

ENGAGING GENERATIONS

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The Good Wife

Recently I received an email with a curious article attached: "The Good Wife's Guide," from a 1955, edition of *Housekeeping Monthly*, presented 12 points to help women meet the expectations of a 1950s marriage. I was appalled reading the various behaviors expected of a good wife. Here I am, 30 years old, recently engaged, looking forward to my future role as a wife—but after reading this article I wanted to run for the nearest border! (Though the article's contents may have been true to the '50s, it is unclear whether it was ever actually published or if it is a later fabrication: see www.snopes.com/language/document/goodwife.asp.)

As my adrenaline level returned to normal, I realized how quickly our way of life can change just over a few short generations. For example, my grandmother was the "ideal" middle-class, mostly white 1950s wife. Like most of her Radio Generation peers, she sacrificed everything to be a good wife and mother. For example, she got up fifteen minutes earlier than my grandfather to set his slippers on the register, ensuring that when he woke up he would step into warm slippers to start his day. "Not enough time" was never an excuse you heard from her: she cared for six children and ran the entire household without a nanny or housecleaner; there was no McDonald's around the corner; and she had no vehicle to run to town when she needed something. When she worked for pay, it was work she could do for others from her own home. She always described her life as hard, simple, and extremely peaceful.

My mother—in the true manner of Baby Boomers and their need for change—did not fit this 1950s mold. There were many days when she let the housework or cooking slide to play and have fun with us kids; dinner was not always on the table by 6:00 when dad came home; the laundry sometimes sat a day or two so that she could spend time with friends and family. Mom worked part-time once we were in school to help with household expenses, but she was always home when school got out. Like my grandmother, she ran the house on her own, with a small amount of help from my father. Her saving grace was that she had only two kids and lived in walking distance of the grocery store and our small-town restaurant. My mom always said she never understood how her mother managed everything, and she believed she would have never survived in those days.

As for the next generation, the mold my grandmother fit into so well is now shattered. I have the type of job that requires long hours and frequent travel—I'm the quintessential Gen Xer. The notion of having dinner on the table any day but Sunday is foreign to me. My fiancé and I eat a lot of meals on the road; I'm not sure what I would do without the convenience

Generational Core Values

As the largest generation in history, the Baby Boomers took precedence on the world stage, with their own children deep in their shadow. As a cohort that embraced change—perhaps because they had unprecedented freedom to do so—and ambitions of greater economic status more than any previous generation, they created a world for their children that lacked the stability of their own childhoods. Two working parents, focused less on the nuclear family and more internally on themselves, and the creation of leisure opportunities through technology with an impact on both workplace and social existence shaped a generation with a significantly different culture. Where their parents looked at the world as a team-building experience, Generation X started in a competitive mode with a sense that nothing lasts forever—certainly not job loyalty on the part of either employer or employee—and that change is rapid and expected, particularly in the world of computer technology.

It appears that Boomers and Gen X set the stage for two important core values among their Generation Y offspring and brethren. We believe this heritage to be a direct effect of Generation Y's reaction to Baby Boomers' values. First is a stronger sense of family (high school seniors in 1992 were twice as likely as those in 1972 to want to live close to family, and Generation Y is thought to be even more family-oriented). Second is an upbringing that is not only multicultural (including ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation) but is an integrated lifestyle, rather than one of simply sharing the same space.

The personal legacies of one generation to another can be traced through these differing cultures, through the transfer of core value systems, and through the impact of events and technology. The sacrifices of the Radio Generation led to Baby Boomers claiming all that was offered them, which created a sense among Generation X of not much left to attain (perhaps because they started at a "higher" level) and a perceived need to reach those heights immediately. A combination of all that came before was the result with Generation Y: a desire to get into the world more quickly (evidenced by increased high school dropout rates), a need for heightened stimuli for motivation, and a focus on family nearly as strong as that of their great-grandparents.

The social legacy of core values is even more clearly visible, with the progression of technology and events molding class structure, the workforce, and the acceptance of diversity. Though the pace of change may differ between urban and rural settings and between various geographical regions, the generational impact is discernible everywhere.

The Good Wife, con't.

of a nearby fast food place and a large department store. I still manage my household, but all too often I find myself out of clean clothes because I haven't taken time to do the laundry. My refrigerator is often empty because I prefer seeing my friends and family to buying groceries, even though the store is only two miles from my house. Life typically feels like a chaotic mess, but it somehow works—although it drives my mother insane. She believes I can still be a great wife and mother someday, although when I am sure there will be no resemblance to the lifestyles of my mother or grandmother—which is fine since I am marrying a modern man who has no problem sharing the household duties.

Though the stereotypical housebound, self-sacrificing wife of the '50s is easy to look down on from today's vantage point, we maintain that what one generation merely tolerates, the next embraces—and this chronology of wedded life supports that notion. Wives worked from home long before Generation X reinvented the concept for the new millennium—as far back as the 17th century in the United States, in fact, when women supplemented household income by collecting and selling eggs or sewing clothes.

World War II put women into the work force in great numbers, only to be sent back into the home to make room for the men returning from military service: tolerated only to be later embraced by those born during the subsequent boom. Sacrifice for the good of the family was no longer as focused on making the household run smoothly once wives reentered the workplace, brought in consistent earnings, and bore fewer children. The definition of "sacrifice" changed for Baby Boomers, who in large part perceived good parenting as being good providers. Women of the X Generation embraced the concept of becoming professionals and created yet another definition for "sacrifice," as something that happens at the workplace more than in the home, and introducing the concept of work-life balance (anathema to Boomers, who interpret leaving the office at the close of business as a lack of dedication to the job). For me, it's a little scary to imagine what marriage in future generations will be like. The differences between my grandmother's family life and mine are drastic. What if I have a daughter? Think about the poor guy that ends up with her! For now though, after reading "The Good Wife's Guide," I almost feel sorry for my 21st-century fiancé.

Generational Core Values, con't.

Values are subjective reactions to the world around us. They guide and mold our options and behavior; they are developed early in life and are very resistant to change. Our values—the product of direct experiences with people who are important to us, particularly parents—define for us what is right and what is wrong. They tell us what we should believe, regardless of any evidence or lack thereof, and they are a direct reflection of generational—hence, cultural—differences that transcend geography and time.

Reading Recommendation

Johnny Bunko's Parachute Is Pink

This may be the oddest book recommendation you'll ever read, because I'm going to keep the book's details a secret. If you're not yet familiar with Gen Y's answer to *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Richard Bolles' career-development bible), then you're in for the same surprise I found in opening up *The Adventures of Johnny Bunko: The Last Career Guide You'll Ever Need*. If you're responsible for hiring in your firm or recruiting volunteers for your organization, you **need** Daniel H. Pink's book, published in paperback in April 2008.

Johnny Bunko, is being touted as the job guide for Generation Y. Though most people in older generational cohorts wouldn't consider Gen Y employees having been in the workforce long enough to conclude that they are stuck in dead-end jobs, that scenario is what this book has been created to address. "I can't believe I have to re-check the numbers on every single one of these statements," Johnny complains as he labors after-hours. He finds himself, as do many Gen Y employees, having followed all the advice he got along the way from his parents, teachers, and counselors, yet now treading water in a job that bores him to tears.

Whatever your thoughts on the validity of the Gen Y job perspective, *Johnny Bunko* is key reading for those who hire or work with Gen Y personnel—not only for what it covers, but how.

