

# LIQUID LEADERSHIP

A globe of the Earth is shown splashing in water, with water droplets and ripples surrounding it. A horizontal blue band is overlaid across the middle of the globe.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

From Woodstock to Wikipedia—  
Multigenerational Management Ideas  
That Are Changing the Way We Run Things

**BRAD SZOLLOSE**

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Multigenerational Management Ideas  
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# Author's Note



All the projects I have developed in my life seem to take on new meaning about halfway through their execution—the scope becomes greater and more alive than the original intention. This book, for instance, started out as a way to help Baby Boomer executives adjust to the overwhelming amount of data they need to absorb in a world that has seemingly ceased to make sense. Yet I soon came to realize that it isn't just Boomers who need help, but individuals from *every* generation. All of us are facing new and unprecedented challenges. Traditional business hierarchies have disappeared. The standard concept of leadership has vaporized. New economic and political realities are reshaping the fundamental laws that help businesses survive.

And so as more and more research came across my desk, a much larger theme emerged, far beyond the scope of my original idea. Each new piece of knowledge was an epiphany, illuminating yet another level of fundamental change. We are truly on the cusp of something never before seen or found in humankind's six thousand years of recorded history. What you hold in your hands is not just a book, but an awakening to the new relationships between generations in the twenty-first-century organization and to the new future of business.

The chasm between generations is blatantly apparent, and yet most ignore it, hoping that Generation Y will calm down, get a mortgage, and have a couple of kids. The secret hope is they will wind up just like us—tired, run-down, and indoctrinated into cubicle life. Unfortunately for Boomers, Gen Y is built for adventure. This is not a fad but a trend, and it's here to stay.

Expecting us to retain the same methodologies from the past is like expecting the United States to retain its agricultural dominance after the Industrial Revolution. We simply can't put the genie back in the bottle.

As comedian Nick Griffin shared on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (July 20, 2007): "As a society we're overstimulated. We have vitamins in our water now, caramel and chocolate in our coffee, and we have cheese in our crust. Cameras in our phones, TVs in our cars, we got BlackBerrys, iPods, TiVo, PSP, and GPS—your kids aren't hyper, they're paying attention!"

To stay relevant as a leader in today's new global economy will require us to not cling so tightly to old methodologies and beliefs but instead to adjust to the new, upgrading our knowledge and skills. But at the same time, we need to keep what still works. This type of flexibility will help you catch the next big idea that changes everything.

*Liquid Leadership* has been designed to help you see which ideas to keep and which to discard in an age when radical disruption seems to be the norm.

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## 1ST LAW



# A Liquid Leader Places People First

*“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”*

—Howard Thurman

# A Farewell to Kings




The old-fashioned idea that your boss is the smartest person in the room has shifted. The smartest businessperson in the room is most likely your graphic designer. Shocked by that statement? Well, you shouldn't be, because today's graphic designers when working to develop a website need to analyze the end user's needs, habits, and affluence. Their job has shifted to include what a customer's experience should be, how this fits into the chaotic list of choices already swirling in that customer's head, and how to separate your brand from the pack. Then they have to actually build the website based on the accumulated user data: code it, design the graphics, and then test it during an alpha stage to see if it generates revenue and the kind of experience that was planned.

What happened to choosing beautiful typefaces and colors? The answer is, the graphic design business has evolved to include marketing, information architecture, training, and usability studies. And guess what other jobs have evolved as well? Those of your multimedia experts, actuaries, software developers, communications staff, even your administrative assistant.

These professionals have been trained at a higher level than in the past, and they refuse to bow to leadership that wants worship of hierarchy. Nor will they flinch because you command them to do so. Believe it or not, they see themselves as equal to you despite your seasonality and your executive position. ("Seasonality," by the way, is polite Wall Street slang for anyone who has earned his/her wealth through years of experience and has the gray hair to show it.) When executives cling to the old ideology of

a corporate organizational chart, this only gives today's younger workforce an incentive to quit. Just give them time.




