Managing Young SH&E Professionals
By Bruce Tulgan

Leaders and managers in organizations of all shapes and sizes in just about every industry all over the world tell me stories about working with today’s young talent—Generation Y (born between 1978 and 1989) and now the emerging Generation Z (born 1990 and later).

These leaders tell me:
• “They walk in the door on day one with very high expectations.”
• “They don’t want to pay their dues and climb the ladder.”
• “They walk in the door with 17 things they want to change about the company.”
• “They only want to do the best tasks.”
• “If you don’t supervise them closely, they go off in their own direction.”
• “It’s very hard to give them negative feedback without crushing their morale.”
• “They walk in thinking they know more than they know.”
• “They think everyone is going to get a trophy in the real world, just like they did growing up.”

Most leaders and managers think today’s young workers may be the most high-maintenance workforce of all time. Are they correct? Research shows that Gen Ys and Zs have very high expectations for themselves and their employers. And, they have the highest expectations for their immediate bosses. Yet, they are more likely to disagree openly with employers’ missions, policies and decisions, and challenge employment conditions and established reward systems. They are less obedient to employers’ rules and supervisors’ instructions. They are less likely to heed organizational chart authority.

Gen Ys and Gen Zs tend to respect transactional authority: control of resources, control of rewards and control of work conditions. Because they look to their immediate supervisors to meet their basic needs and expectations, they freely make demands of them.

These are some statements that young workers have been sharing in workplace interviews:
• “My boss keeps telling me, ‘This is where you are going to be in 5 years.’”

I’m dying to tell him, ‘I hate to tell you pal, but you don’t know where you’re going to be in 5 years.’
• “I know they think they are masters of the universe, but, gee, the Soviet Union disappeared overnight. So could they.”
• “My boss thinks I have a bad attitude. I don’t know why he thinks I have a bad attitude. I told him I’ll work alongside him on any project until he drops from exhaustion.”
• “They keep telling me, ‘This is what you get in 5 years, 10 years, 20 years.’ I feel like—what’s that expression—they are trying to sell me a bridge.”

Because Gen Ys and Zs seem to disregard authority figures and at the same time demand a great deal of them, leaders and managers often find them maddening and difficult to manage.

To bring out the best in today’s young talent, managers and leaders must commit to high-maintenance management.

Managing Gen Y & Z
Most so-called experts on today’s young workers have it all wrong. They argue that since Gen Ys and Zs have grown up with self-esteem parenting, teaching and counseling, the right way to manage them is to praise and reward them with trophies just for showing up. These experts tell managers to create thank-you programs, praise programs and reward programs. They recommend turning recruiting into a long sales pitch; transforming the workplace into a veritable playground; rearranging training so it revolves around interactive computer gaming; encouraging young workers to find a best friend at work; and teaching managers to soft-pedal their authority. This approach is out of touch with reality.

I tell employers that what today’s young workers need is not always the same as what they want. The problem is that successfully giving them what they need is much harder than simply handing them what they want.

The high-maintenance Gen Y & Z workforce calls for strong leadership. Managers should: never undermine their own authority; never pretend that the job is going to be more fun than it is; never suggest that a task is within the discretion of a young worker if it isn’t; never gloss over details; never let problems slide; and never offer praise and rewards for performance that is not worthy.

Managers should spell out the rules of their workplace in vivid detail so Gen Ys and Zs can play that job like a video game: If you want A, you have to do B; if you want C, you have do D, and so on. To bring out the best in today’s young talent, managers and leaders must commit to high-maintenance management.

Getting It Right From the Start
Today’s young workers want to hit the ground running on day one. But, they don’t want to be thrust into a sink-or-swim situation either. They want lots of support and guidance every step of the way. It may be exhausting, but if managers do not plug into the excitement and enthusiasm Gen Ys and Zs bring on the first day of work, they are in serious danger of turning a good hire bad.

Gen Ys and Zs almost always walk in the door with a spark of excitement. The question is, do you pour water or gasoline on that spark? Here’s how to pour gasoline on the spark: Grab hold
of them on their way in the door and don’t let go (metaphorically speaking).

