

THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS

Leading Law Enforcement's Generation X

A Proposed Management Research Project  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation  
Leadership Command College

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March 2000

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to identify who Generation X is, what shapes their thinking, how to motivate them, and how to lead them in Law Enforcement. Generation X are those individuals born from 1961 to 1983. Sometimes referred to as X'ers, they are the children of the "Baby Boomer" Generation. Society refers to them as technology lead, labeled the "Me Generation" for the apparent selfishness, the "Ostrich Generation" for their perceived ability to hide from reality, and the "Loser or Slacker Generation" for their perceived lack of contribution to society.

X'ers think of themselves as highly excitable, bringing with them new perspectives about the job. They seek to make change happen. Marked by a strong desire to make meaningful contributions, X'ers thrive in systems where team accomplishments are rewarded. X'ers see themselves as team players, who care a great deal about their teammates. They are not tied to traditional values of the job, but value family over job.

So how do supervisors motivate and lead them. X'ers get bored with routine tasks, so keep the job interesting. X'ers are motivated by challenge. They like multi-task jobs, and when completed, they like to be acknowledged for a job well done. Get to know them as individuals, their likes and dislikes. Do they have families, or are they single. Allow them to communicate their ideas to the organization. They want to be part of the team, but they also want to feel they contribute to the team. X'ers are here to stay and will replace us, so we need to train them to take over when we are gone.

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## INTRODUCTION

Within law enforcement organizations throughout the United States there has been an invasion. A new breed of police officer is invading Law enforcement. Police administration views this new breed as part of what's wrong with America today. Heard throughout organizations today are "who do these kids think they are", they do not deserve special treatment, and "me, me, me". Supervisors are referring to recruits belonging to "Generation X" those individuals born between 1963 and 1977. (Reiter, Michael S.1999).

The purpose of this paper is to inform administrators on who this new Generation X is. Understanding Generation X is important because they are the leaders of tomorrow. Administrators must come to know and understand what shapes Generation X officers thinking. Just importantly, what motivates them.

This new population of individuals is called Generation X. They are sometimes referred to as the "Me Generation", or X'ers. Police administrators are confused, bewildered, and often angry with this group of individuals coming on the job. Too often, this animosity occurs because administrators and supervisors have not taken the time to learn what makes the new officers act the way they do. With new officers of Generation X as recruits, comes headaches and negative emotions associated with change. (Ferrence, 1997). These include friction between the ranks, supervisors who are frustrated by having to explain directives and orders that were never challenged in the past. There is also animosity by senior officers who see the X'ers vying for job rewards before they put in their time. The X'ers laugh at old fashion concepts such as seniority, time in grade, and time in service. The argument's sometimes made is the

demand for special privileges, working certain shifts, overtime, and that the job is secondary to their lives.

The sources used for this project research paper are books, articles, and the Internet. The intended audience is administration and managers in law enforcement. Administration may come to recognize that there are some very important attributes these men and women bring with them to law enforcement. Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the way police administrators deal with these "kids" will be either smooth or rough. How "leaders" lead Generation X into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will determine how smoothly the transition will occur.

The intended outcome of this project research paper is to facilitate an understanding of Generation X officers. To produce a better officer and leader for the future, and to assist supervisors in knowing how to lead Generation X into the "New Millennium".

### **HISTORICAL, LEGAL & THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

The first use of Generation X was by Billy Idols' rock band in 1979. (Rollingstone.lycos.com 1999). The title Generation X first appeared in a 1960s paperback in London. Referring to the youth of today and their seeming non-conformity to social mores and customs, Douglas Coupland dubbed them Generation X in his 1991 novel "Generation X". Kept up by the media, in the attempts to explain the generational differences between "boomers" and this new group, the title became almost explanatory in nature.

Labeled as the "Me Generation" for the apparent selfishness, the "Ostrich Generation" for their perceived ability to hide from reality, and the "Loser or Slacker Generation" for their perceived lack of contribution to society, these young people were

born from 1963 and 1977. (Reiter, 1999 ) . Other research shows them born from 1961 and 1983. (www. Youth.sa.com, 2000 )

Most Xers are the children of Baby Boomer, parents who were deeply involved with their own "selves". Baby Boomers worked by day and raised consciousness by candlelight. It is found that baby boomers were unable to give their children full attention-leaving them alone much of the time. Baby Boomers parents listened to Dr. Spock-they were permissive, they gave them room to explore. While both parents got ready for work every morning, Xers made cereal for breakfast and stared at photos of their peers on milk cartons, their own MIAs.(Baby Boomers referred to MIAs as military personnel missing during war time). (Tulgan 1995:50).

