



NEW LEADERS FOR A NEW CENTURY

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Demographics is destiny, and American society is experiencing a powerful demographic shift today. It matters much more than our partisan debates about ideology or our daily budget struggles. Nearly every institution in our society – public and private; federal, state, and city – is losing experienced leaders, managers, and keepers of crucial knowledge. The established leaders who came of age in the 1960s when our society was rapidly expanding are passing on. The baby boom bulge that brought them into our institutions is now a retirement bulge taking them to other endeavors. This generation of retirees has worked hard to define our current institutions, and they are retiring with more wealth than any prior generation in American history.

This generation of plenty was not immediately followed by another similar group. Their successors were equally smart, but they had fewer opportunities. During the 1970s and early 1980s, when the American economy faced contracting pressures (the post-Vietnam recession, the oil crisis, and a balance of payments deficit) fewer people were hired into upwardly mobile public and private positions. That means there is often at least a decade gap in our organizations between the retiring, mostly male leaders in their 60s and their male and female successors, who are mostly in their 40s. The generation of Madonna is rapidly replacing the generation of the Beatles, and the days of disco are long forgotten. The 1970s were, in many ways, a “lost decade” with terrible music!

What the current demographic shift means is that young, energetic, but less experienced men and women are replacing a venerable generation of seasoned leaders. The challenge is to impart the necessary wisdom and judgment to individuals who know a lot, but have not had to make many difficult decisions for their institutions before. The opportunity is to turn the youth and idealism of a new generation into a burst of exciting creativity, openness, and inspiration. If the new leaders can combine their willingness to question tired old assumptions with an understanding of the deeper issues, then we can expect an era of great achievement – a renaissance of American leadership. If the generation shift produces reckless managers or new

bosses who act just like the old bosses, then we can expect disappointment and decline – a degeneration of American leadership.

So how do we nurture the promising mix of creativity and wisdom in a new generation of leaders? How do we transfer the best of the old guys to the energy and ambition of the new gals? Historical experiences with similar moments of demographic transformation (the 1910s, the 1940s, and the 1960s) have a lot to teach us. There are three main lessons, and they should provide the foundation for our current leadership development efforts.

Learn to love learning

Young people in our current society are professionalized early, they are taught to specialize, and they are incentivized to develop technical skills. As one becomes a leader, however, specialization and technical skills matter less. Successful leaders must know how to integrate different functions, develop diverse people, and see their organization, its mission, and its stakeholders as a whole. Successful leaders also need to bring imagination to their work, inspiring people to re-think problems and re-define opportunities. Integrating, connecting, and imagining are complex thinking capabilities that are most evident in people who continuously expose themselves to new ideas, new perspectives, and new experiences. A great leader must appreciate art as well as science, music as well as math. Professional development must move from technical training to a cultivation of well-rounded life-long learners. An older generation grew to learn and think broadly; a younger cohort must do the same.

Less is sometimes more

We are a hyperactive society. Competitive markets encourage frenetic activity, ambition pushes us all to work even harder, and social media leave us little time to sleep. The chances are that the rising leaders in your organization work longer hours and sleep less than their predecessors. Successful leaders, however, know how to pace themselves and prioritize. They avoid the constant “crisis” atmosphere that burns out so many talented employees. Instead, leadership is about economizing one’s time to focus the maximum effort on the most important

issues for the organization, and reducing time committed to less important matters. Leadership is also about preserving intellectual energy for creative thinking that is not solely reactive. The only way to pace and prioritize is to do less, and do it better. A hyperactive generation needs to re-train itself to imbibe this crucial lesson.

Look for progress, not solutions

I often ask my best students "why do you like science and math?" Many will answer that they appreciate the apparent certainty of those fields. Mathematical problems have solutions or "correct answers." Scientific experiments have replicable results. Lower and middle-level work in most organizations is similar, and rising leaders spend their early careers as problem-solvers. Some are so good that they get called to solve problems in other parts of their organization. The problems proliferate and deepen as one ascends to higher leadership positions, but they soon depart from any possible solution. How does one "solve" poverty, or inequality, or violence? Savvy leaders recognize that the most important issues do not conform to the simple statements people commonly make about them (for example, "Poverty will not be a problem once everyone develops a good work ethic;" or "More funding for education will end inequality.") Leadership is about taking on the "unsolvable" issues and finding creative ways to make some progress, to make things a little better. A successful organization does not really change the world, but it brings

a bit of tangible improvement. Young leaders must remain ambitious, and they must embrace the pragmatic pursuit of compromises, half-measures, and trade-offs. Progress comes in small steps that have big meaning.

A prior generation of leaders learned these lessons and practiced them over long careers. We can see that in their histories. The current generation of younger leaders have less time to learn these lessons and practice them before they are in the spotlight. Executive training is no substitute for "real world" experience, but it can accelerate the process significantly. In our era when leaders are rising fast, and so much is demanded of them, the least we can do is give them chance, by giving them an advanced education. Every great organization in ten years will be a great organization at educating its best employees. The time to start is now, before all the wisdom walks out the door.

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