

# Erickson on Gen X

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THE BEST OF TAMMY ERICKSON  
ON GENERATION X AT WORK

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# Preface

As a member of Generation X—that thirty to forty-five age cohort—your career path has been anything but easy.

The demographic numbers and the economy have always been stacked against you. As *Fortune* noted back in 1985, “These pioneers of the baby-bust generation are finding life on the career frontier harsher than ever... they’re snarled in a demographic traffic jam... stuck behind all those surplus graduates of the past decade.” The economy went into recession in 1991, and, just when some of you were gaining momentum again, the bursting of the dot-com bubble wiped out \$5 trillion in the market value of technology companies from March 2000-October 2002.

And here you are. Fortyish, or soon to be. Some of you have made it to the top. Others have made it to where you think you want to be. Still others are still working up, heading out, or feeling frustrated about finding work the works for you.

In this collection of blog posts originally posted on [harvardbusiness.org](http://harvardbusiness.org), *What’s Next, Gen X?* author Tammy Erickson helps X’ers understand and navigate the unique career challenges affecting your generation. You’ll find out why you butt heads with your Boomer boss, how your Gen Y employee approaches their job, and what you need to do to step up into the leadership roles that lay ahead.

Now is the time take charge of your career. Armed with Tammy’s sage insight and advice, you will see that your generation’s time has come—and you will be prepared to embrace it.

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# 1

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## 10 Reasons Gen X'ers Are Unhappy at Work

I'm worried about Generation X and corporations. As far as I can tell, these two have a tentative relationship at best—and are likely headed for some rocky times ahead.

Corporations really need Gen X—folks in their 30's to early 40's, who should begin to serve as our primary corporate leaders over the next couple years. But I fear many current corporate executives are taking this small and therefore precious group for granted.

Many of you X'ers are not thrilled with corporate life. You tend not to trust institutions in general and deeply resent the Boomers' confident assumptions that you will be motivated by the same things that Boomers have long cared about. Many of you have told me that you are planning to leave corporate life “soon”—to start entrepreneurial ventures or work for smaller companies—options you feel will suite you better than the corporate roles looming ahead.

Why are many X'ers uncomfortable in corporate life?

1. X'ers' corporate careers got off to a slow start and many are still feeling the pain. You graduated when the economy was slow and the huge bulge of Boomers had already grabbed most of the key jobs. As an article in the May 1985 issue of *Fortune* said: “[T]hese pioneers of the baby-bust generation are finding life on the career frontier harsher than ever . . . they're snarled in a demographic traffic jam . . . stuck behind all those surplus graduates of the past decade.”
2. When you were teens, X'ers witnessed adults in your lives being laid off from large corporations, as re-engineering swept through the business lexicon. This engendered in most X'ers a lack of trust in

large institutions and a strong desire for a life filled with back-up plans, just in case. Many of the adults you saw laid off and then struggling to reintegrate were in their 40's—about the age X'ers are reaching today.

3. Most corporate career paths “narrow” at the top—the perceived range of options diminishes as individuals become increasingly specialized in specific functions or roles. X'ers crave options, which assuage your concerns about being backed into a corner, laid off from one path. The sense of narrowing career paths and increased vulnerability is often most palpable at the transition from middle to upper management—just where many of you are today. This step also often brings demands for relocation and separation from established social networks—an additional assault on your sense of self-reliance.
4. Just your luck—the economy was slow when you entered the workforce and now it's slowing once again—just as you are standing at the threshold of senior management. Stepping into leadership roles right now looks more difficult and the roles themselves, more vulnerable than they have at any point in the past decade.
5. And then there are those pesky Gen Y's. Many X'ers are charged with “managing” Y's, which—let's face it—is an impossible task, at least if you define “manage” as controlling their channels of communication. While vying for promotions and trying to look good, many of you feel that Y's are doing an end run around.
6. X'ers are, in fact, surrounded by a love fest—and not feeling the love. As I've written on my blog, Boomers and Y's are learning from each other—and enjoying their interactions. It's easy to feel left out.
7. X'ers are the most conservative cohort in today's workforce—and you're surrounded by “shake 'em up” types on both sides. In your personal lives, X'ers are not particularly keen on rules, but you had to follow them in the workplace—and you resent it when others now don't. It seems unfair to be rewriting corporate etiquette when you've had to toe the line for so long.
8. Many X'ers' are guarding a closely held secret: you're not all as comfortable with the technology that is changing the way things are

