



**Aitken  
Leadership  
Group**

# Who's Next?

## Thoughts On Raising the Next Generation of Leaders in Engineering

Leaders in American engineering firms are facing the challenge of how best to develop their young talent. Despite all the wisdom that demographics experts are sharing with us, most leaders are still a bit dazed in response to the challenge of developing — let alone attracting and keeping — the brightest talent of the Millennial Generation.

Born 1977 through 1994, and currently about 70 million strong, Generation Y is big. It is huge, and yet, in its lifetime so far, its many members have known only safety. Gen Y has been a protected generation, raised in an era when the safety of children was of paramount importance to society. Not surprising, then, that the single biggest complaint we hear about young professionals is that they are 'entitled.'

Well, who entitled them? And what if it isn't really entitlement? What if it's just an undaunted sense of self-worth mixed with a startling lack of cynicism?

Generation Y is not an 'ironic' generation, like Generation X which came before it. Gen Y is generally earnest, and willing to go the extra mile — when it matters. And it is the importance of this task of making life matter, as opposed to *just* making a living, that differentiates Gen Y members from their older peers.

Time and again, we have heard senior leaders confess their puzzlement as to why their young employees just 'don't seem to care' about appearing to climb the organizational ladder. Why they don't try to impress their supervisors with their sterling work ethic? Why they don't leave last? The answer, we believe, is that Gen Y defines personal success as doing work that matters — that aligns with their values — as opposed to doing work that only garners accolades or material reward. For Gen Y, values are primary. Material success is also important, but it is not quite as important as doing good in the world.

The trick for senior leaders who are thinking about leadership development for these whippersnappers is to create an environment wherein their Gen Y employees do *enough* of the stuff that *does* really matter to them. Full stop. The key word: enough. In our experience Gen Y folks need just enough wetland restoration, green energy think tanks, super-light next generation windmill blades, etc. Whatever it is, they need to do just enough of it — and they feel on purpose in their lives.

When Gen-Y gets their *meaning* needs met, and associate the opportunity to do that important work with the firm, their loyalty is reinforced. They are then able to see the firm as a place where they belong.

So what matters to Generation Y? Well, it's probably not much different than what really matters to anyone: giving back to the planet and to the species, good work/life balance, creating better solutions to perennial problems, meeting their potential, happiness, a strong family. Given the space and time to clear the mental clutter of day-to-day urgencies, we all more or less value the same things in life. What makes the younger professional generation today different is that they have been raised to keep these values — these ingredients to a 'life worth living' — front and center in their minds.

If an engineering firm wants to gain the commitment and harness the energy of Generation Y, it must cultivate a culture that is adequately aligned with this generation's way of thinking about life. It must also allow for activities where Gen Y can get *just enough* of the stuff that really matters to them. There are many ways to do this, and we will be offering some examples in future letters. In the interim, please contact us to talk about best practices or applications for your firm.

By Geordie Aitken

### Three useful questions for the leader of an AEC firm today:

- 1 What makes the 25 year-olds that work for our firm tick?
- 2 How does our culture — and our strategy — align (or not) with our young employees values and goals?\*
- 3 What is in the way of having even greater alignment with our future leaders?

\*if I don't know, how do I find out?