Hence, the word "latchkey kid". This is a generation that has arrived home to an empty house with both mom and dad working, or a single parent home where the remaining parent has to work to survive. Nothing is more important to this generation than relationships. Growing up as children of divorce, starved for closeness and intimacy as the family deteriorated. Abusive, neglectful, busy, absent, non-emotional and working parents have no time for relationships. Because of being deprived of intimacy these individuals value it more highly. Probably one of the most defining characteristics of the X'ers is their comfort with technology. Raised on mass media, Pac-Man, Nintendo, and computers, X'ers aren't awed or frightened by technology the way Boomers are. Information and its component parts are natural to them. Computers, instead of being a hindrance to them, are a necessary and fun tool. They can't imagine what it was to be with out them. (www. Youth.sa.com, 2000).

What do X'ers think of themselves? Highly excitable, the X'ers bring with them a fresh perspective about events. Change is not to be feared, it is sought. Where the Boomer fears change, the X'ers actively seeks to cause it. X'ers don't have a comfort zone, whereas Boomers fear getting out of theirs. Mistakes are anathema to Boomers, where as X'ers just shrug and then try again with another approach. They see themselves as the real "problem-solvers. A challenge stimulates them to high levels of productivity, whereas not "rocking the boat" is boring to them. When bored, they will actively seek ways to use their energy. (Ferrence, 1997).

Marked by a strong desire to make meaningful contributions, X'ers thrive in systems where team accomplishments are rewarded. X'ers see themselves as the ultimate team players and are more likely to care about the successes of team mates. There is also willingness to switch teams if it is in their best interest to do so.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In conducting research for this paper, numerous online web sites were reviewed along with books, and articles written by social scientists who were attempting to describe what is believed to be significant change in behavior between generations. It is found however that there was not a clearly established set of criteria for identifying and working with this "new breed" of employees. It is believed to be a serious overgeneralization on the part of the social scientists. Some literature indicates researchers were trying to force fit the target group into specific categories of traits. ( Ferrence, 1997).

The research is remarkably consistent in depicting X'ers as a stereotypical generation of less qualified, unenthusiastic, complaining but creative group. This

description was a common one throughout the material, almost as if all the authors had used the same resource book for their material. I feel that no one group of people could possibly fall into such a narrow definition. For instance, although many X'ers did come from broken homes, were in fact latch key children and had to entertain themselves, this clearly did not apply to all, or possibly even the majority of them. The demographics of our society don't fit the formula. Not all X'ers had bad childhood's, not all had to entertain themselves while waiting for Mom or Dad to come home, and not all those did exhibit characteristics as stereotyped by the authors of the research material. (Ferrence, 1997).

The researchers and authors seem to suggest that most of the Boomers who raised X'ers were ineffective parents or had broken home or dysfunctional families. Yet studies tell us that this isn't true. The percentage increase of working mothers and fathers, or single parent families didn't include all, or even a majority, of the Boomer families. For every X'er who had family problems, logic say's that there is an equal number or more that didn't. (Ferrence, 1997).

A significant number of X'ers came from good stable family situations, received proper parenting, discipline, love and values. Not all of the broken homes or single parent families were a bad influence on the children. A significant number of the X'ers received what they needed to become good contributing members of society. Even among families that had problems there were varying degrees of success in the raising of the X'ers. It seemed absurd to lump all the X'ers into such a narrow and constricted stereotype. (Ferrence, 1997).



A possible reason for the shift from Boomers to X'ers is the movement from an industrial society to an information society. This part of the research was not found. Society has become more dependent on electronics media's and information than anything else in history. This has impacted all facets of society, from education to personal use of time, from line worker to manager. (Ferrence, 1997).

This author credits the X'ers with making the changes in the workplace that have come about. Some of the changes seen in our police departments are, newer equipment, bulletproof vests, newer communications, and computers. However, the facts don't seem to support that concept. Participative management, quality teams and circles, power down, shared decision making, all started while the X'ers were still watching Saturday morning cartoons. The Boomers had complained very long and loud about wanting these things and they had already initiated the forces of change.

## **RELEVANT ISSUES**

There are four key issues that need to be addressed in this research. Who is Generation X, what shapes their thinking, how do we motivate them, and how do we lead them in law enforcement in the new millennium?

The first issue to address is who is Generation X? Generation X are the individuals born from 1963 to 1981. (Reiter, 1999). Other research showed they were born from 1961 to 1983. ([www.youth.sa.com](http://www.youth.sa.com), 2000). Some individuals will fall into both generations. Generation X are the children of the generation known as Baby Boomer, born from 1946 to 1964. ([www.BBQ.com](http://www.BBQ.com), 2000).

