

Chapter Title- Trust & Empowerment: A Declaration of Interdependence

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Generation X leaders tend to more fully engage all levels within an organization to create progress. While Baby Boomers (Boomers) and older generations appear more comfortable working within traditional hierarchies and politics, Gen Xers (Xers) just ignore or sidestep these inconvenient and progress-thwarting aspects of communication and leadership where bureaucracy often outweighs common sense. Trust and empowerment help define a very different Xer approach where all ideas are valid, and all people are valued. This chapter will explore such an engagement method called Needs/Goals/Barriers/Solutions (NGBS) and show how it effectively engages all people in multi-generational success.

If you participate in most any leadership meeting led by Boomers, the phrase “buy-in” is regularly woven into the conversation. Considering traditional, top-down hierarchical approaches common among colleges, gaining “buy-in” sounds like a good leadership goal. However, while it is often necessary, Xers view buy-in as a lazy way out of true and authentic leadership. Empowering front line employees as well as administrators to become collaborative solution-creators develops a culture where ownership is more important than buy-in. A culture of empowering ownership is built upon trust, and this is perhaps one of the largest differences in Xer leadership. Xer leaders tend to be naturally trusting toward front line employees.

Xer culture offers many contradictions. For instance, Xers tend to distrust authority figures but extend considerable trust to the masses of employees. Xers came of age with unprecedented freedom compared to previous generations. Thus, they balk considerably when constrained or inspected by supervisors. They question motives when directives are given

without explanation. As leaders, though, Xers are self-effacing and lean toward informal. They give fewer directives in favor of non-hierarchical problem solving.

It is important to note that Xers do work toward buy-in and especially so when things have to be done in a hurry. Nevertheless, ownership is preferred even though it takes longer and often appears less tidy. The difference is palpable; ownership efforts take longer to create but produce self-sustaining results. Buy-in efforts are deployed more rapidly but then require more monitoring. The “police work” style monitoring is often damaging to an organization, and particularly so when many Xers are present in the workforce.

So how do Xers achieve more ownership and create self-sustaining solutions? The first step is by shedding ego-based power struggles. Xers, typically, are more interested in being successful than in being “right” about something. They have followed Boomers for so many years who cling to the ego of “golden chair” positions in an organization. Thus, they are long accustomed to performing without boosting their own ego by exercising direct power. Xers use more indirect power by coordinating and facilitating inclusion. Thus, Xers find creative ways to engage others in defining issues and creating solutions.

One such approach is called Needs/Goals/Barriers/Solutions (NGBS). It hinges upon allowing employees to offer input on an important topic, such as improving student learning and success at a college. Employees may participate in a survey and follow-up focus groups, broad scale retreats, and so forth to provide insights into their top needs, goals, barriers, and solution ideas related to improving student learning and success or any other topic of high importance. Qualitative compilation of this input results in major “bucket” areas needing improved focus and an additional list of miscellaneous topics needing support. This non-threatening way to express

issues frames each challenge as an opportunity to succeed. And, it provides a great road map within each “bucket” as detailed input results in tangible action.

Thoughtful progress is made through ad hoc Task Teams formed around everyone’s input. This answers the inevitable questions of, “Why are we doing this?” and, “What’s in it for me?” Since follow-up action is based upon everyone’s input, the highest hierarchical level of leaders are justifiably viewed as supportive problem solvers rather than dictatorial managers. Ownership is further enhanced as faculty and staff members are allowed to choose the Task Team efforts they will engage in directly. Leadership Team members, then, do not have to police implementations. Progressive innovation champions emerge at all levels.

Following is an overview of a NGBS survey and corresponding results that drove campus planning at Tarrant County College (TCC) Northeast Campus. This effort began in late 2014 with a NGBS survey administered in early 2015, and it continues to drive campus planning. The NGBS survey had above a 30% response rate- about double the usual rate. Initial data were categorized into four “buckets” that were shared at a President’s Leadership Retreat involving approximately 75 faculty, staff, and administrators in June 2015. Initial results were further analyzed and solidified into four main areas of need:

- Supporting Student Needs
- Improving Communication
- Improving Effectiveness and Efficiency
- Improving Infrastructure (including Facilities & Technology)

TCC’s NE Campus Leadership Team further considered all input and developed Steering Teams for each of the four areas. Task Teams working with each Steering Team were then created to research and implement strategies developed during the retreat. Care was taken to

blend faculty, staff, and administrators on all teams as well as to cross-pollinate between departments and divisions, so that all members of the TCC team would continually fuel true collaboration. The following Steering Teams and associated Task Teams were formed:

Student Needs Steering Team

- Academic Probation Recovery Task Team
- Assessment of Student Needs Task Team
- College Transfer Task Team
- Exemplary Practices Task Team
- First Time in College (FTIC) Student Engagement Task Team
- Science/Technology/Engineering/Math (STEM) Task Team
- Student Leadership Task Team
- Student Planning and College Entry Task Team

Communications Steering Team

- Campus Programs Task Team
- Campus Updates Task Team
- Information Station Task Team
- SharePoint Planning Tool Task Team
- Stackable Credentials Task Team
- Student Updates Task Team
- WIGs-Day Update (Wildly Important Goals) Task Team

Effectiveness and Efficiency Steering Team

- Effectiveness and Efficiency Task Team
- Professional Development Task Team

- Supplemental Instruction Task Team

Infrastructure Steering Team

- Campus Space Utilization Task Team
- Community & Industry Education Off-Campus Centers Task Team
- Infrastructure Needs Task Team
- IT Support & Training for Student Planning Task Team
- Social Media and Student Media Task Team
- Sticky Space Development Task Team
- Texting Technology Task Team

These teams met over 2015 and 2016, and have been empowered to accomplish tasks working across the campus hierarchical structure by reporting results directly to the Campus Leadership Team. The Leadership Team can then act more promptly and communicate results.

