



# From Taking Hills to **Hanging Out**

Managing the NeXt Generation's  
Need for Trust

By John Burke

John Burke pastors Gateway Church in Austin, Texas and serves as president of the Emerging Leadership Initiative. At age 42, this young baby boomer ministers with and to those we often label as Gen X and Millennials (or as John calls them: the emerging generation). His church is dedicated to creating a come-as-you-are culture to mold a church out of post-Christian people. In his book, *No Perfect People Allowed*, Burke offers ways to bridge the chasm between the church and our postmodern world. CMA asked him to draw from his experience, to help our readers better understand this emerging generation (Gen Xers and Millennials).



I'm convinced that Christian leaders (many being baby boomers) must engage the emerging generation at all levels of leadership. To not pass the baton of leadership means marginalization of the local church and other ministries over the next few years.

Time's running out. Many of us are discovering that our leadership methods and programs, which met with slam-dunk success a few years ago, don't work now. We're baffled. It worked before, why not now? I know this dilemma all too well. Though raised in a boomer world, I've spent most of my ministry reaching the emerging generations.

I remember in the late 80s, "charge the hill" was kind of the ministry mindset in the parachurch organizations I was a part of. People were motivated by a hill to conquer. "Take the hill!" In the 90s, I was a campus minister trying to reach this generation (there were no labels like "GenX" or "Postmoderns" back then). But I found the methods and mindset that motivated boomers didn't motivate this emerging generation. I'd say "CHARGE," and start running up the hill. I'd turn around and they'd all be sitting in a circle at the bottom of the hill.

"What are you doing?" I'd ask.

"We're hanging out," they'd say.

"Well, don't you want to take the hill?"

"No, we kind of want to hang out first."

### **Different Values**

*Taking the hill* versus *hanging out* shows a difference in values. At first, this drove me crazy. Then I began to see that their value-ordering might just be more biblical than what I inherited. The people sitting at the bottom of the hill valued relationships and doing things together. Not that they didn't want to accomplish anything or do anything, but they wanted to be valued as people first, and they wanted to do it together. They didn't want to be used as a means

to the more important end.

I think an important thing for me to say upfront is that we're talking in broad generalities. Not every person is the same. There are trends, but no one I'm dealing with wants to be treated like a statistic. I think there are uniquenesses that make every generation their own culturally distinct group, with some values that reflect God's intentions and others that don't—this includes boomers and emerging generations.

If we're to effectively communicate to this younger culture, we need to consider the factors that have shaped this new generation. We've identified five sociological struggles that greatly affect the way people relate to God, church and each other. We try to keep this in mind as we lead and manage and communicate. This generation struggles with: trust, tolerance, truth, brokenness and aloneness.

With the workplace and ministry environment in mind, I'm going to focus on the struggles with trust, brokenness and aloneness. These three struggles influence staff relationships, even in Christian organizations. In the broader culture, tolerance and truth are significant struggles people have with church and Christianity, but these two have a less pronounced effect in staff circles of Christian organizations.

### **A Hard Time Trusting**

This generation seems to struggle with trust. I think that comes from several things. You have a group of people who grew up with the nuclear family blowing apart. A child born in 1968 faced three times the risk of parental breakup as did a boomer child in 1948.

About 50 percent of those currently under 40 reached age 17 with both biological parents in the house. All kinds of things happen when a family is torn apart. The relational wounds go deep, and they fester beneath the surface into adult years. Many struggle to trust those in authority who may poke at that wound with subtle reminders that this relationship is transactional: "if it doesn't accomplish what I want, it will end."

They often assume the worst as a way to protect the wound. "If I don't expect much, I can't be hurt much." Anything that reeks of "corporate" gets interpreted

as serving the machine rather than valuing people, and might be viewed as bad or impersonal. They assume they'll be used and spit out, because that's the message corporations have conveyed—everything's transactional and based on the personal goals of those in authority. As a result, they're going to be guarded, ready to get kicked, so they're going to be ready to kick back too. You don't get loyalty that way.