Here is a simple rule to teach managers: Day one is the most important day. Plan for their first day of work as if planning your kid’s birthday party. That doesn’t mean greeting them with candles, balloons and gifts. But, you do have to greet them.

Consider the greetings the U.S. Marine Corps offers to new recruits. The Marines have a well-known onboarding program called boot camp. For 13 solid weeks, an all-encompassing 24/7 experience is provided in which an ordinary human being is transformed into a marine—a person with a unique set of values and skills, a person so connected to the Marine Corps, its mission and every other marine that this person is now ready to walk in the line of fire and win battles. That’s what I call a greeting.

The Marines have a dangerous, difficult job that doesn’t pay much. Despite that, the organization builds 40,000 new marines every year with a washout rate that is so low it can hardly be measured. Learn a lesson from the most effective employer of 18- to 22-year-olds in the Western world. When thinking about shaping the orientation process for new young talent, think about how to emulate the boot-camp approach. Obstacle courses, firing ranges and mandatory push-ups in the mud are not necessary. What matters is replicating the intensity, the connection to the mission, the feeling of shared experience and belonging to a group, the steady learning and the constant challenge. It is about taking young workers seriously on day one and every day after that.

Take Time to Teach

Here’s the good news: not everything (or anything really) must be turned into a computer game to plug into the learning needs of Gen Ys and Zs. They want the latest and greatest technology, but you should not conclude that today’s young people only want to learn from computers. They also want to learn from you.

Here is a great example that an engineering group leader from a nuclear weapons research laboratory shared:

I learned from the mechanics here who are short-staffed. They teach new mechanics to do one simple task very well. Then after the new mechanics do that task for a few days, they add another simple task, and so on.

After a few weeks, the new mechanics have a dozen things they can do pretty well. They are full-fledged members of the team, but with a much smaller repertoire. The really ambitious ones keep adding one skill after another and build pretty big repertoires within a few months.

So, I decided to do that with my new project engineers. I give them one tiny piece of the project. I’ll sit with them and teach, then let them have a tiny piece of work. When they get that tiny piece of work done, I’ll teach them...
another piece. And another. It is very effective with young engineers. They actually like it this way. They are doing less, but they feel like they are doing more.

It may be high-tech work they are doing in a nuclear weapons lab, but this is low-tech training at its best. You can train them the old-fashioned way in short-term stages that track directly with adjustments in their day-to-day responsibilities. Every new task turns into a proving ground, which enables them to demonstrate proficiency and earn more immediate responsibility.

Create intensity, connection to the mission, a sense of belonging to a larger group and constant challenge. Simplify complex roles, then rebuild by teaching one tiny piece at a time. The more you encourage them to learn and leverage information, ideas and techniques while they work, the better they will do their jobs.

Teach them how to set priorities and act on those priorities from the top down. Help them eliminate time wasters. Help them learn to live by a schedule. Teach them how to make and follow a plan; to take notes and use checklists; the values of good workplace citizenship; and the habits of critical thinking. Teach them the art of constant critical self-evaluation.

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Conclusion
Overall, when managing new young talent, you may need to say, “When you work with me, on any task for any period of time, these are my ground rules.” Establish a regular time and place for one-on-one meetings. Be systematic, honest and positive. Keep asking them what exact actions and steps they plan to take. What can you do to improve? What do you need to revise and adjust?

Keep close track of their performance. Establish what they must do at every step so that they earn more of what they need and want. Make the quid pro quo explicit. Turn every request and demand into opportunities for them to go the extra mile and earn special performance-based rewards.

Follow these tips and you will likely turn dissatisfaction into reasons why young professionals will stay and work harder than ever.

Bruce Tulgan is an internationally recognized expert on young people in the workplace. He is an advisor to business leaders worldwide and the author/coauthor of numerous books including Managing Generation X, It’s Okay To Be the Boss and Not Everyone Gets a Trophy. Since founding the management training firm RainmakerThinking in 1993, he has been a sought-after keynote speaker and seminar leader. Follow him on Twitter @brucetulgan, or reach him at bruce@rainmakerthinking.com.