

Understanding the Millennial Generation: Developing a More Effective Workforce for the Future SAF

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Abstract:

Singapore's current enlistees are better educated, more adaptive and learn faster. They are also more acquainted with social media and technology. Compared to their predecessors, these soldiers' characteristics, requirements and expectations are vastly different. Current junior ranks will eventually take over as senior commanders within the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Each generation has its own unique characteristics with their strengths and shortfalls. With proper training and engagement, Generation Y's unique qualities can be harnessed to build an effective and committed workforce for the future SAF. The current leadership can achieve this by understanding this generation's unique characteristics through better engagement rather than stifling their natural talents.

Keywords: Leadership; Strategies; Future Planning; Generation Y

INTRODUCTION

Chief of Army (COA) MG Ravinder Singh described Singapore's current enlistees as "better educated, more adaptive and learn faster."¹ This generation of soldiers is also more acquainted with social media and technology. The unique differences in generations might be exaggerated,² however, the current generation does have unique characteristics, requirements and expectations that are vastly different from their predecessors. Current leadership must be aware that cross generation tension can inhibit teamwork, cripple communication and severely limit the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) mission to "enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor."³

The SAF's current soldiers consists of three generations, characterized by their unique generational traits: Baby Boomers (born 1945-1962), Generation X (born 1963-1981) and Generation Y (born 1982-2001).⁴ Gen Y is the newest generation to join the SAF and currently fills most of its junior ranks. This enigmatic group of young people has puzzled

commanders in recent years and could well catalyze fundamental changes in training methodologies. It is an inevitable reality that leadership must transfer to each new generation as they mature. Gen Y soldiers will eventually be senior commanders and policy makers shaping the future SAF. Hence, there is a need for senior commanders to better understand Gen Y members and adapt current management and training techniques to better engage them. While the organization attempts to mould this new generation of soldiers to operate more advanced weaponry and undertake increasingly complex tasks and missions, it is important that the SAF revises its management and training methodologies to leverage on their strengths and address their shortcomings. The repercussions cannot be underestimated. Unlike in the private sector, leadership at the top cannot be bought—a military commander must be groomed through time and effort. Thus, this article will provide principles for the development and management of the new Gen Y soldiers for the future SAF.

THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND GENERATION Y

Bruce Tulgan, founder of the leading generational research firm, Rainmaker Thinking, argued that Gen

Y is “the most high-maintenance workforce” seen.⁵ However, they will also be “the most high-performing workforce in the history of the world.”⁶ By first understanding the workings of this new generation and then channeling the right amount of resources into their management, the SAF will be able to fully utilize them as a formidable workforce. Interestingly, the United States (US) report, “The Relationship of the Officer Evaluation Report to Captain Attrition” reported that, “senior officers in the US Army think they understand the world of lieutenants and captains,” however, “many junior officers and others are convinced that they do not.”⁷ The SAF must learn and not fall prey to such pitfalls. There is a need to understand the characteristics of Gen Y soldiers before implementing methods to train them up as professionals. These characteristics will be the key impetus for change since the SAF can no longer hold steadfast to ways of training that brought success in the past but are less effective for future generations.

William Strauss and Neil Howe, historians who were influential in defining American generations, define Gen Y members as those who were born between 1982 and 2001.⁸ However, there are other experts who generally disagree with this range, arguing that demographics differ for different cultures and countries, and thus find it hard to qualify Gen Y in terms of year of birth.⁹ To avoid this dispute, this paper will focus on qualifying Gen Y as a generation which possesses its own unique generational characteristics, rather than the year of birth. It should be noted that even though these characteristics are a broad generalization of how the new soldiers are, it nevertheless depicts how majority of them act. Generalization is inevitable in any attempt to define characteristics of large masses of people.

GENERATION Y CHARACTERISTICS

Technologically Savvy and Interconnected

Gen Y soldiers are technologically savvy and interconnected. Based on IDA’s “Annual Survey on Infocomm Usage in Households for 2010,”¹⁰ 82% of Singaporean households have access to the Internet

and at least 96% of households with school-going children have access to computers at home. The Gen Y grew up with gadgets like computers, mobile phones, iPods, social networking sites such as Facebook and online games like *World of Warcraft*. It has also become a norm for youths to use the Internet and its connectivity for activities such as communicating, gaming, information gathering and interaction.¹¹ In addition, according to a survey conducted by Synovate in 2010, 85% of Singaporean youths (aged 8 to 24) own a mobile phone, a startlingly high proportion compared to the regional average of 64%.¹² Caused by an evolving landscape of technology and media, the heavy reliance on communication technologies and digital media appears to be the main drivers distinguishing Gen Y from its predecessors. The pervasiveness of technology has radically altered underlying ways of learning, socializing, leisure and self expression. It has also spearheaded a new form of media literacy whereby Gen Y is developing different forms of competencies, skills and literacy practices. Digital communication (e.g. social networking sites, text messaging, instant messaging etc.) has spawned new avenues for youths to communicate and interact through mobile phones, instant messaging as well as public social networking sites like Facebook.¹³