done as everyone seems to think you are. While it's perfectly acceptable for Boomers to feign ignorance and ask for help, it's embarrassing for X'ers to do so.

9. And if Boomer colleagues are annoying, the Boomer parents of your Y reports are down-right over-the-top. X'ers can't believe the frequency of Y-parent interactions and are deeply turned off by parents who make their presence felt in the workplace.
10. Finally, your own parenting pressures are at a peak. You're deeply committed to spending more time with your kids than your parents did or were able to spend with you, but juggling is getting more and more difficult.

Is it time to jump off the corporate train?

I hope not—at least not for most of you. Corporations really need your leadership. But I understand that we need to create corporate environments that are more conducive to your needs and preferences.

## 2

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# Hey, Gen X'er: You've Won!

Picture this. A Boomer walks into a Gen X'er's office (okay, cubicle) and says, "I've got great news for you! You've won!"

Now remember: Boomers, as I've argued, tend as a group to be pretty competitive. This is the cohort that grew up in a world that was fundamentally too small for them. They went to high school in Quonset huts behind the high school because there weren't enough classrooms to hold them all. They've competed for everything from spots on the high school sports team, to college admissions, jobs and promotions. Winning, for Boomers, is a very big deal.

"You've won the promotion!" Pause, as the Boomer waits for any obvious signs of delight from the X'er.

"Of course, it does mean you'll have to relocate. The promotion is in our Topeka office." Pause. Dead silence from the X'er.

Then, "No, thanks."

What does the Boomer, in all likelihood assume? For most, it would be easy to make a rapid leap to a value judgment regarding the X'er's level of commitment to the company and to his or her career. It would be a short step to assume that the person lacked ambition, confidence, or perhaps even raw intelligence. After all, how could they not get how big a deal this is? All of these judgments would, I believe, almost certainly be wrong.

And, by the way, what does the X'er, in all likelihood assume about the Boomer? Would insensitive, out-of-touch, or even down-right nuts be possibilities? I suspect they might.

X'ers were teenagers during a difficult time in many national

economies. During the 1980's and 90s there were persistent financial crises in many Latin American countries and stagnation in Europe. It was a time when the President had Americans wearing Whip Inflation Now buttons. And, it was the era of re-engineering. Knowing an adult who was laid off from a corporation where he or she had once planned to collect a gold watch of retirement is a widely-shared experience for many in Generation X.

As a result, many X'ers tend to be very nervous about putting too many eggs in the corporate basket. When I talk with X'ers, I often visualize athletes bouncing on their toes, ready to dodge one way or the other, depending on which direction the play moves next. Many hate the feeling of being boxed in. They don't like having their degrees of freedom, their options, reduced.

Of course, in many traditional corporate career paths, boxing people in—at least in the sense of urging them to specialize or to take on managerial roles that remove them from the “skill” of the business is exactly what we do to people in their 30s (where the majority of X'ers are today). Hence many X'ers are feeling increasingly uneasy within corporations. Our research shows that X'ers, for example, are more likely than any other generational cohort to fear being laid off. (In reality, they are probably the least likely cohort to be laid off—but they are the most perpetually worried about it.)

So, back to the promotion to Topeka.