Labeled as the "Me Generation" for their selfishness, "Ostrich Generation" for the ability to hide from reality, and "Loser or Slacker Generation" for their perceived lack of

contribution to society. (Ferrence, 1997). Also referred to as X'ers, these individuals come from homes with both parents working, or single parent homes where the remaining parent worked to survive. X'ers were left at home to care for themselves which brought forth the term "latchkey kid". ([www.home.pix.com](http://www.home.pix.com), 2000).

If left at home due to parents working, then what shaped X'ers thinking? When X'ers arrived home to an empty house, they turned their attention to TV, videos, pac-man video games, and computers. They are a visual generation. ([www.home.pix.com](http://www.home.pix.com), 2000). One of their most defining characteristics is their comfort with technology. Raised on mass media, X'ers aren't frightened by technology the way Boomers are. (Ferrence, 1997).

Relationships are very important to X'ers. They feel they must fit in, this is especially true in small groups united by common interests and mutual acceptance. These groups act as a replacement family and offer a sense of belonging, which wasn't found in their own families. ([www.home.pix](http://www.home.pix), 2000).

Another characteristic that shapes Generation X thinking is a desire for status, power and money, which is why they are impatient at times and demanding. Boomers were content to wait their turn, but X'ers are competitive and want it now. To them success is constantly improving their position within the organization. Recognition for their success is how they satisfy themselves. Patience and organizational thinking are no part of their values. (Ferrence, 1997).

How are Generation X motivated and lead? Trusting Generation X police officers to make the best decision possible and take responsibility for their decisions results in higher performance, greater commitment and a sense of belonging in the organization.

Innovation and creativity normally include some level of risk. Supervisors must focus on rewards and not discipline. Supervisors should encourage dissonant information and individual opinions. (Reiter, 1999). I have found that if you take an interest in X'ers as individuals, explain how they contribute to the team they will feel they belong with the organization and will do a better job.

## **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this research was to identify Generation X, what shapes their thinking, and how to motivate and lead them into the new millennium.

Who is Generation X? They are the individuals born from 1961 to 1983. They are a generation of misunderstood individuals that have been labeled as the "Me Generation", commonly referred to as X'ers. X'ers are the children of the Baby Boomer generation. While both parents worked, X'ers came home to an empty house. When at home they cared for themselves with little structure in their day. X'ers grew up comfortable with technology and are impatient in their quest for money, status and power. They are uncomfortable with paramilitary organizations, discipline and the chain of command. X'ers are not tied to the traditional values of the job, and organizational loyalty is not perceived as important. They value family over job. Generation X is stereotyped as a group of grumblers who are different from their counterparts, the Boomers. Yet, police managers or supervisors can tell you that Boomers have griped and grumbled their way through the past 26 years in much the same manner. In addition, some of the characteristics that were used to typify the X'er were found in segments of the Boomers.

As for all X'ers exhibiting behavior that managers and supervisors view as negative, some are knowledgeable, capable, hard working, and willing to go the extra mile. Granted a segment may argue and challenge supervisors, but there are an equal number who are dedicated to making the organization a success and to having a successful career on the job. The X'ers have actually just continued what Boomers started. Managers and supervisors today have forgotten what they were like as new recruits in their departments.

So, how do we motivate and lead Generation X officers? . X'ers get bored with routine tasks, so keep the job interesting. X'ers are motivated by challenge. They like multi-task jobs and when the job is completed, they like to be acknowledged for a job well done. This author believes that everyone, X'ers and Boomers, both like the satisfaction of hearing they have done a good job. It makes them feel they are an asset to the organization. Take time to find out who X'ers are. As supervisors, we cannot lead someone if we do not know him or her. Know their likes and dislikes. Do they have families, are they single? The more you as a supervisor know about these individuals, the easier you will find it to understand and lead them.

X'er officers are the future leaders in law enforcement, and they are here to stay, and Boomers need to except that fact. X'er officers will replace us when we are gone, and what supervisors do to encourage, train, and motivate them today will reflect what type of leaders they will become in the future.

As a supervisor of Generation X officers, I have found communication and listening is the key to dealing with Generation X officers. They want to be a part of the organization and contribute to the program to make it more efficient, but sometimes we

do not want to hear it. Take the time to hear it. No, take time to "Listen" to it. Never discourage ideas from these officers; remember they are just trying to make things better for all officers in an organization.

Find out what training the officers are lacking and take an interest in them. Try to get them the training. More training means more knowledge and the more knowledge the bigger the asset they become for the organization.

Allow for time off, whenever possible, or as the need arises. Remember family comes first, and if a conflict is affecting their lives, until that conflict is resolved they are not their best. Once the problem has been resolved, they will give you a good days work. Create a climate of flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to change within the organization. Set high standards of performance and hold "all" employees to them. Develop and expect effective leadership on the part of all your supervisors and administrators. Finally, train supervisors and administrators about X'ers.

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