that presents a challenge.

Xers started working as a group about the time when job security was at one of its lowest points, the times surrounding the 1987 Stock Market adjustment. No job appeared safe, as downsizing became the stuff legend were made of and employees who had devoted a great deal of their lives to the same company found themselves out of a job. The dues paid by these people seemed to have been for nothing, prompting Xers to abandon the notion that there was some value in loyalty and dues paying. Hard work without a meaningful reward system did not interest Generation X members.

The lessons to be learned here regarding loyalty and dues paying are simple. In order to build loyalty in a Generation X employee, managers in the law

enforcement field must EXHIBIT loyalty themselves. Base decisions on movement within an organization not solely on length of service, but rather on one's ability to perform the task at hand. Performance is the only thing that provides a feeling of security for the Generation X employee. When they are not rewarded for outstanding performance, but watch others "in the club" gain success and career advancement based on a person rather than professional loyalty, the Xer is lost. They are used to getting quick results from their efforts . . . money from ATM's, food from microwaves and drive-through windows, and anything else they need in a split second. Asking them to wait around for the reward for their efforts goes against their very nature and does not allow the fullest potential of the individual to be reached.

Xers simply need for managers to make note of their outstanding efforts as a matter of daily business. When managers in the profession realize the Xers need for this, we can use this to our advantage by reaping the benefits of short-term productivity. Sometimes the mere opportunity to work on a project is enough of a reward to satisfy the need of most Xers for a challenge. Xers need managers to share their admiration of their work, not keep it to themselves. This is not a function of feeding the ego, rather it's a method of providing reassurance that their efforts are in fact an important component of the organization.

Transition Planning

In order for the law enforcement profession to actively prepare for, and manage properly, the emerging Generation X, leaders within the profession must provide the direction necessary to accomplish these tasks.

There will be natural resistance to change, especially change which calls for a shift in traditional thinking within the profession. This resistance can be overcome by positive direction and a plan to best utilize the talents and energies of the "new breed" of law enforcement profession.

Agency Head

The organization's leader (Chief, Sheriff, etc.) must first and foremost lead the transition in managing Generation X employees by example. As the final authority on matters of assignments and responsibilities, the agency head must take the risk of using the "less seasoned" employee in positions traditionally reserved for veteran officers. Difficult for someone who probably feels like they paid their dues to achieve their position, but essential for a successful transition.

Law Enforcement Management

Similar to the role of the agency head, the manager in law enforcement must be willing to take a risk on an "untested" resource. Allow the ideas of the inexperienced to be stated fully, and, when appropriate, implemented. Utilize the Gen Xer's aptitudes toward information gathering and processing to the agencies' advantage

by identifying positions where these skills are most helpful and assign them there.

Employee Organizations

Ability to perform a specific function and the work ethic brought to a position have long been associated with the ability to advance within an organization. Also connected to this trait is longevity. Labor representatives have championed the cause of the long-term employee in so much as seniority within an organization is concerned. This has caused, in some cases, the stifling of Generation X performers, who possess equal or greater ability to perform a task, but not the longevity to earn a chance. Labor must understand that only by fostering the talents of the Gen Xers in the organizations of today, will there be a senior force to represent in the future.

Senior Police Employees

Like the labor organization, senior employees must realize that just hanging on from year to year does not equate to a vested right to a position. Generation X employees should not be viewed as the enemy by senior performers. Instead, they should be looked at as a motivator to encourage and challenge senior employees to maintain their performance levels at a high standard.

Conclusion

Dealing with the impact of "Generation X" on the law enforcement profession is a matter of opening up our perspective and allowing the benefits of a new generation flow in. We as managers often forget the impact we have on our employees.

One of the principle complaints "Xers" have about management is that we don't "walk the talk." We give lip service to ideas such as having a positive attitude, empowerment of our employees, involving them in the decision making process, and genuinely valuing our employees as people.

There are several, simple things managers can do today to deal with the impact of Generation X on the profession. Most are attached to the idea of putting the human being, and his or her needs, not necessarily above the needs of the profession, but certainly at the same level.

First, managers can begin by *living* the type of employee they would like to have in themselves. Actions DO speak louder than words, and employees learn more about what's important to an organization by watching how the managers act, than by dozens of written policies and procedures.

Greet employees on a daily basis as if you are happy to see them and are happy to be on the job. Obviously there will be days in the course of a managerial career where these things are untrue. It is especially important on those days for the example of professionalism to emerge.

Treat employees (and the general public) as if they were your "customers." The adage which says most law enforcement agencies would be bankrupt, if in the actual customer service business, is true in far too many organizations.

Experience what your people are going through, not just by “walking around,” as was the prescription given years ago for improving organizations’ health, but by actually stepping into the shoes of your employees. Work their jobs for a few hours each month and experience the highs and lows associated with it. There is no better way of gaining perspective.

Discuss projects and assignments given to subordinates and take the time to explain the benefits the assignment and/or project will provide to the organization and any personal benefits that may be including in working the assignment. Never blame someone “higher up” the command structure for an unpopular policy or procedure. If descent exists, find out how to overcome it, assist in making everyone a part of the solution, and seek clarification of issues from your boss if the questioning of the process is valid.

Be open with personal feelings, in regard to the profession, with your employees. Use them as a conduit for venting your feelings in a professional manner, and be willing to allow them to do the same with you.

Encourage risk taking (haven’t we heard that before). The only way this can **actually** happen is for the manager to create an atmosphere where making an honest mistake becomes an opportunity to learn, not just rationale for discipline.