

**From Boomers to Linksters—
Managing the Friction Between
Generations at Work**



GENERATIONS INC.

**MEAGAN JOHNSON
LARRY JOHNSON**



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Meagan Johnson and Larry Johnson

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Meagan's Dedication

To Alex: My truly badass husband, who has made me the happiest bride ever.

Larry's Dedication

To CJ: My friend and spouse of forty years, who taught me how to love.

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Authors' Note

We wrote this book together to offer the perspectives of a father and a daughter on the issues facing members of different generations who work together. Because we wanted to offer our own individual opinions, as well as our combined observations, we interspersed the chapters with individual as well as joint reflections. In addition, since we can only offer personal perspectives from our respective generational roots (Generation X and Baby Boomer Generation), we interviewed members of the Traditional Generation, Generation Y, and Generation Linkster to gain their insights, which are included in the book.

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Signposts: Harbingers of Things to Come

“Life is rather like a tin of sardines—we’re all of us looking for the key.”

—Alan Bennett, British author, actor, humorist, and playwright

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Meagan Remembers

When I was six years old, I went to the grocery store with my father. He bought an item priced at \$1.69, but the cashier misread it and only charged him 69 cents. (This was 1976. Scanners had yet to be invented, and cashiers manually entered prices.) My father alerted her to her mistake. She thanked him and charged him the extra dollar.

I was dumbfounded! At the time, my weekly allowance was a dollar. My father had just thrown away what it took me a week to earn. So I said, “Dad, that was dumb. All you had to do was keep your mouth shut and you could have saved a whole dollar.” “Yes,” he replied, “but how I feel about myself is worth more than a dollar.”

My memory of that event has followed me all my life. It helps me decide how to handle situations in which I must determine the right thing to do. It taught me that there is more to life than

material gain. I've even used it as a standard for picking the company I keep. Would I want a friend who would have kept the dollar? I think not. Thanks, Dad, for the great life lesson.

Larry Responds

You're welcome, Meagan, but gosh, I don't even remember this big event in your life. In retrospect, it seems I was able to convey a simple life lesson for a pretty small price. If it had been a million dollars at stake instead of one, I hope I would have acted as nobly.

It does remind me that early experiences can have lasting influences on our lives. I attended YMCA summer camp when I was ten years old. My family didn't have a lot of money and couldn't afford the tuition, but I was an enterprising sort. I secured a position as a dishwasher that allowed me to go for free.

For some reason, an adult counselor at the camp considered tuition workers second-class citizens. On an overnight excursion, after a long day of hiking, this counselor told the kitchen crew to wait until all the paid campers got their food from the chow line before eating. I waited and waited. When I saw some of the paid campers queuing up for seconds, I got in line. This counselor grabbed my arm and jerked me out of line. In front of all the other campers, he dressed me down, reminding me that I was just a "dishwasher," and I had to wait for the "real" campers to eat.

My humiliation was unbearable. I burst into tears, threw my plate in the counselor's face, and ran into the woods, hoping I would get lost and starve to death just to show them how unjustly I'd been treated.

Luckily, a more sympathetic counselor tracked me down and escorted me back to camp, where he gave me something to eat. He told me not to take the counselor who had been mean to me seriously because he had some personal problems that caused him to act that way. In retrospect, he should not have been allowed to work with kids, problems or not, but I did gain something positive from the experience. In the years since, I've traced any empathy I have for people less fortunate than I to that unpleasant incident. It gave me a small taste of what it feels like to be discriminated against. It was a painful, but beneficial, event in my life.



Personal and Group Signposts

We call these kinds of events *personal signposts*: experiences in our lives that significantly contribute to who we are. They are personal because they are unique to each individual. They are signposts because they influence our future decisions, reactions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Other signposts have just as much impact on us, but these spring from the experiences of the groups to which we belong and the society in which we live. These *group signposts* can have a strong effect on us because they are magnified by the power of numbers. For example, if you are a member of a racial minority, you may or may not have endured racism yourself. However, the fact that your friends, family, and colleagues probably did will affect how you view the issue of discrimination. And, if you combine this *group signpost* with one or more *personal signposts* associated with race, the effect can be very powerful.

Larry remembers an experience he had when working for a large organization. He and his boss, Irene, were conducting interviews to fill a position that would report directly to Larry. It came down to two finalists: one Larry liked, and one Irene liked. Since Irene was the boss, Larry yielded, and they hired her choice.

