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## Matter for Debate

# In the time of significant generational diversity — Surgical leadership must step up!



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## ABSTRACT

The diverse attitudes and motivations of surgeons and surgical trainees within different age groups present an important challenge for surgical leaders and educators. These challenges to surgical leadership are not unique, and other industries have likewise needed to grapple with how best to manage these various age groups. The authors will herein explore management and leadership for surgeons in a time of age diversity, define generational variations within “Baby-Boomer”, “Generation X” and “Generation Y” populations, and identify work ethos concepts amongst these three groups. The surgical community must understand and embrace these concepts in order to continue to attract a stellar pool of applicants from medical school. By not accepting the changing attitudes and motivations of young trainees and medical students, we may disenfranchise a high percentage of potential future surgeons. Surgical training programs will fill, but will they contain the highest quality trainees?

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## Introduction

The diverse attitudes and motivations of surgeons and surgical trainees within different age groups present an important challenge for surgical leaders and educators. These challenges to surgical leadership are not unique, and other industries have likewise needed to grapple with how best to manage these various age groups. Jenny Floren (2010) has asserted that “Generation Y has created a need for a cultural overhaul that has not been this dramatic since women entered the workforce en masse”.<sup>1</sup> The authors will herein explore

management and leadership for surgeons in a time of age diversity, define generational variations within “Baby-Boomer”, “Generation X” and “Generation Y” populations, and identify work ethos concepts amongst these three groups. The surgical community must understand and embrace these concepts in order to continue to attract a stellar pool of applicants from medical school. By not accepting the changing attitudes and motivations of young trainees and medical students, we may disenfranchise a high percentage of potential future surgeons. Surgical training programs will fill, but will they contain the highest quality trainees?

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## Generational definitions

Within surgical departments are various members who have grown up in very different circumstances based on their age. Many of the younger trainees do not remember the Soviet Union. They do not remember when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of Great Britain or Archie Gemmill's outstanding goal against Holland. The first U.S. President they can remember is Bill Clinton. Their tastes in everything from music to literature, to what to do with their free time are very different from most of the surgical leaders of today. The workplace that we inhabit is confounded by many different views, and many of the difficulties that arise today are value-diverse issues based on generational differences. First we must define these population groups. Baby Boomers were born between 1945 and 1964; Generation X were born between 1965 and 1980; and Generation Y, accounting for most of the younger trainees, were born after 1980. The authors of this article are nearly derived from each of these generational groups. We recognize the dramatic differences between these age groups. Sociologists have emphasized that these differences are among the largest age related societal changes ever.

As we explore the differences between these generational groups, it is important to note that these are generalizations and as such they by no means apply to all members of these generational groups. In addition, there are gray areas between these age groups so that often early members of one group are often more similar to the later members of the previous group than the later members of their own. One must also remember that we tend to recruit people who are similar to ourselves. So, even though we may feel that the surgical trainees are not what they were twenty or twenty-five years ago, they probably are more similar to us than some of their colleagues who progress to medical or other specialties. So surgeons and surgical trainees in particular, may not reflect the generational tendencies of their generational group to the same degree as others. However, we need to be careful not to miss out on training the best future surgeons because of being "out of touch" with these generational differences.

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## Age diversity and their origins

One must understand that the differences between members of these three age groups are more complex than simple variances in age. Because of differences in culture, parenting styles, and educational systems over time, the members of these three generational groups have been raised in very different worlds. The result is that each group varies significantly in their social and political values, communication styles, motivational issues, methods of interaction, and expectations of their leaders. The values and work ethos of these different groups also differ significantly as well as how they view each other's priorities. Many Baby Boomers and Generation X members believe that Generation Y's have no work ethic – they're just a bunch of "slackers." They don't want to attend meetings after 4:00 pm, they have "another life", they have other things they want to do. Many members of Generation Y believe that Generation X members are whiners, and

in return Generation X members often think that Generation Y is arrogant and entitled. Both Generation X and Generation Y think that the Baby Boomers are workaholics who expect to work excessive hours. While many of these perceptions are too broad and overstated, true differences among the generations fuel these sentiments. Variations in priorities, motivators, and expectations are very much real among these groups (Table 1).

Some of these variations are likely to be due to major differing styles of parenting experienced by the members of the generational groups. Baby Boomers were raised by parents who lived through World War II. These parents made tremendous sacrifices during the war and therefore viewed their children not as perfect little people, but as people who should be raised to work hard. The Baby Boomers were raised to believe that money equaled security and that loyalty to employers was an important and noble quality. Many Baby Boomers believe that hard work can overcome many difficulties. Many Generation X'ers and Generation Y'ers view hard work as an inconvenience. Working extra hours does not glean respect from Generation X or Generation Y as it does for Baby Boomers.

Generation X were raised by parents at a time when the dominant Western world-view had changed to post-modernism. In the post-modern world-view, truth is expected to be relative to one's background and experiences, and therefore there is no absolute truth. This led naturally to questioning authority among Generation X. While the modern world-view of Baby Boomer parents had held to a unifying purpose for life such as a God-given design, the post-modern world-view holds that random events lead to present reality and there is no unifying or bigger purpose to life. This led naturally to a stubborn individualism among Generation X. Thus Generation X members are much more likely to wish to work alone, focus on one's own skills and development, be less loyal to employers, and be less likely to accept direction simply because it comes from one in authority.

The parents of Generation Y raised them at a time when the self-esteem movement became prominent. This movement held to the view that a child's success in life rises and falls with his self-esteem. This is the movement that produced every child at a sporting event receiving a trophy, turning off scoreboards if one team was too far ahead of another, no failing grades – just "deferred success," and the like. Homes became much more child-centric under this movement. Thus Generation Y children were often immersed in praise regardless of merit and this has led to a more narcissistic viewpoint among this group. One can imagine how Baby Boomer leaders react to Generation Y trainees who seem to expect a pat on the back for doing things the Baby Boomers thought were just a normal part of their job and training. Please keep in mind the popular song for early childhood education "I am special, look at me". That says it all!!

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## Workplace ethos

Comparison of workplace attitudes and approaches to training, work and profession vary considerably between the three populations. Looking at work drivers, the Baby Boomers

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