**The idea of the CEO as messiah has shifted.  
Leadership today is about sharing ideas and  
responsibility.**

There has been a backlash against the idea that a CEO is superhuman. The recurring boom and bust cycles have created an air of distrust, especially when it is the people on the front lines who make the products, who make the company profitable, who give the CEO his/her salary.

The entire office hierarchy has indeed shifted at the same time. Baby Boomers to a great extent based their entire careers on learning and developing their own methods and then keeping them to themselves. Back in the Industrial Age, knowledge hoarding was the only way to get ahead in your career. It worked because you could impress your boss and your peers and rise to the executive committee by having your own methodologies. It was easy to become a hero. All you had to do was implement a few ideas along the assembly line and you made the company profitable.

New leadership is not about hoarding ideas; it's about sharing them. (But note that it isn't about management by committee, either. Waiting for each and every person to have their say before a project gets out the door only slows things down.) This new way of doing business requires something that Industrial Age alpha managers disdain: being involved with and evaluated by the people you are leading.

The college degree an information-hoarding Boomer earned twenty-five years ago is obsolete, given that 75 percent of the things you have to learn today didn't exist back then. To lead you have to stay up to date. In order to keep pace with change, remember:



**Knowledge hoarding is out.  
Knowledge sharing is in.**

Today's leaders are an integral part of companies' successes and not a separate anomaly looming at the edges of day-to-day production. For leadership to work these days requires leaders to be more approachable, more flexible, stronger decision makers who show respect for every member's contribution to the organization. Even the weirdest member of your group is now a vital contributor. Decision making must include input from the bottom contributors for implementation to be sound. After all, do you even know how your products are made? Seriously! How much time is involved to build it? Why do software coders take so long, while hardware is always on time? How about visiting that one store out of 3,600 that is the leading producer in a seemingly shrinking economy? What makes that store tick? What's their magic? If you haven't spent time at the bottom, it is just a bunch of numbers on a page . . . and nothing more than an educated guess. Real-time, up-front, in-the-customer's-face feedback may be the only way to get an answer.

Skills and knowledge must be constantly updated, and what better way than knowledge sharing? It will also make you think twice about just looking at a resume when choosing your people or just looking at a spreadsheet. What is really going on? We must be on constant alert for the next big thing. Assumptions do not work. Never have, never will.

Here's an example of what can happen if you neglect to share, ask questions, and get some real feedback. Two scientists who happen to be friends of mine showed me a manuscript they had been working on for five hard years. I didn't say a word as they explained their breakthrough to me. Since both of them are well-respected chemistry professors at a local college in New York City, their ideas were backed up with PhD research and field-tested. But they had spent years keeping their big idea hush-hush.

Slowly we continued the discussion as I walked with them to Barnes & Noble. I listened intently, but I didn't have the heart to burst their bubble, so I just brought them to an *entire section* of published books that were already talking about their "unique" breakthrough. Their shocked looks said it all—their ideas weren't that unique. What they assumed was a proprietary idea had already been beaten to death by dozens of other authors over the years. They hadn't realized that working in a closed world had been dangerous to their research. They had hoarded their supersecret knowledge, assuming it was so unique as to be worth millions. These

two scientists had to abandon everything they had worked on for a half a decade for the book project. If only they had discussed their ideas and researched the industry outside of academia, they might have discovered their faux pas in time and changed direction slightly.

## Shaman or Sherpa?

Like an ostrich that wakes up to find its head in the sand, today's executives must realize they can no longer assume their ideas are unique or even sufficient to take the company to another level. What you think is a unique idea may be a business norm in another country. And Generation Y knows this!