It turned out to be a mistake and they eventually had to let the woman go. In discussing it later, Irene graciously claimed responsibility for the fiasco. She said that she had let a prejudice hidden deep within her affect her judgment. It turns out that Larry's preferred choice was white, and Irene's was black. Irene herself is also black.

Larry was surprised. Irene had never struck him as being racially motivated. After all, she had hired him, a white guy, when there had been several minority candidates from whom to choose. She also had a sterling reputation as the consummate HR professional. Larry asked her to explain.

Irene replied that she hadn't preferred her candidate because she was black, but because the white candidate's Southern accent grated down at her "very core." As a young black woman growing up in the South, she associated many negative experiences with a Southern drawl. The combination of a *group signpost* (being black) and the *personal signposts* (these negative experiences) affected Irene's ability, years later, to be fair and impartial. To her credit, she promised to make a conscious effort not to let this prejudice affect her judgment again.

Irene's story illustrates the good news about signposts. They can have

very positive effects on our lives, as did Meagan's experience with Larry at the grocery store, or they can have very negative effects, like Irene's reaction to a Southern accent. *But they can be changed.* Signposts are not life sentences. Irene proved the point. She learned from her insight and made a conscious decision to move in a different direction.

Generational Signposts

A *generational signpost* is an event or cultural phenomenon that is specific to one generation. Generational signposts shape, influence, and drive our expectations, actions, and mind-sets about the products we buy, the companies for which we work, and the expectations we have about life in general. Generational signposts mold our ideas about company loyalty, work ethics, and the definitions of a job well done.

Meagan's grandfather, Joe, was from the Traditional Generation (the parents of Baby Boomers born before 1946). He came of age in the 1920s and struggled to raise a family during the Great Depression, a major signpost for his generation. Joe, like most of his cohort, believed that if you were lucky enough to have a job, you owed absolute loyalty to the company that hired you—always. Joe worked for Procter & Gamble for forty years. Throughout his employment and his retirement, he insisted that everyone in the family buy only P&G products. If P&G made it, they bought it.

Compare that attitude with that of people from Generation Y (born after 1980). Their average job turnover rate is approximately 30 percent.¹ Some employers tell us they feel lucky if newly hired Generation Yers stick around past lunch. This lack of job loyalty can be traced to many factors including that the job often pays very little so the only way the Gen Yer can make more is to move elsewhere or the job itself is not his or her calling in life, it's just something to do until he or she finds a career path. For many, however, they simply don't need to work because they still live at home and are being supported by Mom and Dad. That phenomenon can be associated with a major signpost for them: They are the offspring of what we call "helicopter parents." We'll explain many of the implications of that parentage in Chapter 6, but suffice it to say that these kids are often overly indulged.

Life Laws

When Meagan was a young child, Larry traveled every week. She and her mother loved to surprise him by meeting his plane at the gate. It became

a Friday night family tradition. However, for every generation born after September 11, 2001, that family tradition now takes place outside the security area. Today's young people have no recollection of being allowed to enter an airport concourse without submitting to a TSA screening. For them, this necessity is a *life law*.

Life laws are events that have social, political, or economic influence on our lives but occurred before we were old enough to remember any difference. We've talked to many members of Generation X and Generation Y who take for granted the fact that schools are not segregated by race. They can't imagine a time when it was otherwise. Consequently, they often have little appreciation for the sacrifices made by their Traditional elders that led to the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Oliver L. Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka (KS) et al.*—a decision that outlawed segregation in schools. Nor do they remember the subsequent struggle by the civil rights movement to turn the ruling into a reality. For them, school integration is a life law. It's always been that way.

Life laws are important because they often affect how one generation views another. If you were part of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, you may have little patience with 18-year-olds who take their civil rights for granted. Likewise, if you are from a younger generation, you may have little patience for an older worker who is still bringing those struggles to work and sees the world through that lens. For example, we know a Gen Xer who found it irritating when she was pregnant that her Baby Boomer boss said she should be grateful the company was letting her come back to work.

Generation Defined

During a speech, Meagan mentioned that she is part of Generation X. An audience member yelled out, "Aren't you getting too old to be a Generation Xer?" That's a risky question to ask anyone and, to her credit, Meagan resisted the temptation to snap back, "Aren't you a little old to call yourself a Baby Boomer?" Instead, she clarified that generational groups are not determined by the present age of the members, but by the social events and demographics that were happening at their inceptions. Traditionals are defined as people born before the end of World War II. Thus, although people grow older, the period in which they were born always remains the defining time period that determines to which generation