

Leading a Different Generation

Maybe the Play Is the Thing

Younger lawyers entering firms today are definitely wired differently than previous generations. Entitlement is probably the word most often used when older lawyers talk about the new generation.

A variety of factors, of course, account for the differing views of different generations. But as I was talking through a number of issues with partners in a client firm recently, this idea occurred to me: *We learn a lot about how we act as adults by how we played as kids* – a fact that might spur partners' thinking about how to lead the newest breed of associates.

A Playtime Analogy (or Talking Structure)

Most of the partners in law firms today are, like myself, members of the baby boomer generation. When we were kids in the 1960s, the world seemed like a safer place. After school we could play outside until the streetlights went on and then— whatever we were doing—we all had to go home.



by Karen MacKay, MBA, CHRP
President

That was the rule, plain and simple, and it was pretty much the same rule in every house. Our parents didn't try to "manage" our playtime. We learned how to get along with people because we made our own friends without our parents being involved. We learned to deal with conflict, we learned to negotiate, and we learned to play fair or else we were kicked out of the game. When and how we got our homework done was our responsibility and nobody else's. In short, most of our generation developed what we now call "initiative" because we lived fairly unstructured childhoods with simple rules and we made our own fun.

Let's compare this to the experience that most of the youngest law firm associates would have had in their childhood play. The youngest lawyers (in large part, children of the baby boomers) are now about 25 or 26 years old and hit the playground in the 1980s. As their parents, we worried about their safety so we took them to the playground and we stayed with them. We worried about their education so we structured the evenings so that they got their homework done—and if they didn't get their homework done, we thought that, as parents, it was our fault. We also thought that if we kept them busy they wouldn't get into trouble, so Tuesday was swimming lessons, Wednesday was Brownies or Cub Scouts, Thursday was family night when we turned off the TV and played board games—and so on throughout the week. We provided structure, we chose the activities, and we drove them to and from everything.

Now these young lawyers are entering your firm. They want structure. They want you to deliver professional development. And they want you to help them build their careers. They want you to assign the work, rather than just assuming they'll seek it out before they've developed the necessary know-how.



The leadership challenge is to find ways to keep them in the game. The sustainability of your firm depends on it.

LP lawpractice.org • June 2006 **Law Practice** 33

[Print PDF Version](#)