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The New Officer: The NeXt Generation

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The workforce of the next 20 to 30 years will be comprised of Generation X workers. Today, about 33.6 percent of the workforce is made up of this generation, who were born between 1963 and 1977. These are the “latchkey kids” that presently represent 16 percent (Sally), or 46,000,000 (Smith), of the U. S. population.

In one study, 30 percent of Xers surveyed said that they were strongly committed to their organization, compared to 89 percent of the older workers (Hazelwood). Growing up, this generation has often seen their parents working for long durations of time at a particular organization only to have their jobs lost to downsizing (Messer 14). Their childhood has been marked with high divorce rates, drug abuse, and political scandals, leaving them with a negative view of the world (Smith), and apparently this has resulted in their view of employment differing from their predecessors (Hazelwood).

Generation X officers have been characterized as displaying a lack of loyalty to an organization based on their belief that job security is found in options rather than commitment (Messer 14). Perhaps this could more accurately be looked upon as the result of their optimism regarding getting new jobs, with 90 percent of Xers feeling they can easily find a new job (Hazelwood). Generation X is determined to be more secure in family life and finances (Sally), with a tendency to stay single longer than previous generations, therefore giving them greater flexibility, and freedom to move from one job market to another (Messer 15). They are maturing as a strong, independent, driven workforce, who does not feel that job security can be found in committing their careers to a single agency (Messer 16).

Expectantly, Generation Xers report being offended by the slacker image and they describe themselves as being technically literate, realistic, and hardworking, but are admittedly cynical. Also, they consider themselves aged beyond their years, feeling older than they really are (Sally). About half of those surveyed feel they will eventually work for themselves and expect to have to sacrifice personal time at some point to further their careers (Rottier).

Generation Xers measure their success by the amount of time they have off-duty, the amount of money they earn, and by the training that they receive, increasing their marketability (Messer 15). Interestingly, in a 1998 Roper Organizational poll, 69 percent of twenty-nine year-old workers were interested in higher pay, whereas this figure was 58 percent twenty years earlier (Messer 15). Without a doubt, Xers want recognition, so by an agency using merit-based promotions, rather than promoting simply based on seniority, the new members of an agency can see that the agency is committed to their growth ("Employing").

Presently, the Generation X workforce is averaging 3.5 years at any one job (Herman). It seems that training is important in ensuring the high morale and productivity of Generation X. The better the training and educational opportunities, the longer these workers will want to stay with the organization, and the more loyal they will be (Messer 17). Mentoring programs work well in socializing Generation Xers in the workplace.

Mentors should address social and philosophical issues, as well as the technical aspects of the job ("Employing"). Generation X officers should be trained quickly so they can gain something of value (Messer 17), and their work environment must be one of continuous learning (Messer 18). In a friendly, informal way the Baby Boomer mentors can blend their values of duty before pleasure, respect for authority, and adherence to rules with their counterparts' values of balance, informality, and self-reliance ("Employing").

By allowing people of this generation to perform various assignments or tasks, their efforts lead to feelings of value and importance within the organization. Xers need accurate, specific, and timely feedback, which should be related to specific actions with clear goals and guidelines (Messer 18).

Studies have shown that job security and respect were more important than pay and fringe benefits (Bopp 296). Studies further indicate that too much importance may have been attached to pay and material incentives (Iannone 8). As reported by the International City/ County Management Association, workers ranked appreciation for their work, being "in on" things, and sympathy for personal problems the highest. Likewise, their supervisors thought that a good salary, job security, and promotion were most important to their employees (Walsh 141).

In motivating officers toward meeting the goals of an organization, they must believe the goals are attainable; otherwise, they will not be committed (Iannone 7). Generally, officers want to perform well, and a supervisor can make it easier for them to do so by providing recognition for their accomplishments and by helping them correct mistakes with positive reinforcement (Iannone 8-9). Often, it only takes a minute to boost the motivation of an officer (Walsh 296).

Today's "latchkey" workforce may be influenced by a negative attitude of the world, but these people are interested in providing a fruitful life for themselves and their families.

Today's job market plays into their belief of being able to easily find a new job throughout the criminal justice field. With an understanding of their motivations, an agency can inspire dedication by showing Xers that their growth is important, by providing room for advancement, training, and with a learning environment that will increase their marketability. Importantly, today, a supervisor should know his or her people and their families, and should acknowledge a job well done, adding to their officers' motivation, job satisfaction, and longevity.

Footnotes

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