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OCTOBER 26, 2006

## VIEWPOINT

By Carmine Gallo

## Digg This: Talking to Gen Y

**Digg.com CEO Jay Adelson's tips for communicating with the younger generation in your workplace**

Millions of people a month submit, share, or read news articles "dug up" and posted by members of the Web community Digg.com. The hugely popular site was started by Kevin Rose, a former TechTV host, and Jay Adelson, a former chief technology officer for data center company Equinix who appeared on Kevin's show as a guest. I have a special fondness for people connected to TechTV because I spent three years as a host on the network until the dot-com bust led to a sharp decline in its advertising.

Its hosts were innovative and creative, moving on to build companies like Digg, a site where registered users submit and vote on stories (see BusinessWeek.com, 8/14/06, "[Valley Boys](#)"). Digg employees represent a wide range of ages, from 27 to 50. So when I decided to write a column on how to communicate with the younger generation, I asked Digg's 36-year-old CEO, Jay Adelson, for his insight.

Today's demographic trend is impossible to ignore and has big implications for workplaces across America. Seventy million Americans who belong to Generation Y (born between 1977 to 2002) are entering the workforce in massive waves. Add Generation Xers, who are now in their 30s and early 40s, and you have millions of employees whose visions for their jobs differ from their parents' and most of their bosses' old command-and-control management theories.

According to research compiled by RainmakerThinking and quoted in *USA Today*, Gen Y—the millennium generation—has high expectations for itself and its employers, seeking highly engaged managers to help them grow and develop their professional skills.

This finding reinforces the insights I learned from a fascinating conversation with Adelson, who has given a lot of thought to motivating, inspiring, and engaging young colleagues.

### Empower Them

Adelson argues that younger workers are transforming the workplace from the "get rich quick" attitude of the '90s to a culture of empowerment and contribution. At the end of the day, he says, these employees want to feel as though they are part of something essential and that they have contributed to its achievement.

"Am I important, and am I offering value? Those are the questions young people are asking themselves," says Adelson. A key to managing this generation is to create excitement about the company's achievements, but more important, to help employees recognize their role in accomplishing that mission.

Empowering means soliciting employees' input and giving them a role in the decision-making process. Meetings, for example, shouldn't be a method of broadcasting a set of orders. Inviting a young employee into a face-to-face meeting builds an expectation of participation. It shows the individual that the manager cares what he or she thinks. Meetings should be considered two-way communications, forums for asking other people to contribute their ideas and letting them know that their contribution is not only welcome but valued and carefully considered.

### Be a Mentor, Not a Taskmaster

I asked Adelson what young people expect from their leaders in today's workplace. His reply: "They want a mentor, not a taskmaster." Adelson explains that young workers fresh out of school have no frame of reference for their new job. They haven't been in the corporate world for a decade or more, so they join the corporate ranks with memories of mentors who they loved or hated. And unlike their parents, who may have found fulfillment in a steady paycheck, the new generation of employee wants a relationship with someone they feel understands them and their goals. "Managing is no longer just about hitting certain metrics, it's about understanding individuals and helping them grow," says Adelson.

As I was writing this column I noticed a Dilbert cartoon in the morning newspaper that showed Catbert—The Evil Director of HR—showing a new employee around the building. When he introduced the wide-eyed worker to Alice, his mentor, she strangled him while screaming, "I don't have time to babysit! I'm buried in work! I do not like you!!"

That's an extreme example, but it makes the point that many bosses spend more time managing to task and less time mentoring their subordinates. Adelson believes that 50% of a manager's time should be allocated to developing her staff. Yes, 50%. It sounds like a lot, but Adelson reasons, "If [managers] aren't doing that, then the headcount is wrong, the budgeting process is wrong, or the company has tried to create too much efficiency. You'll burn people out."

### Help Them Reach Their Goals

How should managers spend some of this time "developing" employees? Young people don't want to show up every day to just "turn

a screw," as Adelson puts it. They look for meaning—in their work, their lives, and their interactions with their bosses.

As the RainmakerThinking research indicated, members of Generation Y want to grow. Adelson argues that an important component of mentoring is to know your employees and understand their goals. One person's goal might be to express themselves creatively in their job while another person might aspire to a specific position in the organization or industry.

The key is for managers to find that sweet spot in the lives of their employees and to help them reach their goals. If the goal isn't in line with the job function, then the job is wrong for the employee. That, too, is the job of a manager—to help people find the right roles and to exceed in those roles.

Helping employees achieve their goals is a win-win-win situation. According to Adelson, the employee will be engaged, which leads to higher productivity for the boss and the company. The boss's boss will be thrilled because the manager is getting the most out of his staff. Yes, I repeat, it's a win for the employee, the boss, and the company.

A strong manager can be a mentor, generate respect among younger people, and also develop relationships with staff that foster trust and admiration by both parties. Adelson believes that it's not an option to develop this type of relationship with younger workers—it's required.

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