Boomeranging: Five Methods For Revitalizing an Aging Workforce

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By Robert Pater | Jun 01, 2016

Ever been surprised to discover the actual age of someone who seems much younger than his/her years? They likely don't have a hidden Fountain of Youth and don't have to be an exception. In fact, it's important and highly possible for leaders to encourage youthfulness during these times where numerous companies in many regions of the world see their workforce aging. Such graying employees typically prompt organizational concerns about sustaining a productive, receptive, and safe workforce. Too many aging workforces become hampered by issues of trust, resistance, as well as ringing up the Safety bill with mounting numbers and severity of soft-tissue and other injuries.

We've frequently see one prime characteristic of such young-thinking/acting people is they tend to have a "spring in their step," exhibiting a youthful physicality. One way to accomplish this—and there are four other methods listed below—is to move with greater balance. Changes in the nervous system and brain result in physical balance deteriorating with age, if not compensated for. The great news is that there are doable practices for dramatically elevating balance at any age. And deepening balance is a readily noted sense that significantly drives both physical and mental self-assuredness, as well as preventing a range of personal injuries.

While, on one hand, older workers can be a drag on go-go cultures, they also bring much-needed attributes. Knowing this, wise companies have attempted many strategies for both mitigating the drag-down effects of such workers while trying to maximize the strengths such people bring—harnessing their technical expertise and history of process development, pairing them into mentor relationships with

next-generation personnel, tapping their "survival" experience in making fewer mistakes and averting injuries, and more. Some companies have learned to incorporate aging-related ergonomic modifications (lighting, load-lightening, etc.); others promote health and wellness initiatives in order to help people get the most from themselves at the highest levels.

While I agree these should be continued and expanded, a recent study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* ("It matters how old you feel: Antecedents and performance consequences of average relative subjective age in organizations") revealed older workers who were "young at heart" are more productive, more efficient, and lasted longer at work. I suspect that behind this—though this wasn't specifically reported—such workers had more energy and were more curious, receptive to change, and innovative ("child-like" qualities). These likely also elevate Safety performance and culture.

Of course, the Internet googles over with advice on how Baby Boomers can "think young." I think there are many ways to accomplish this, going beyond the default suggestions running from being inspired to staying fit to ingesting selected supplements, to hormone therapy, to knee, hip, and other body part replacements. No quarrel with these, but I want to take a slightly different tack. That is, toward "acting young" more than to just "thinking young."

From both personal observation and experience working with numerous "aging workforces" in a multitude of companies worldwide, we've found that not only does "acting young" raise energy, it can also significantly boost Safety. Such workers envision themselves living longer, active lives, rather than giving in to the self-fulfilling biases that aging entails declining activity, pain, or inevitable injuries. Given that the brain plasticity research indicates the right physical activity not only reduces brain shrinkage but actually grows more neurons, "acting young" may speed and enhance mental processing and memory.

How to re-youth an aging workforce? Leaders can essentially help "Boomerang" Baby Boomer workers five ways:

• *Deepen balance,* as described above.

• *Spread forces.* Concentration of forces builds up physical tension, potentially leading to restricted movement (associated with "being old"), discomfort/pain, and potential soft-tissue injury. This can first be accomplished by effective ergonomic design and equipment purchasing; then, at a more portable level, providing methods and techniques for de-concentrating forces during all movements, at work and at home. Self-monitoring is a critical precursor—especially noting, by occasionally checking in, where tension or pain begins to build. Once noticed, it's

relatively easy and effortless to make simple and small adjustments to nip budding problems at an early level.

• *Move fluidly*. Engage in methods for accomplishing tasks that boost flowing movements rather than more static or jerky ones. We've seen the results of workers learning how to "move smoothly." They report less soft-tissue discomfort/pain and greater range of motion.

• *Coordinate breath*. It's amazing how many people at work either hold their breath when exerting effort or breathe shallowly. Either habit reduces oxygenation needed both for mental focus (the brain is the first part of the body that reacts to oxygen deprivation) and for overall physical energy. It's critical for us all to first continue breathing naturally deeply during activity and next to remember to exhale relaxedly and smoothly on exertion. These are very effective but higher-level skills.

• *Move "easy,"*—with greater leverage. There's a saying in the internal martial arts, "The beginner moves in big circles, the more advanced student moves in smaller circles, and the master moves in no circles." The smaller the movement, the less effort is required; more than that, the right, often-unnoticed movements generate more power. And it's very practical to maximize effectiveness while minimizing effort through an *internal* (rather than merely intellectual/book) understanding of natural alignment and position.

Bottom line: Our physiological age is more important than our chronological one. And it's possible to help "youthify" a workforce in certain ways, by helping them move "younger" and generating greater energy, excitement, mental alertness, and receptivity to improvement and Safety.

About the Author

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