In all likelihood, the idea of being promoted and relocated feels to the X'er, not as a “win,” but as being moved out along a tenuous limb that could, goodness knows, be sawed off by a capricious corporation at any moment. Helping X'ers feel more comfortable in taking on these types of roles has to do with helping them see the opportunity as one that broadens their options, rather than limiting them. And, of course, suspending the predictable Boomer knee jerk reaction in the process.

By the way, I was teaching a class of executives recently—and told this story as part of a discussion about the importance of looking at each generation's actions through their eyes, not our own. One of the participants, an X'er, shared with me that she had just gone through an identical experience, right down to the specifics of Topeka as the targeted site for the promotion!

What did you do? I asked.

“I quit.”

# 3

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## Stuck in the Middle: How Generation X Can Survive the Boomer-Gen Y Love Fest

I have a lot of empathy for Gen X managers. Many tell me that they feel like they've been waiting for years for Boomers to vacate the really "good" jobs. Now, just as the prize is finally looming into sight, Boomers are being advised (granted, by me among others) to "retire retirement." Meanwhile, the workplace is flooding with a new crop of highly talented, upwardly mobile Generation Y's. And, to top it all off, under the thin veneer of occasional head shaking, these two huge generations, the Boomers and the Y's, are quietly enjoying a workplace love fest, with the much smaller cohort of X'ers often feeling on the outs and sandwiched in the middle.

What's going on? Is the future of Generation X in the corporate suite at risk? Well, first, the need for Boomers to delay retirement is pretty real. Many countries around the world are facing skill shortages and need their talents. But, that doesn't mean that all of the Boomers (or even necessarily many) want to remain in key leadership roles much longer. Many who tell me that they'd like to continue working are quick to add that they are not interested in a role with the same level of responsibility or pressure that they hold today. Chances are good that the top jobs will open up.

However, before they go, the Boomers will have a major influence on who succeeds them in these coveted spots. And, for X'ers, the

growing competition from the Y's is real. Several Boomer corporate leaders told me recently that they find themselves gravitating with pleasure to the Y's in their organization. "Skip level meetings are really a joy," one explained. "I find myself connecting with those guys more easily than I do with my own direct reports."

There's some logic there. Although Boomers may be rolling their eyes a bit at the bold entry of Y's into the workplace, I find in my interviews with them that many are pretty tickled with the Y's enthusiasm and eagerness to learn—and particularly their eagerness to learn from them. Don't we all love to be looked up to as the experts? Y's are proving quick to soak up all that Boomers can give.

In contrast, as I've discussed in earlier posts, the relationship between X'ers and Boomers can be tough. To many X'ers, Boomers have already taken up far too much physical space and mental mindshare, often with an air of decided superiority and self-pre-occupation, and for far too long. Looking up to Boomer bosses for advice or coaching is, for many X'ers, wearing thin. Unfortunately, this often translates into a friction that can be felt on both sides.

What's an X'er to do, particularly if you're managing in the middle of this complicated dynamic? My practical side leans toward the "if you can't beat it, use it" strategy:

First, don't fight the natural draw between Boomers and Y's. Leverage it to your advantage. Encourage mentoring relationships between Boomers and Y's. They'll both enjoy it, and it will save you a lot of valuable time that you'd otherwise have to invest in developing the skill sets of your younger reports.

Second, embrace the Y's technological prowess. Use their tech savvy to look for innovative ways to get work accomplished faster and easier or to redesign your group's processes. Because they are our first generation of "unconscious" technology users in the workplace, Y's tend to do things differently without even trying. Consider seriously where the new approaches might be more effective.

Finally, if you feel stuck, move sideways. Some X'ers tell me they're planning to bail out of corporations rather than risk being forever sandwiched in the middle ranks. But corporations, looked at creatively, can be great places to broaden your options by providing multiple roles and ways to learn a wider range of skills. Ask for opportunities that stretch you in new and interesting directions.