Knowledge sharing, on the other hand, keeps everyone within the team up to date and ready to attack the new frontier. Since young people have this type of "seek out all knowledge all the time" mentality, you will need to start listening to their input. Their accumulated knowledge base will make sure you don't waste your time reinventing the wheel. After all, Gen Y's perspective is unique, and many are working with technology that didn't exist ten years ago. With that in mind, the first step to new leadership on your part is to realize you have more to learn each day. As Alvin Toffler wrote in *Future Shock*, "The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those that cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

Millions of jobs have been phased out over the past ten years because they are no longer relevant. Key positions have become extinct, relics of the twentieth century, because the technology and methodologies they supported no longer exist. At the same time, there is a misalignment between those losing their jobs and the newly created jobs. This misalignment between jobs lost and jobs created exists because the skill sets don't line up. This is leaving millions of unemployed workers wondering what to do next, unaware that all they need is training to fill key positions in high-growth sectors like Green jobs or robotic repair.

Any sharp entrepreneur can see that there is a golden opportunity to build a training company to reposition the unemployed for the demands

of a high tech job. This type of job training can't be found in college. It's just a matter of how the reeducation process gets actualized.


Being able to learn faster is the key to success in the twenty-first century. This means you must have not only the capacity to pick things up quickly but also the openness to let go of old methodologies while embracing new ones. Knowledge sharing works well when confronted with speed learning to learn, unlearn, and relearn in record time. Immersive learning has become the apprenticeship of the twenty-first century, and information-driven entrepreneurs—infopreneurs—are making a killing teaching new methods of learning. Citizens of the Information Age must be dedicated to being lifelong learners.

At first, knowledge sharing can seem counterintuitive. It's a matter of shifting from “me” language to “team” language. But if you make the switch, you will find greater innovation and productivity. And remember, you will only be as strong as your weakest link—the person who isn't receiving knowledge or isn't sharing their knowledge base.

What is the result of closing the distance between knowledge hoarders and leadership? With a flatter hierarchy changes can be implemented quicker than in an organization where the leadership is sitting in an ivory tower, disconnected from the front lines. By making yourself approachable and open to new ideas, you will get the inside scoop on internal innovation as well as problem solving. By giving power to the people on the front lines, you're assured that quality is managed *internally at the source*. Approachability assures that new ideas get funneled to the proper managers . . . and *implemented*.

In organizations where there is strict hierarchy and boundaries, management becomes the last to know when things go wrong—and the last to know they are about to go out of business. Innovative ideas are never brought forward in these types of organizations because no one is inspired to do so. Why bother? Silos begin to form, and knowledge hoarding begins to create redundancy. *This is wasting money*.

So do yourself a big favor—close the gap between upper management and work implementers, get rid of bottlenecks, redistribute decision making, and create an open door policy.



**The hardest thing to face is that the weak link just might be you, the Industrial Age leader, still barking orders at your staff.**

How do you start to manage diverse talents and knowledge in a multigenerational team? Management throughout the years assumed that lower-level employees were just task-driven and not capable of any real innovation. But today's workforce is far sharper. Technology has required a much smarter workforce at all levels. Think about how many software applications you have had to learn to use, along with system diagnostic knowledge. Knowledge workers have had to upgrade in order to be employable. So why not start an open door policy and invite people to bring their ideas to you personally? Instead of being the last to know, now you can be the leader who is in the know.

Today's young workers act more like entrepreneurs and expect to be treated as such. They see themselves as a business partner-slash-consultant who is directly affecting your bottom line. They want to be rewarded, and they know they are the ones making you look good. You may not want to hear this, but it's the truth. They also view leaders who don't contribute to the bottom line as a bloated waste of time. This requires leaders of tomorrow to be more dynamic, personable, and involved.

In this new paradigm, everyone gets to share the leadership role throughout the day and management is just the guide, a Sherpa on this sacred journey. Of course, someone has to make the final decision, but the new workforce expects to be included in the decision-making process. They are confident, knowledgeable self-starters, and if you listen to their contributions with the same respect you would give a thirty-year business veteran, you may be shocked to find that their ideas could revolutionize your business and even your industry.

On the other side of the coin, if you're a member of Gen Y, you need to focus on deadlines and redefine what communication actually is. Cherry-picking the best projects has to be balanced with the basics of business and actually getting some work done. We can't all be working on the next big

breakthrough—someone will have to actually do the task-driven stuff no one wants to do—you know, the *real* work.