I think you do get loyalty when they can trust the people who are leading them. That means boomers understanding, being honest and admitting mistakes. They need to see leaders (authority figures) as real, authentic, vulnerable people who are seeking to serve others out of their own brokenness, who don't just value the product but also the people and the relational process.

When you're working with this generation, reiterate the personal value and vision of what you're doing. Why is each person a valuable, necessary part of the team? What is the greater good that impacts people? How are we doing this together? It's not a number on a goal sheet that motivates, but stories of how one life and then another is changed by what you're doing together. If you establish trust and relational vision, then they'll give themselves wholeheartedly to accomplish the vision.

I say this, not as someone who does this perfectly, but as someone in the middle of dealing with this with my staff. We're in the middle of them confronting me on keeping it balanced right now, moving too fast to feel relationally life-giving.

Submitting to confrontation as a leader is a shift boomers must face to gain trust and lead in a more biblical way. It means asking yourself, "Okay, am I willing to practice servant leadership as Jesus taught (Mark 10:42-45), or will I get defensive because they're questioning my authority?" At times you have to be able to say, "No, it's this way, and by this time, and it's your job." There are times when that would be appropriate. But that should not be the norm, or else you've got a very unmotivated staff.

The better approach is to create a dialogue where you as a leader can take input and listen. They need to feel they

have a voice. When you make a decision, you need to acknowledge that you heard their input, and you need to explain why you made that decision, and why we need a unified front moving forward. *Taking their input seriously and allowing it to shape your decision making is an important part of building trust, so that everyone is moving forward together.*

The trust issue is huge when working with this generation. But I also want to touch on two more struggles I think have significant impact in the workplace.

### **Experiencing Brokenness**

Statistically, this is an incredibly broken generation. Approximately one out of four women growing up was sexually abused by the age of 18. That creates tremendous relational issues. One out of three women has had an abortion. And then there are the men involved in that as well.

Half of this generation will have lived together before marriage if they're under age 40. Most are sexually active and, as a result, one out of four will have a STD (sexually transmitted disease) by age 40.

Pornography is a huge struggle. Those who grew up starting in the early '60s set the all-time U.S. youth records for drunk driving, illicit drug consumption, and suicide. This is the culture of brokenness people have grown up in the midst of, and it affects how they relate.

And, according to George Barna's research, things aren't that morally different for Christians. If these broken areas cannot be brought into the light of Christian community (1 John 1:8-9), confessed (James 5:16), and healed, they will affect team dynamics and relationships.

Creating a culture where brokenness can be safely exposed, the person still valued, and where the church community will walk with that person with the belief that he/she will become more and more of what God intended—this is the healthy path for Christian organizations. If the brokenness stays buried, the toxic waste will eventually leak out relationally and do much more damage.

But leaders must also remember that brokenness is not bad, and it's not generational—it's human. And it's where

God shows his strength as we're honest about it and dependent on him. Leading out of honesty about brokenness is a gift emerging generations can bring to Christian organizations.

### **Mobility Breeds Loneliness**

This generation feels very much alone. They've grown up in the first society that's so highly mobile. People move all over. Most individuals don't live within close proximity of second- and third-generation family members. As an adult, I got to know the 10 neighbors closest to me, and within five years, nine of them had moved away. That's pretty typical. Relationships are more transient.

My mom, a Builder, always went to the same gas station, and knew the store manager where she always shopped. She was a loyalist to every person she bought anything from. I remember that growing up. That's nowhere to be found now. Today, you don't know the people you're interacting with most of your life. And then you add to that the speed at which we do life, with much of our time consumed virtually with television and the Internet, plus the blowup of the family, and it just creates a culture of aloneness.

So you have a generation of people who long for community and relational stability but who also don't trust very easily. And even if your younger team members weren't directly involved in some of these negative factors, most of them grew up surrounded by them. Even if they weren't directly affected, their friends were. It's part of the cultural worldview that shaped them. Just because they're Christians doesn't mean they're shielded from the world.