# 4

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## Ouch! The Painful Divide Between Generation X and the Boomers

*The Boomer Century*, a recent PBS special (first aired March 28, 2007), set off a torrent of vitriolic commentary. Whether you agree with the critics or not—or even care about a TV show—the existence and tone of the ensuing debate is worth considering seriously.

First, here's a Boomer perspective on the show: It was a fun romp through some of the most important and formative events of our Boomer lives, hosted by one of our generation's frequent spokesmen (and a good friend of mine) Ken Dychtwald.

The X'ers responded with scorn and furry. Virginia Heffernan, writing in the venerable *New York Times*, said the show “labors to con us into sharing its fierce assumption that the only way to see the last 60 years of civilization is through the collective ego of the American children born between 1946 and 1964.” In her view, the show did little but “relive Kennedy assassination clichés and revisit palaver about idealism, disillusionment and self-discovery.”

She only opened the floodgates. Martin Kuz's article in the *San Francisco Weekly* was titled, “Boomtastrophe.” Among other points, he claims Baby Boomers are “dragging the whole country down.” Regarding the show itself, he says, “shunning veracity, PBS presented *The Boomer Century: 1946-2046*. Billed as a documentary, it wove a narrative that hewed closer to mythology, depicting the Me Generation as mankind's

gift to its own.”

Ouch.

Rest assured that Boomers answered back, but furthering that particular debate is not my objective today. (Google “The Boomer Century” if you want to read more from either side.)

Rather, let’s take a deep breath and reflect on the raw nerve this TV show exposed. As hard as it is for Boomers to believe, most members of Generation X are not your biggest fans. To many X’ers, Boomers have been a continual thorn, always holding the vast majority of the “good jobs” and seemingly diminishing their limited economic opportunities yet further. Boomers have taken up far too much physical space and mental mindshare, often with an air of decided superiority and self-pre-occupation, for far too long. But despite lofty teenage promises, they have done little to better either corporations or broader world. The workplace that Boomers have managed has not been overly receptive to many X’ers’ values and preferences. And, as X’ers move into positions of increased authority, resentments related to the results of Boomers’ custodial roles—of the environment, international relationships, the national debt—are already beginning to surface.

Tammy Kobliuk offered the following thoughtful response to one of my blog posts: “In my last office I was one of the few Gen X’ers working with a large number of Baby Boomers. There is a definite culture difference between the two groups despite an often small separation in age. Gen X’ers are more concerned with finding the right job for them, regardless of which company, instead of sticking with a company and hoping to climb the ladder. I have found many Boomers to be very ambitious and concerned with climbing the ladder. Many are unhappy in their jobs yet don’t consider leaving their organizations. Gen X’ers, on the other hand, are often more concerned with a work-life balance where they work to live instead of live to work. Free time is highly valued, probably more so than money for many. We have seen Boomers fill and stay in management/leadership positions thus resigning us to remain in the rank and file. We tend to job hop more than Boomers since company loyalty is not something we expect, having seen and been affected by the downsizing of the 80’s and 90’s. Boomers are seen by Gen X’ers as a “me” generation. It’s all about them. They got the jobs and the houses and we were left with the leftovers.”

Going forward, striking a respectful truce with X’ers will need to

become an important Boomer priority. Without it, there is the possibility of generational conflict and a paucity of talent to sustain the corporations Boomers have dedicated their lives to.

Repairing relations between these two generations may involve Boomers helping to make corporations more receptive to the needs of Generation X. It may involve getting out of their way gracefully, moving perhaps into individual contributor roles within corporations, and turning the reins of leadership over to them. Or, it may involve shifting Boomer priorities to demonstrate more of the generation's good qualities: the passion and commitment to change that marked Boomer's teen years. Boomers have the opportunity to use your large numbers in ways that will further agendas that X'ers would support, to be sensitive to their needs as a generation, as well as your own. Now's the time.