Texting, emailing, and instant messaging are ways of speeding up knowledge sharing while eliminating the face-to-face meeting inertia. This definitely helps eliminate stopping and starting on a deadline. It's just that now, technology can be used to speed up production, with simple questions being answered over the network in a five-minute window instead of hours of meetings.

Understand, though, that your responsibility doesn't end just because you click the SEND button. Using technology to touch base or get answers over a network is only a small part of the communication paradigm. The dynamics of interpersonal, interoffice communication will still require face time. What needs to be managed now is when an actual meeting is necessary and for what purpose. And who best to learn this from? Boomers.

For some strange reason there tend to be multiple training sessions to get Baby Boomers on board with how to handle Generation Y. Yet no one is training Gen Y on how to work with Boomers.

This is part of a serious communication gap in most organizations. As Boomers retire, their legacy of knowledge and methodologies isn't getting passed as it once would have. In the past, such generational gaps were naturally filled in, thanks to similar shared experiences. Everyone had similar skill sets and common experiences to eventually bridge the gap. But generations born after 1985 have a technological skill set that no other previous generation has, as well as a completely different ideology for how to live life. And this is causing Gen Y to look at Baby Boomers with mild disdain—as if Boomers are dinosaurs, simply to be tolerated. Hence the failure of generational knowledge to be transmitted as it used to be.

To counter this attitude, and to encourage more openness on the part of Gen Yers, you as a Liquid Leader must stress the knowledge base that Boomers bring to the table. Remind everyone that the technology we are using today was invented by Baby Boomers and that soon the younger workforce will be on their own without a compass. We need to really take the time to bridge that knowledge gap, or otherwise we will be living in a modern technological version of *The Lord of the Flies*.

## Change Is the Only Constant

If you are scared by all this, you should be. Change is here. But you should also be excited. For the first time in history the workforce is brimming with incredibly talented self-starters more than comfortable working in a global marketplace and eager to prove themselves.

How does one stay open and handle the transition that is taking place? Look back at history: What would have made life more palatable for the farmer as his son went off to join the Industrial Revolution, leaving the farm for the factory? What would have prepared the horse-drawn carriage manufacturer for the explosion of that newfangled device called the “automobile”? Companies like Studebaker went from making horse-drawn wagons to making cars—and were damn good at it for a while, because they watched for trends and adapted accordingly.


Now look at what big companies like IBM are doing, sinking serious money into 3D online virtual worlds. Or how about the US military? They are sinking big money into Serious Gaming technology. Meanwhile, NASA is looking at building robots with artificial intelligence for missions beyond our galaxy. Think they are adapting, or wasting their money?

Because change is happening so rapidly, the world that our grandchildren will soon inherit will not look at all like the world in which we’ve grown up. The last 235 years of explosive advancement will look juvenile compared to the hypergrowth about to take place. To be in line with it and capable of seeing it requires a new set of skills. Being closed and incapable of being on top of the changes will only leave you struggling back in the Industrial Age. Challenge everyone to reinvent a completely new business model for you to evolve into. Build it, create it, and be the leader in your category. Hell, get a team involved whose sole mission is to destroy your current business model in favor of a technology-driven global powerhouse that runs lean and mean! Get as many young people on that team as you can. Why? Because they aren’t bogged down by the traditional thought process. They also have a natural propensity for searching out new applications to make their work easier (besides, they are using technology online right now that you aren’t even aware exists).

Change is the constant overall arc that will define the twenty-first century. Once you know that and expect it, will you continue to sit back

on your laurels, or will you get ready to change your entire organization knowing full well that your current business model is being threatened by technology?

As the digital revolution continues to grow, will you be ready to make the leap, or will you stubbornly cling to old business models with a “wait and see” attitude?



**Gather your best and brightest on a Friday afternoon,  
bring in the pizza and beer, and roll up those sleeves.  
Talk with them about how to catch the competition  
with their pants down.**

To shake up their status quo, Netflix announced a competition with a \$1 million reward promised to any team that could improve their movie recommendation service. Is it that Netflix is too close to their internal workings to come up with their own ideas? Or is it something bigger?