Unfortunately, such comfort in technology does have trade-offs. First, their widespread use of technology and increasingly open culture has fostered a comparatively more flippant attitude towards privacy and security matters.¹⁴ However, their honesty and balanced perspectives about the pros and cons of technology leave room for reasonable negotiations about its use in the workplace.¹⁵ It is imperative for training methodologies to address this without compromising their open nature. Second, their comfort in online communication stems from trade-offs in face-to-face social interaction skills and the ability to negotiate disagreements.¹⁶ This is exacerbated if online communication masks the inadequacies of their social skills. This complicates management and may also affect future Gen Y commanders’ communication

skills and ability to win the hearts and minds of their soldiers.

Better Educated

A recent and detailed study conducted by Pew Research Centre in America revealed that Gen Y is the most educated group in comparison to preceding generations.¹⁷ This characteristic is also observable in Singapore, where the results obtained from the Singapore's Census of Population showed that the percentages of Singaporeans aged between 20 and 29 years old with higher education in 2000 and 2010 were 47% and 65% respectively.¹⁸

Gen Y is more adaptive and learns faster, which makes up for its lack of experience when creatively approaching problems.¹⁹ However, their enthusiasm for finding an efficient means to solve a problem and the curiosity for answers to every challenge are often misinterpreted as laziness and disrespect for authority.²⁰

Intrinsically Motivated and Optimistic

Gen Y is an intrinsically motivated and optimistic generation,²¹ perhaps fostered by the economic prosperity they were born into. They are financially stable, having been the main beneficiaries of the economic boom from the 1970s right through the 1990s.²² In addition, as a result of their upbringing, most Gen Y members have been pampered by their Baby Boomer parents who have been actively removing obstacles and bad experiences from their lives. Parents and society have rewarded them for every achievement made, making them believe optimistically that anything that they seek is possible.²³ This has caused them to be more sheltered and optimistic about work, life and their future.²⁴ Barbara Dwyer, CEO of the Job Journey argued that Gen Y members think they can alter the world upon entering the workforce. This is aggravated by their high confidence level, resulting in sometimes unrealistic expectations, tied with the need for instant gratification and a sense of entitlement.

Partly due to their higher level of education, Gen Y members have a strong need to understand the meaning of their work.²⁵ As such, they have a desire for meaningful jobs and are more willing to work hard as long as the job provides fulfillment.²⁶ Once a purpose and value has been identified, Gen Y members will be more willing to make job sacrifices despite unstable economic conditions and job uncertainties (i.e. accepting a lower wage for a more meaningful job). This is a double-edged sword. While having a purposeful and fulfilling career serves as a great motivation for Gen Y, they are less tolerant when their aspirations are not met.

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This is due to an optimistic belief that they can be better employed, utilized and paid elsewhere in the job market. However, the optimism of Gen Y members should not cause unique challenges

in the workforce since they are candid about their shortcomings and have positive attitudes about their potential.²⁷ Therefore, this characteristic might prove more of an asset than a liability to the military since the higher their expectations of the future, the more likely they are to work hard. The SAF must find ways to intrinsically motivate them.

Intolerance of Hierarchical Structure

The changes in upbringing have altered the way Gen Y relates to authority. First, being more educated than their predecessors, Gen Y members have a tendency to want to know the reason and intent of an instruction before carrying it out. Education has taught them to think rationally and independent, thus the traditional "do as I say" is not as effective anymore. Second, as a byproduct of education, teachers are more lenient towards their students in an effort to encourage creativity and curiosity. Third is parenting. Baby Boomer parents tend to see the child as the centre of the family, often pampering and sheltering them.²⁸ Parents are more attentive to the needs of their children and encourage them to raise questions every time they are in doubt. Consequently, this has made them more apt to question authority and more



App used to track suspicious personnel

intolerant of traditional hierarchical structures.²⁹ They prefer communicating through interactivity to the authoritative “command and control” communication styles typical of a military organization.³⁰ Therein lies a danger of Gen Y soldiers defying orders from higher command.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations for the development and management of the new Gen Y soldiers in the future SAF target their underlying characteristics. They are divided into National Education, leadership, training, communication, respect and resilience training.