# 5

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## Finally, Gen X Takes Over

What if you swapped all the roles of all the people on your team? Put people into leadership roles who hadn't yet had an opportunity to implement their ideas? Asked former leaders to play support roles, contributing their expertise, but within a new framework, established by others? Brought in people who had never been included before and made them full-fledged, card-carrying members of the team?

From a generational perspective, we are changing chairs—shifting out of the roles we've each played for the nearly two decades, and into new roles that combine our generational strengths and our peculiarities in new ways.

Oh, I know, nothing is quite so neat and tidy—an entire generation doesn't have precise boundaries and certainly doesn't experience exactly the same thing at the same time. But several landmark events signal a change.

One, of course, is President Obama. His swearing in marked the end of 16 years of Boomer presidents. While some might quibble over the official dividing line between the generations, I would argue that Obama is not a Boomer. Generation X is stepping to the fore.

But interestingly, many of his top team are Boomers, selected for their experience and lending—I hope—the best that generation has to offer: idealism and an enthusiasm for change.

The same shifts are occurring in the corporate world. Although the median age of serving CEOs is mid-fifties, most senior leaders are first tapped in their late forties. The new CEOs selected this year are likely to be X'ers. Boomers—competitive, productive—are beginning to

move out of the top spots, but not necessarily out of the workforce. Like the Cabinet members, they're increasingly easing into roles guided by the no-nonsense views of Generation X.

Will these new roles suit the times? I think perhaps they will. Bill Strauss and Neil Howe, coauthors of *Generations*, posit that each generation makes a unique bequest to those that follow—and generally seeks to correct the excesses of the previous generation. They argue that the Boomer excess is ideology—and that the Generation X reaction to that excess involves an emphasis on pragmatism and effectiveness.

This generational priority will give X'ers a strong advantage in remaking organizations to reflect twenty-first-century realities: the need for transparency, accountability, real-time performance, lack of ideology, top-of-market effectiveness, and cash value.

And this is not the only switch. Generation Y's have graduated from being our youngest generation. Those 14 and under, the members of what I call the Re-Generation, are already demonstrating their own sensibilities, distinct from Y's in many ways. They are determined conservationists—serving as living reminders to their parents of issues we need to address.

Y's are now, in many parts of the business world, fully integrating into the team—no longer an interesting minority, their numbers make them a vital constituency. Within a few short years they will be the largest group in the workforce.

We've got a new team forming in the workplace this year. Here's a wish that we are blending best characteristics of each generation.

# 6

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## Why Generation X Has the Leaders We Need Now

William Strauss and Neil Howe, coauthors of *Generations*, posit that each generation makes a unique bequest to those that follow and generally seeks to correct the excesses of the previous generation. They argue that the Boomer excess is ideology and that the Generation X reaction to that excess involves an emphasis on pragmatism and effectiveness.

As many of you know, I've spent much of the last year talking with members of Generation X—those of you born roughly in the 1960s and '70s. The book I've written based on those conversations (*What's Next, Gen X? Keeping Up, Moving Ahead, and Getting the Career You Want*)—including quotes from your responses to posts on [harvardbusiness.org](http://harvardbusiness.org). Through this research, I developed a deep admiration for the generational traits evident among most X'ers, particularly in the context of our current challenges.

Future leaders in all spheres will have to contend with a world with finite limits, no easy answers, and the sobering realization that we are facing significant, seemingly intractable problems on multiple fronts. Perhaps the biggest change from the past: leaders will have to listen and respond to diverse points of view. There will be no dominant voice.

In this context, I'm convinced that Gen X'ers will be the leaders we need. The experiences that shaped those of you who were teens in the late '70s and '80s, as I've outlined in past posts, translate into valuable contemporary traits and perspectives.