I want to be clear here. Even though these struggles influence the people I work with and minister to, I don't walk into a staff meeting wondering, "Okay, what trust issues are going to come out today? I wonder how her past is going to respond to this?" I'm not thinking that. But it does influence our staff.

For instance, they believe in the mission of Jesus. But they long for the community of Christ. They want to work hard and accomplish great things for God's kingdom, but if it's not life-giving relationally, they're going to voice it (if

that opportunity exists), then become cynical if not heard, and finally just quietly survive or leave.

### **Workplace Practicalities**

In general, I've found boomers are more motivated by reaching the goal and by accomplishment. Now, it's not that the emerging generations don't want to accomplish or that they're lazy; far from it. Our staff is incredibly hard working and it's uncanny how much we accomplish as a team. But they really need to be valued as people, not just for performance. This is so important to understand. The value isn't just in what they produce, but in who they are. The typical pace of ministry causes many of us (me included) to neglect this critical biblical value.

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I've interviewed many people who were on the staff of boomer churches. Their biggest problem was that they never talked to the senior pastor, they never heard his heart. Nor do they have a sense that they're doing this in community. They often feel their church is accomplishing the work of the church—just not being the church at a staff level.

Just the accomplishment alone isn't enough for them (should it be for any of us?). On a practical level, as I'm interacting with our staff, they need to know there's dialogue, and not everything mandated from the top.

My staff will disagree with me, and then I'll push back and disagree with them. And sometimes, I have to say, "I don't get it, but all of you are differing with me on this one, so I'm going to trust your consensus." Sometimes, I have to say, "Okay, I hear you and I understand, but this is where we're going to go."

But I try not to play that card very often. Because really, we don't go there together, and there's a cost to playing the trump card. So, that doesn't mean every decision is a vote and we go with the highest vote. It just means you create a culture of dialogue where they can truly make a contribution to the direction you're all trying to go together.

As leaders (Builders, Boomers and Busters), we must remember that Jesus is The Leader, and we're not to lord it over those he's given us responsibility to lead. We're to serve them in helping them make the most of their God-given abilities as highly valued children in God's family and co-laborers with the Creator in his harvest field.

God uses every generation. One isn't good and another one bad. But our dif-

ferences can help us all better evaluate what biblical leadership and organization should look like.

### **A Word to Boomers**

When boomers lead younger people, I think they inadvertently send the message: "You're worth what you produce for me." Just the other day, a staff member told me, "You know, I'm often afraid I'm not doing enough." I said, "Do I cause that fear?" which isn't easy to ask. And he said, "Yes."

When I've realized this is the message I'm sending, my first reaction has been, "Wow, how am I sending that message? I sure didn't mean to." But you have to remember that different cultures interpret words or even a lack of feedback through their own cultural grid. I need to remember to not only ask about or measure the task or the achievement, but during a post-mortem, talk about the process of getting there together. Celebrate what's been done together.

Reiterate the value to the kingdom, and each person's value in the whole thing. You've got to be humble, create space, ask them to tell you.

I think focusing only on outcome is a trap boomers tend to fall into. The strength of that is boomers get a whole lot done and have a "can do," positive outlook often. And so they have vision that can be compelling to emerging generations. If the emerging generation has trust, feels valued and part of the process, then they'll not only accom-

plish all that boomers can accomplish, but they'll have a lot of fun and do it in life-giving ways. I've come to believe that's much closer to what Jesus intended. After all, Jesus never said the greatest two commands were to "accomplish a lot," and "hit your goals." He said, "Love God," and "Love people."

This generation is the future leadership of God's Kingdom enterprise. We must entrust leadership to them, or watch the church and the Christian organizations of America slowly fade

into obscurity. If boomers seek to understand the factors shaping this generation, and listen and respond to their emerging leadership, I believe they'll lead us back to a more biblical, life-giving way of being what God intended, as we lead his redemptive mission forward for emerging generations.

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