

# Generational Differences in the Military

A primer on the discussion

by LT Gregory Hazlett, CHC, USN

I had an interesting conversation a few weeks ago. A frustrated SNCO vented about how much praise and supervision Marines require these days. He said he felt like today's junior Marine cannot even go to the field or turn a wrench without expecting an award for it. Our discussion quickly turned to how different generations function in the military and how today's young Marines are amazingly positioned to do extraordinary things for the Corps.

In *Leadership* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1978), leadership scholar J.M. Burns noted that leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on Earth. This sentiment is equally valid when it comes to the discussion of generational differences. Terms like "Baby Boomer," "Gen X," "Gen Y," and "Millennials" fill media outlets and the blogosphere. With so much discussion about who Gen Xers are and what Millennials think, one must wonder why an understanding of generational differences remains largely undiscussed in a military context. In this article, I will argue that it is incumbent on military leaders to know and understand the uniqueness of the two primary generational cohorts in the military today. Furthermore, I will argue that the studying of generational differences lines up with a Marine Corps that values diversity and communication. As leaders, it is our responsibility to learn how to effectively communicate and to understand the diversity between different generational cohorts.

**>LT Hazlett is a doctoral candidate currently working toward a doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology. LT Hazlett has been a Navy Chaplain for nine years and has made two desert deployments with the NMCB 74, two 5th Fleet deployments on USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) and has served with the USCG on the Oregon coast. He is currently assigned to 2d Maintenance Battalion, 2d MLG. His vast diversity of tours has given him a unique perspective on military leadership, communicating to Millennials, and organizational effectiveness.**



**Leadership is done with people, and Marines value diversity and communication. (Photo by SSGt Gabriela Garcia.)**

A generational cohort is defined as a group of individuals who are roughly the same age and experience the same cultural milestones. Generational cohorts also share common tastes, attitudes, and decisive social circumstances. Cultural anthropologists have long established the definition of a generation

to be roughly 20 years (based on the historic age families start to birth and raise offspring). Following this rule of thumb, each cohort consists of a 20 to 26 year period of time. Researchers, such as Strauss and Howe, have observed this pattern as far back as the 1500s. Cultural milestones, such as



**This cohort is roughly the same age and has similar experiences.** (Photo by LCpl Koby I. Saunders.)

the Great Depression, World War II, the advent of television, the landing of Americans on the moon, and the creation of the Internet all affect how a specific generation of youth develop. These milestones both speak into and help to define how each *Saeculum* mature in unique ways. In an overly simplistic example, youth raised during the Great Depression were infinitely more frugal as adults than their post-World War II children.

Here is the problem: each generation interprets events through a grid based on their unique generational understanding. Consider how each generation understands leadership authority. Imagine if respect for a leader could be seen as a bucket.

The first generational group to review is the Baby Boomers. Boomers were born between 1946 and 1968. Due to their age they are a relatively small demographic in the military. The military, which functions very similar to a typical baby boomer organization, expects the bucket to be full. Boomers respect policies, structure, and value hierarchy. Boomers are crusaders for their cause. This crusader mentality led Boomers to develop into very dichotomous subcultures. Anti-establishment hippies and corporate ladder climbing yuppies both came from this genera-

tion. In the military context, Boomers' culture would say you do not have to respect the leader, but you do have to respect the position. Ergo, Marines stand when a senior person enters the room. For most Boomers the bucket of positional authority remains full unless something dramatic happens to empty it.

The second cohort is Gen X. Gen Xers were born between 1968 and 1979. Gen Xers were the first generation in American history whose parents had society's permission not to want them. Birth control and abortions increased in the 1970s. The Carter administration's economic policies required many families to have both parents working outside the home. Widely publicized scandals involving religious, political, and sports figures shattered their view of role models. Xers grew, at best, independent and, at worse, abandoned. Inherently, they distrust authority, and consequently, Xers start with an empty bucket. If they elect to give a leader their respect they will be fanatically loyal to that leader. When a Xer chooses to trust a leader their authority bucket becomes full. In most cases, due to their loyalty, the bucket will remain full.

The last group is the Millennials. Born between 1980 and 2000, Millennials were raised in a hyper-inflated

world of self-esteem, parental involvement, and cooperation. Millennials, like Xers, start with buckets that are empty. They too chose which leader they will respect and which they will merely obey. However, unlike Xers, the Millennials bucket has a large hole in the bottom which constantly drains out the contents. To lead a Millennial, a leader must continually earn their respect. Millennials are the most confident, tech savvy, and entitled generation in American history. They joined the military fully expecting to be seen as an active participant in the unit. Not merely trigger pullers or wrench turners, they want to be heard and allowed to be innovative. It is hard to understand that a Millennial has the guts, or gall, to think a leader's job is to provide for them.

This article would be remiss if it did not spend some time discussing what Xers and Millennials bring to the Corps. Gen Xers bring numerous strengths, such as their pragmatic realism, to the workplace. They are self-reliant, fun loving, and strive for work-life balance. The most glaring struggle for military Xers is their informal and cavalier approach to authority. The fastest way for a leader to empty their bucket is to be perceived as dishonest. Xers will not be forced to "drink the Kool-Aid," so be completely up front with them.

Millennials are arguably the most tech savvy, knowledge infused, confident generation America has ever known. Additionally, they are the most diverse and inclusive generation in American history. Millennials were raised in a culture of continual affirmation and social connectedness. The greatest motivation for Millennials is praise and recognition. They must feel appreciated and that their work has meaning to the greater mission.

As situational leadership creator Ken Blanchard puts it, leadership is not something we do *to* people, it is something we do *with* people. The understanding of generational differences is what we do with people. It is a critical skill for military leaders who value diversity and communication.