Cinematch was Netflix’s movie recommendations engine. For years, it did an efficient job of matching movies with users’ past choices and historical favorites. Then, suddenly, it seemed to plateau. So Reed Hastings, Netflix’s founder, chairman, and CEO, turned to the public for fresh ideas—and upped the competition by offering a million bucks. Almost overnight six hundred teams, totaling one thousand people from thirty-one different countries, registered to participate. The campaign has been so successful, reaping thousands of revenue-generating ideas for immediate use, that Netflix held another contest immediately after. These new ideas will make a company like Netflix cutting-edge and keep them solidly entrenched in the future of content on demand.

So how are you going to take your company from a Model T to a space shuttle? Open up your organization to new ideas. And as you conduct these brainstorming sessions, pay close attention to happy accidents that just might change your industry.

Take a look at the most explosive technology-driven companies over the past thirty years, the ones that made larger, established companies rethink their business model: Microsoft, Apple Computer, Yahoo,

Google, Netscape, Facebook, MySpace, Dell, Electronic Arts, Twitter, etc. All of them were started by twentysomethings frustrated that their ideas were being ignored in favor of the status quo, by old farts in suits who wouldn't listen. These upstarts felt their big ideas were better than anything currently in use. They decided to do something about it, and they turned those ideas into billion-dollar companies.

If you don't start listening to the youth in your company, you will miss the next big idea that is right under your nose. This young generation has been trained as children—through video games, karate classes, lacrosse, and micromanaged scheduling—to see risk taking as normal.

How do micromanagement and karate classes as children translate into risk taking as adults? Simply put, today's middle manager had a Day Runner-style organizational schedule as a youth and thus an enriched lifestyle. They were raised without winners and losers. If they did fail, their parents didn't acknowledge it. Because of this they see life as bold and adventuresome, filled with one experience after another—a dynamic world to be embraced and to leap into, not one spent sitting in a cubicle all day, typing. Video games taught them to take risks and not worry about learning each part of the game; you'll learn that as you go forward. In other words, Gen Y has been raised on taking action before they have the knowledge. (This is the opposite of Boomers.) This has made them ambitious adults not bogged down by status quo thinking or so-called proper behavior. These young people are all looking to invent the million-dollar idea that will allow them to retire before they get old, like, before *forty*, dude. It is impossible for a Millennial to sit still for too long.

So I ask, are you listening to the youth of today? The ones on the front lines who are constantly looking for new software to automate their jobs and your business? You might want to start asking them what they have discovered—and listen to the answer.

## Looking for the Next Big Idea

The hardest part for anyone is trying to stay open to new and fresh ideas. I'll be honest: The first time I saw the Internet, I was cynical. *What is the big*

*deal? How do you make money on this thing?* I wondered. I had friends who were already talking to people all over the world via ham radio. Boring. But then the dot-com boom happened, and everybody wanted a website. It just took off, and I had to eat crow. Either I was right and it was a waste of time, or it was me who didn't get it. No one was explaining it to me.


If someone had explained to me that the World Wide Web was a media channel, a publishing site, a storefront, a communications tool, a web log, and a social network all rolled into one, that had low operational costs and had far greater reach and influence than television, then I might not have been so cynical.

So take a page from my failures, and listen to your younger tech experts. Not only because they have the potential to start their own company and compete directly with you (many of my former employees have done just that), but also because the horrifying truth is that someday soon *you* may have to work for *them*. Many companies are reporting a shift in team management, with twentysomethings leading a Baby Boomer team. It is happening now.

Our entire Industrial Age model will be reworked as we begin to understand that it doesn't apply anymore to the way we do business in the Information Age. From small mom-and-pop stores to large hundred-year-old multinationals, technology has leveled the playing field. Rethinking and retooling your core business may be your only strategy.