Engagement in National Education

Gen Y members have benefited much from the economic boom experienced by the country over the past few decades and most have been brought up with a sense of entitlement and “taking things for granted.”³¹ Being born in a privileged environment, Gen Y members perceive the current higher standards of living as a given, and may not appreciate what their forefathers worked hard for many decades ago. Coupled

with Singapore’s globalizing economy, Gen Y members may run the risk of losing a sense of belonging to the country and a national identity.³² A survey conducted in 2006 revealed that 53% of Singaporean youths would consider emigration in search for greener pastures.³³ During the 2006 National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted that Singaporean talents have been increasingly scouted by overseas multinational companies. The significance of this should not be underestimated as the government, in response to concerns about Singapore talent not returning from overseas, established a Singapore Overseas Unit which strives to maintain strong connections with them.³⁴ In addition, the Ministry of Education followed up with the creation of a new steering committee on National Education (NE) to revisit its NE program in an effort to engage Singaporean youths to foster a greater sense of belonging and national identity.³⁵ These rising concerns will definitely affect the work attitude of the Gen Y members within a military organization charged with national defense. In order to maintain its effectiveness, the SAF must ensure that its people are deeply rooted in its core value of “Loyalty to Country.”

As Gen Y members are more willing to work harder if they are engaged in a meaningful and purposeful job, a call to the nation's defense would serve as a strong foundation for building their work commitment to the SAF. Regardless of the nature of their jobs within the SAF, be it Full-Time National Servicemen (NSFs), staff appointments, operational duties, officers or specialists, the fundamental purpose in the SAF is national defense. With a strong sense of belonging to Singapore and knowing that their individual efforts contribute to the defense of their country, these Gen Y members will be more willing to make job sacrifices, thus providing the psychological motivation to enhance the effectiveness of this workforce. The SAF should engage Gen Y in NE and make it a continual effort with strong command emphasis.

The challenge is to find the best approach to reach out to the Gen Y soldiers, as time has rendered most of the older methodologies obsolete. With Gen Y being more technologically savvy and educated, the medium for engagement must adapt to its characteristics in order to be effective. In a speech at Connexion 2009, Dr Ng Eng Hen, then-Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defense, emphasized the need to "refine the approaches to reach the new generation of Singaporeans who are web-savvy and well-travelled."³⁶ He argued that NE should not be disseminated purely as information but must be adapted to the way the new generation lives, works and communicates. It should no longer be a one-sided, passive communication of information but should encourage greater interactivity and room for creative discussion. In addition, greater command emphasis on NE engagement should be observed at the unit level, as this is where direct interaction with junior soldiers takes place on a daily basis. Unit Commanders should, therefore, proactively engage their units in engaging and experiential NE activities that allow robust and creative discussions on a regular basis. Such activities can include research-based project work, debates, discussion forums, scenario-based role playing, tours, etc.³⁷

Adapting Leadership Styles to Better Engage Gen Y

The SAF defines leadership as "a process of influencing others to accomplish the mission, inspiring their commitment, and improving the organization,"³⁸ It is imperative for the SAF to not just groom officers to lead the Third Generation Fighting Force, but also to know what type of leaders appeal to these young officers. Research from Global Manpower Professionals on a group of Asian-based Gen Y members reported that while they are more inclined to "relationship-oriented leaders,"³⁹ current leadership is biased towards a "task-oriented" approach. While Gen Y members deem it pertinent for leaders to be caring and inspiring, current leadership believes in demonstrating competency, honesty and forward thinking. Gen Y members' higher educational level, coupled with helicopter parenting and changes in teaching methodologies, have caused them to prefer leadership styles inclined to being more democratic than directive, engaging than domineering, and more flexible than hierarchical.⁴⁰ As such, Commanders should learn to adapt their intangible leadership styles towards being caring and inspirational figures, especially in a peacetime training environment. This does not imply discarding the directive and authoritative "command and control" style completely, which is necessary for a military organization.

