

Bridging Generation Gaps

Cultural miscommunications lurk with four generations at work.

It's common to find four generations sharing the same workplace nowadays. With the possibility of having fans of Tommy Dorsey, Led Zeppelin, Donna Summer, and Eminem sitting around the same conference table, navigating unfamiliar cultural territory becomes a daily task.

Generational identity—much like gender and ethnicity—distinguishes each person. But generations don't have to divide people. Understanding and appreciating each other has always been the key to teamwork.

Here are generalities that identify each generation:

•**The Silent or Traditional Generation** (born 1930 to 1945): This group is too young to have been World War II heroes, and too old to participate in the rebelliousness of the 1960s. These kids of the Great Depression learned that "children are to be seen and not heard." They grew up hearing slogans such as, "Loose lips sink ships." They value thrift, hard work, and respect for authority. They built a work ethic on commitment, responsibility, and conformity as tickets to success. A command-

and-control approach comes naturally for members of the silent generation.

•**The Baby Boom Generation** (born 1946 to 1965): This group grew up with the Cleavers, the can-do optimism of John F. Kennedy, and the hopes of the post-World War II American Dream. Social and political upheaval from Vietnam, Watergate, and Woodstock spurred them to rebel against authority and carve lifestyles based on personal values and spiritual growth. Rocked by years of reorganizing, reengineering, and relentless change, they long to stabilize their careers. They welcome team-based work, especially as an antiauthoritarian declaration to "the Silents" before them.

•**Generation X** (born 1966 to 1979): These "GenXers" are street-savvy survivors who grew up quickly amid rising divorce rates, latchkey lifestyles, AIDS, violence, and low expectations. Initially denounced as slackers, they embrace free agency over company loyalty. They don't work to live, but rather live to work. They don't expect to find a final resting place at work. Ambitious and independent, they strive to balance the competing demands of work, family, and personal life.

•**Generation Y, also known as The Echo Boom Generation or Millennials** (born 1980 to 2000): This most recent generation to enter the workforce is referenced in a number of different ways and is still being studied. They benefited from the backlash against hands-off

parenting and the cultural elevation of stay-at-home-moms. Coming of age during a shift toward virtue and values, they set their sights on meaningful goals. In seeking personal and professional fulfillment, they have adopted a can-do attitude that characterizes their work ethic. They are accustomed to lots of feedback and coaching and sometimes shock the older generations with their casual attire and attitude toward hierarchical structure.

With such diverse perspectives, it's little wonder that most workplace polls show that the majority of workers have experienced generational clashes of attitudes, ethics, values, and behaviors.

One problem is that reporting hierarchies no longer correlate to age or experience. Though people of different ages have always worked together, the ranking system that once separated them—with older folks at the top—is largely a thing of the past. Twenty year-olds are working alongside people old enough to be their grandparents and, in some cases, managing them.

Organizations aren't solely responsible for mediating the war of the generations. Rather than wait for employers or consultants to provide a fix, individuals can control their own destinies.

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At a time when most people feel fully responsible for their own careers, you might want to ask yourself what you're going to do to work effectively in a multigenerational workplace. You can start by acknowledging that the workplace has changed and that it will continue to change. You should also accept the various cultures, and respect your associates and their backgrounds. Your career will benefit if you take time to master a few communication tools and strategies.

Here are some suggestions:

•It's not what you say, but how you say it.

Generational clashes often stem from miscommunications in tone or style. The Silents, for example, are aware that they might be technologically challenged; empathy is a better strategy than derision. The younger generations, in general, might have shorter attention spans than their seniors, so they may prefer verbal training to reading documents.

•Understand the different generational motives. GenXers may seem to be less driven, and baby boomers managing GenXers should know that money usually isn't the motivating force. It's quality of life. Managers should look for ways to support GenXers' balanced lifestyle.

•Look beyond appearances. When that cherubic echo boomer suggests that a lovebug has corrupted your computer files, you better listen. When a Silent suggests you're shooting yourself in the foot, realize that there may be memory and wisdom behind the advice.

•Benefit from diverse opinions. Poor teams allow generational differences to divide them; effective teams leverage generational knowledge to better understand and serve their customers and clients. A four-generation team will produce stronger results than any single focus could.

•Choose your mentor wisely. Echo boomers launching careers should skip a generation when seeking guidance or nurturing. They're not likely to find mentoring a priority among GenXers who often think of themselves as free agents looking for balance in their lives and time for themselves.

•Keep an open mind about attitudes. Just because others don't share your work ethic, it doesn't mean they're lazy. If GenXers seem like slackers to the baby boomers and Silents, perhaps it's because they're mindful of how workaholicism affected their own upbringing. They've seen the damaging effects of blind loyalty to an organization (many of their parents were laid off) and aren't apt to fall victim themselves.

•Adapt your style to the realities of today's workplace. Navigating an echo boomer work world with a GenX mindset will inevitably derail your career. Technology, global competition, and demographics have reshaped the workplace, so don't think that your attitudes and perceptions should remain the same.

When navigating the generational landscape, look for what unites you with your peers. Everyone is living through profound changes in the business world. By recognizing and respecting differing ideals about the workplace, you'll get the job done better and faster. Plus, you might have fun.

Source: King, D. (Reviewed 2011). *Bridging generation gaps*. (L. Zereski, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

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