I predict a surge in businesses that continuously create new online businesses, sell them off, and reinvent another and another, all according to the marketplace and its needs—idea factories specializing in creating products for a new Internet marketplace. This disruption of traditional business models is a normal part of the twenty-first century, and companies like Google, Atlassian, and Oracle push the boundaries by building an idea incubation farm within their company culture. All they do is give their people the freedom to create something amazing.

Try being adaptable to new ideas, flexible to emerging models and those already in existence, or try creating an entirely new model. After all, what do you have to lose? Oh yeah, your Industrial Age business model and its limitations.



**Today's definition of "cutting edge" means constant diligence and absorption of new ideas and new methods and consistent speed of implementation.**

We can no longer afford to believe that our knowledge accumulation ends once we get a college degree. The idea of coasting once you hit forty is over, as today's graduates hit the ground hungry and eager to prove their worth. And they have new tools at their disposal that we Boomers barely even understand how to use!

The depth of knowledge that your team brings to the table is what determines success these days. The dirty little secret of all this is that no one can fool you by sitting on their past accomplishments, nor can they attempt to razzle-dazzle you with old ideas. Someone with a PhD from twenty years ago may not necessarily be the smartest person in the room. The only way to stay ahead is to commit to a lifetime of learning and challenging our own interpersonal status quo. Skills and knowledge must be constantly updated for everyone's career survival.

Leaders will need to be open to the newness of technology, leverage the fresh perspective that Gen X and Gen Y bring to the table, and spot the "Aha!" moment when they realize how that technology can be used to create a new business paradigm.

You want to be the wise sage who can spot the future in a five-minute, badly presented PowerPoint presentation. To do that requires someone who is open to new ideas and willing to ask a lot of questions that might make you look stupid. But you can laugh all the way to the bank. Remember, many billion-dollar ideas have been scribbled on cocktail napkins by college dropouts.





## About the Author



Brad Szollose is a recognized thought leader, author, entrepreneur, business coach, and speaker, specializing in transitioning leaders from Industrial Age methodologies to the management strategies and emerging markets of the Information Age.

He is no stranger to the boardroom: During the dot-com era of the early nineties, Brad cofounded K2 Design, Inc., raising more than \$7 million in private placement and becoming an IPO. K2 became the first dot-com agency to go public, with sixty employees and valued at more than \$26 million. During Brad's tenure at K2, the company experienced 425 percent growth and received the Arthur Andersen New York Enterprise Award for Best Practices for Fostering Innovation.

Brad served on the K2 board of directors from 1996 to 2001 and on various private boards since. Today, Brad travels the globe speaking to corporations, executives, and entrepreneurs on Information Age leadership strategies, Gen Y management, and new business models for a global village.

CAPTURE THE ADAPTABILITY NECESSARY  
TO ENGAGE AND LEAD A MULTIGENERATIONAL  
WORKFORCE IN AN ERA OF RAPID  
TECHNOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

“In a wonderfully engaging style, Brad draws you into the problems and solutions of running a company in today’s disruptive economy. Eliminating bottlenecks and hierarchy and aligning your entire organization will not only speed things up, it will increase your ability to win the day.”

—Michael Beitler, PhD, author of *Strategic Organizational Change*

“Brad Szollose’s *Liquid Leadership* is enlightening! Managing in today’s environment is not about clinging to a cookbook of best practices, but about developing an environment that drives consistent innovation and change.”

—Vince Poscente, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Age of Speed*

“*Liquid Leadership* will shake you up a little, even if you are doing things right. No matter the size of your organization, the author makes you examine your everyday actions with living, breathing, actionable principles . . . because leadership is won each day not by words, but by actions. Want to reinvent your company? *Liquid Leadership* gives you the answers.”

—Bradley (Brad) Peterson, president of Strategic Asset Management International

“*Liquid Leadership* is not only an informative book, it is destined to become a business manual for any company, large or small, that wants to thrive in any economy. Brad reminds us that it is not a leader’s job to tell people what not to do; it is a leader’s job to encourage people to do what they were created to do.”


—Dave “The Chef” Sheffield, bestselling author and relationship marketing expert

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