To effectively bridge the extremes of these two styles of leadership, a recommendation is to develop and train the Gen Y soldiers through coaching. The SAF defines coaching as "the responsibility of the chain of command to improve the performance, skills, learning, and commitment of their subordinates. It is a process to help subordinates learn from their experience, which can then be translated into effective new actions in present and future roles, thus contributing to the SAF's transformation."⁴¹ In a recent news article published in *The Straits Times*, the emphasis on coaching to enhance workforce effectiveness is achieved by moving away from the traditional authoritative leadership style of command and control to one that facilitates an individual's learning and achievement of clearly defined goals.⁴² Commanders are responsible for their soldiers' goals through tracking their

progress and constantly providing feedback through focused coaching conversations.⁴³ This will help Gen Y members maintain their intrinsic motivation to work hard for their future and, at the same time, keep their sometimes unrealistic optimism in check. Coaching efforts were introduced in SAF's Leadership Developmental Doctrine Directive in 2005 which adopted the GROW coaching model. This model helps to facilitate goals setting, reviewing the reality of the desired goals and options available, as well as the next step to take in order to achieve these goals.⁴⁴ Therefore, commanders can still afford to be authoritative at the organizational level whilst engaging the soldiers at the individual, more personal level through coaching.

Redeveloping Training and Education

Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely, former Director of the Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, defines training as a process that allows leaders to prepare for foreseeable functions in a set of known circumstances.⁴⁵ Training in the SAF and Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI) is primarily supported by SAF's Instructional Design and Development Branch (IDD), tasked with instructional design for training purposes. To achieve their desired instructional design, the IDD facilitates instructor development programs and seeks out relevant learning systems and pedagogies for training purposes. It is imperative for the SAF's instructional designers to acknowledge that the advent of technology, particularly the Internet, has caused instruction to be more challenging.⁴⁶ The Internet has not only increased information accessibility, it has changed who we learn from, what and where we learn.⁴⁷ Technological advancements like accessible mobile phones have spawned different ways of socializing and self-expression.

Despite such changes, organizations have been reluctant to transform. Instructional designs in the past were primarily based on the Behaviorism

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philosophy.⁴⁸ Behaviorism believes actions can be trained and changed, depending on the conditions a learner is in. In the training process, the learner is trained by responding to cues given by the instructor. This translates to high levels of control on the part of the instructor for providing learning reinforcement. However, Marcy P. Driscoll, author and coauthor of instruction and learning books argued that

the Internet has led to a constructivist philosophy of learning whereby learners construct knowledge based on their experiences through assimilation and accommodation.⁴⁹ Assimilation refers to a process of incorporating experiences into an existing framework of knowledge while accommodation refers to the changing of current frameworks of knowledge. This means that instructors are no longer just reinforcers. They are now facilitators of learning who provides timely feedback to trainees about what, where and how to acquire the necessary resources for learning.

Even though IDD recognizes changes in education philosophy, instructors that are directly in charge of the Gen Y members must acknowledge this shift. The key to engaging Gen Y members lies within the relationship with their immediate superior, and not merely the organization.⁵⁰ Instructors must start to reappraise old instructional designs and procedures to ensure processes remain valid.⁵¹ SAF can look to expanding coaching into a dynamic partnership that goes beyond current face-to-face interactions through the use of technology. It is commendable that SAF has been keeping up with technological trends by supplying 8000 iPads to recruits recently.⁵² Such devices, when utilized appropriately, can be used for online learning as well as coaching. Commanders can now provide advice and insights to recruits they would have never had personal contact with. Mentors can provide continual feedback to help improve the soldiers' training.

Communication and Respect

In order to develop a more effective workforce, Commanders must understand their people through effective communication and gaining their respect. In the case of Gen Y soldiers, comprehension is not difficult—all that is required is a change in the management's perception in order to develop them into a more effective workforce.⁵³

To understand Gen Y, commanders should embrace its unique characteristics of curiosity, increased adaptiveness and sometimes unrealistic expectations. Suspending judgment about Gen Y members' curiosity and not viewing "why" as challenging authority but as a reflection of their higher education as "thinking" soldiers, may be the first step towards bridging the communications barrier. Understanding the tendency of Gen Y members to search for efficient solutions as being adaptive rather than perceiving it as being lazy may empower them to perform more creatively. Empathizing with their often unrealistic expectations as a form of optimism and guiding them towards more realistic approaches will certainly motivate them to work harder for the organization. An unprecedented level of openness by Commanders is required to accept the new generation's behavior if effective change is to take place.⁵⁴

Gen Y members appreciate leaders that communicate, connect and create safe environments for them to express their ideas freely.⁵⁵ US Army Brigadier General James Schwitters, Commander of US Army Training Centre in Fort Jackson, asserts that fear and intimidation used during training was no longer as effective as before.⁵⁶ Gen Y soldiers do not respond to shouting and offensive treatment but connect with those that lead by example and respect those that have earned it. Unlike before, their intolerance of hierarchy structures means that authority is no longer synonymous with respect. Commanders should be more authentic and approachable, yet not overly soft-hearted. Commanders must also be prepared to give rationales behind their decisions, be fluid and

open up to questions and not to misinterpret the Gen Y as challenging authority.