Literally hundreds upon hundreds of ideas were shared via the NGBS survey and in subsequent meetings. While not all ideas can be developed into implementation strategies, it is crucial to honor each idea with genuine consideration. When this is accomplished, people may feel more valued and a part of transformational progress even if it is not exactly as they had envisioned. In order to truly honor the many contributions, leaders must not only shed ego but also redevelop their view of the organizational hierarchy.

Traditional hierarchies depict a top-down flow of information and decisions. The president, vice presidents, deans, directors, and so forth are shown at or near the top of the chart while front line faculty and staff are seen at the bottom.



Xers simply do not view organizations in this fashion. They are skeptical of traditional authority and suspicious of anyone claiming to have all the “right” answers.

Many Xers envision a flipped version of the usual org chart, one where the president and vice presidents are at the bottom supporting more weight instead of at the top controlling subordinates. This places front line faculty and staff near the top. Faculty and staff, in turn, directly support students.



This is not to assert that students then control things from “above” the chart. Rather, it is to postulate that people do not need to be controlled. People need to be supported and engaged as partners in an organization’s mission.

So how do Boomers and other generations such as Millennials respond to this Xer approach to leadership? Boomers from most areas and levels appear to respond positively. Engagement and empowerment, in general, seem to be pretty popular. However, Boomers in “power” positions can feel disenfranchised as their roles are redefined to become facilitative supporters instead of authority figures. Many have struggled with a transition away from the comfort of hierarchical power and time-honored political ways of accomplishing objectives. Once they have adapted, however, Boomer leaders can flourish with experience and political skills to fully engage the breadth of employees in high-reaching, collaborative objectives.

Dr. Pamela Fisher, a retired Baby Boomer college president, said that her, “...generation set out to overturn the establishment.” She went on to reflect that, in order to overturn the establishment, Boomers had to *become the establishment*. This seems a powerful reflection worthy of note to Xers as well as Boomers. If Boomers have become the very thing they set out to disrupt and overturn, then might partnering effectively with Xer leaders and colleagues create the bright and worthy future they once envisioned? Might Boomers and Xers who now hold most significant leadership positions create a future of broad engagement and ultimate progress?

Authors of Generations (Strauss and Howe 1991, 80-90) theorized that today’s Boomers and Xers are quite similar to Thomas Jefferson’s *Idealist (Boomer)* and George Washington’s *Reactive (Xer)* generations. The older *Idealist* and next-younger *Reactive* generation leaders mutually supported each other to create great societal progress amidst a crisis. Whereas Jefferson

and Washington forwarded an agenda based upon a Declaration of Independence, might today's leaders jointly manifest a *Declaration of Interdependence*?

And what of the Millennials? This generation is rapidly moving into leadership roles as well. Millennials respond very favorably to engagement and empowerment methods such as NGBS. They have expressed appreciation not only for inclusion but also for the framework. Whereas Xers often enjoy a complete lack of framework to rev their creative engines, Millennials seem to like a basic framework within which to operate. The Steering Teams and Task Teams, for instance, offer Millennials a chance to be leaders of important efforts that achieve tangible results. The Needs/Goals/Barriers/Solutions approach, then, is helpful and timely for all generational groups.

As we weave a tapestry of collaboration and progress, we must honor great traditions without being beholden to "that's the way things have always been done" concepts. There is an old story about a young man who asks his mother at a family dinner, "Mom, why do you cut both ends off of the roast beef before you put it in the pot and cook it?" His mother tells him that she is not sure, because his grandma just taught her how to cook that way. When his grandma arrives later they ask her about this cooking secret. She responds by saying that, when his mom was a girl learning how to cook, they only had a very small pot for the roast so had to cut the ends off to fit it inside.

Just as it is vital to avoid "that's the way we've always done it" traps, conversely we must also beware of simply chasing every "shiny new toy" best practice. Just because something is new does not necessarily mean it is better or will work within the context of any organization. People must have time to think, dream, and plan together to determine which innovative ideas have merit and might be implemented or even augmented.

Multi-generational collaboration done right, then, is based upon trust, inclusion, and empowerment. When all ideas are valid for consideration and all people are valued, tangible and collaborative progress occurs naturally as organizational health is supported. The NGBS approach is one way to broadly engage people in healthy conversations, honor great traditions, and focus on innovative progress. Vision for the organization's future and for daily operations is developed together, while many lessons are learned and shared to fuel progress.

Sometimes we find the most profound life lessons in children's books, such as this one from The Ghost Dance (McLellan 1995, 21-22) where the author wrote, "If all hold to the dream, the magic will be strong—be strong to call back what we loved the most, and of the new keep what is good, weave old and new in harmony." Perhaps this is the preamble to the *Declaration of Interdependence*.

References

McLellan, Alice. 1995. *The Ghost Dance*. Toronto, Canada. Stoddard Publishing Co. Limited.

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