- Your accelerated contact with the real world, for many through a “latch-key” childhood, has made you resourceful and hardworking. You meet your commitments and take employability seriously.
- Your distrust of institutions grew as you witnessed the lay-offs of the ‘80s and has prompted you to value self-reliance. You have developed strong survival skills and the ability to handle whatever comes your way with resilience. X’ers instinctively maintain a well-nurtured portfolio of options and networks.
- A sense of alienation from your immediate surroundings as teens, coupled with rapidly expanding technology, has allowed you to look outward in ways no generation before could or did. You operate comfortably in a global and digital world. Many of you are avid adopters of the collaborative technology that promises to re-shape how we work and live.
- Your awareness of global issues was shaped in your youth, and you are richly multicultural. You bring a more unconscious acceptance of diversity than any preceding generation. Your formative years followed the civil rights advances of the 1960s. High divorce rates during your youth meant you are the first generation to grow up with women in independent authority roles. You welcome the contributions of diverse individuals.
- Your preference for “alternative” and early experience in making your own way left you inclined to innovate. You tend to look for a different way forward. Your strongest arena of financial success as a generation has been your entrepreneurial achievements.
- Your skepticism and ability to isolate practical truths have resulted in rich humor and incisive perspective. You help us all redefine issues and question reality.
- Your childhood made you fiercely dedicated to being good parents, prompting you to raise important questions about the way we all balance work with commitments beyond the corporation.
- Your pragmatism has given you practical and value-oriented sensibilities that, I believe, will help you serve as effective stewards of both today’s organizations and tomorrow’s world.

The most difficult elements of your past may well be those that provide you with the strongest capabilities for today.

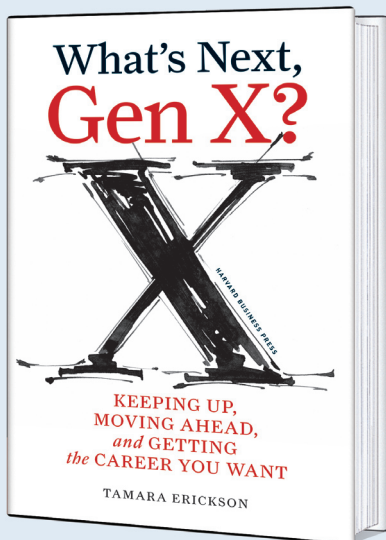
You have traded the idealism of my generation for realism, tempered by value-oriented sensibilities. At mid-life, you are well-prepared to serve as pragmatic managers, applying toughness and resolution to defend society while safeguarding the interests of the young. You will force nations to produce more than they consume and fix the infrastructure.

In today's challenging world, your humor may be your most-valued asset. Czech leader Václav Havel said, "There are no exact guidelines. There are probably no guidelines at all. The only thing I can recommend at this stage is a sense of humor, an ability to see things in their ridiculous and absurd dimensions, to laugh at others and at ourselves, a sense of irony regarding everything that calls out for parody in this world." You help us step back . . . and remind us to laugh.

You will have the opportunity to change the corporate template, and create organizations that are more conducive to your values. As leaders, you will be able to reshape the organizations you lead to make them better places for future generations and yourselves, make them more humane, and break the cultural norms of corporate life—long hours, a focus on full-time work, heterogeneous perspectives, and language of combat. You will bring your desire to create better alternatives, including how to balance work with commitments beyond the corporation and finding meaning in work. Most importantly, your preference for "alternative" and your inclination to innovate will allow you to look for a different way forward.

I'm ready to join the team.

# GOOD NEWS FOR GEN X'ERS FACING THE NEXT PHASE OF THEIR CAREERS



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As you've just learned from this collection of posts about Generation X, you face unique challenges in the workplace. In *What's Next, Gen X?*, Tamara Erickson builds on the insights shared on her blog to identify a practical approach for moving your career forward. This book will show you how to:

- Find work that aligns with your passions
- Understand what makes Boomers and Y's tick—and work with them more productively
- Spot and seize newly emerging professional opportunities
- Leverage unique “X'er” traits to become an effective leader

*What's Next, Gen X?* offers an optimistic view of the future of your generation—and gives you the tools to get there.

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