Incorporating Resilience Training

Although the recommendations thus far have been focused on the organization in adapting training and development methodologies to address the unique characteristics of Gen Y, Gen Y soldiers must also understand the challenges posed by a military environment and must, in turn, adapt to certain inevitable demands of being employed in military service. The SAF was established to defend the sovereignty of Singapore against potential adversaries. In recent years, the SAF has also increased its participation in global Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief operations and United Nations (UN)-sanctioned international peace and support missions in order to enhance Singapore's overall security.⁵⁷ The nature of war, disaster relief and peace support missions irrevocably places soldiers in environments that are physically, mentally and emotionally stressful.⁵⁸ As such, Gen Y soldiers must learn to cope with such pressure in order to perform at their best.

A systematic approach is recommended to engage all Gen Y soldiers in attending resilience training courses as part of their military service. The key of these courses would be to teach soldiers coping strategies to overcome stressful situations, thus improving their adaptability and resilience.⁵⁹ Lazarus and Folkman, who developed the Stress and Coping Model, defines coping as "the ability to manage internal and external demands appraised as adverse or exceeding one's ability."⁶⁰ Since these demands vary in different situations, resilience training programs must impart flexible coping strategies to resolve the different stressors to make it more effective in a military environment.⁶¹

Some other countries have recently introduced comprehensive resilience training as part of their basic military training program. The US Army commenced the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) in 2009 as an approach to incorporate resilience training for its soldiers.⁶² The resilience skills taught in this program can be loosely summarized as: identifying

and leveraging on individual strengths within a team to overcome challenges; identifying the possible outcomes, both positive and negative, when facing a crisis and preparing oneself to move past the event; recognizing the degrading effects of negative energy and reframing them as advantages; building strong relationships with others for mutual support; and formulating a plan to address the crisis.⁶³ The Australian Defense Force also has a coping skills training program which was redeveloped in 2009 as BattleSMART (Self-Management and Resilience Training).⁶⁴ Similar to the CSF, the BattleSMART teaches its soldiers to assess whether their initial response to an event is the best one, and thereafter identifies various options to adjust or change the response if necessary.⁶⁵

Then-US Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey Jr., directed that, after completion of the initial course, continual resilience training should be conducted on a monthly basis for at least one to two hours. Furthermore, since 2011, CSF has been incorporated at every level of military training, from the private in basic military training to the more advanced courses offered to senior commanders up to Brigadier General.⁶⁶ Although these resilience programs are relatively new and under trial, the extent of their implementation suggests the significance of building psychologically resilient soldiers in modern war conditions. The SAF has also recently conducted a study between 2007 and 2008 on the development of such a resilience training program. Branded as Bridge (Building Resilience in Individuals for Growth and Emotional Well-being), the program has seen positive results from recruits undergoing basic military training.⁶⁷ The next step is to develop the resilience training program to encompass all levels of its military education system. Resilience training will help train Gen Y soldiers, who have a reputation for being “spoilt and pampered,” to be a more adaptive and effective workforce for employment in current and future SAF operations.

CONCLUSION

It is inevitable that leadership must be passed from one generation to the next and that current junior ranks will eventually take over as senior SAF commanders. Each generation has its own unique characteristics with their strengths and shortfalls. Today’s point in question lies with Gen Y, a generation that has often been perceived negatively as lazy, spoilt, unrealistic and disrespectful of authority by preceding generations. However, with proper training and engagement, Gen Y’s unique qualities can be harnessed to build an effective and committed workforce for the future SAF. This can be achieved by understanding the generation’s unique characteristics and adapting the current leadership to better engage it rather than stifle its natural talents.

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The real challenge surrounding the dynamic millennial generation and the SAF lies in balance. Besides understanding Gen Y and adapting training methodologies to it, “the military leadership can ensure that those in positions of command at all levels are trained and stress-tested to maintain a delicate balance—the balance between empowering Gen Y troops and providing them with direction, discipline, and cohesion. Indeed, balanced leadership is the only way to empower a millennial-dominated military to think and act creatively, responsibly, and with the right sense of mission.”⁶⁸

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