Leadership Practices for the New Generation of Employees
By Marcel Faggioni

Since the early 1900's the face of the Canadian workforce has undergone many changes. This evolution in society is often referred to as generational transitions. The needs, wishes and aspirations of the various generations of employees are quite different and as employers, we have had to evolve culturally to meet the challenges in meeting these needs and wishes.

The period from circa 1920 to 1945 produced what is known as the "traditional" generation. This generation of workers was highly influenced by World War II and the industrialization of the economy. This same generation experienced economic hardship and rationing due to the "Great Depression". Their core values were driven by dedication, sacrifice, hard work, delayed rewards, a great sense of duty, conformity and respect for rules/law and order. These "traditional" workers demonstrated great loyalty towards the organization. They seldom questioned authority of their superiors and often wanted structure in their work routines. They were primarily motivated by the saying "a good day's pay for a good day's work".

The period known for producing the "baby boomer" generation extended from 1945 to 1964. This generation was heavily influenced by the optimism generated by the post World War II period, the drive towards greater civil rights, the anti-authority movement and overall work prosperity. The "baby boomers" were idealists, who strove to change the world in making it a better place to live from a health and welfare perspective. As employees, "baby boomers" placed a great deal of importance on the meaning of their work and its value. Work came first above all else, since work represented a means to an end. The "workaholic" was a product of this generation. Career advancement and public recognition became more important for this new generation of workers.

Following the 'baby boomer" generation came the "Generation X'ers". Those born between 1965 and 1980 were members of this generational cohort. Individuals of the "Generation X" era were influenced by unprecedented technological growth, shifts in family/social trends and racial/gender/ethnic diversity on a demographic scale. Generation X'ers are characterized as global thinkers, self-reliant, pragmatic and technologically advanced. As employees, they value work life balance, flexible workplace rules and collaboration at all levels of the organization. This generation places a lot of emphasis on balancing fair compensation with ample leisure time away from work.

The period extending from 1981 to 1999 distinguishes itself with the creation of "Generation Y". This new breed of individuals grew up surrounded by all types of advanced technology. They were surrounded by an environment that provided them with ample time to become involved in athletics and team sports. Their values are characterized by a strong sense of optimism, diversity, confidence and achievement. Generation Y employees work towards meeting deadlines, but are not necessarily

happy to work within an imposed and stringent schedule. They enjoy having the flexibility of accomplishing the assignment at their own pace. Ultimately, these employees value autonomy and discretion. They are motivated by individual and public praise and opportunity for skills development, as well as variety in their work.

In terms of organizational leadership, companies and agencies alike have had to transform their leadership approaches to suit the evolving workforce through the years. What worked in the early 1900's does not work in more modern times. This can be said on numerous fronts. During the predominantly "traditional" generation of the early part of the 1900's, an autocratic management style was very evident in most workplaces. Under an autocratic style of management, the supervisor exercised a very aggressive and closed form of supervision. The subordinates were simply ordered to follow instructions without any say as to work methods. Work was very prescriptive and employees were not given any discretion in how the work got done. This era was marked by voluminous policies and procedures, which created a very inflexible work environment. Much of work was confined to very strictly defined duties and responsibilities. The main focus of employers was aimed at ensuring maximum productivity at any cost (often to the detriment of the health and safety of workers). The needs of the workers were not considered because of the overarching concern for production.

With the passage of time, the autocratic style of management did soften up somewhat. Managers and supervisors were not as austere in their approach towards their subordinates. Employees were given some limited discretion over the work methods. Work was not as strictly defined as in the industrial period. Working conditions saw some real gains. The transformation in the organizational culture was giving way to a more participative style of management as society moved into the 1980's. Employees were given a greater voice in the form of limited decision-making. Employers began forming committees and forums for employees to provide input on how to improve their workplace. Employers began to use employee attitude surveys to gauge how employees felt about their work and their working environment.

As society entered the 1990's, organizational leadership underwent a significant change, especially evident in the technology, government and people service industries. The style of management was one that could best be described as collaborative. The collaborative style is founded on the principle of "win-win". Based on this philosophy, the organization's conscience is focused on ensuring that its needs for production are balanced with the needs of the workers for a fulfilling work environment. Under this new and evolving leadership approach, the employer attempts to create an organizational culture that seriously looks at ways of fostering a "win" for employees in terms of job satisfaction, while achieving its own "win" in terms of assuring productivity gains from a more satisfied workforce. In sum, everyone is a winner under collaborative leadership.

It is important that employers recognize that the new workforce is made up of individuals who have greater aspirations for employee empowerment and involvement. Organizations that do not embark on this trend towards a collaborative leadership transformation will likely experience serious issues such as increased levels of employee turnover, poor employee morale, lower productivity rates, increase sick time and general organizational malaise. A transformation in the direction of collaborative leadership should help in maintaining a healthy work environment, which will maximize

the retention of existing employees and the attraction of new employees from the outside.