

A New Kind of Diversity: Four Generations at Work

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We live in a fascinating, educational and energizing workplace culture in America. For the first time in history, we have four distinct age generations in the workplace at the same time. They each bring a different frame of reference and each presents unique challenges and opportunities for organization leaders. They each bring unique contributions to the workplace as well. While successful leaders have long recognized that hiring in their own image (i.e. a personality or business approach or even ethnicity similar to their own) is not the best strategy, diversity now includes yet another dimension! The BIG QUESTIONS relative to generational differences are:

1. How can leaders identify and capitalize on both the uniqueness and similarities between the generations?
2. How can leaders build and enhance effective working relationships between the generations?
3. What specific strategies, tools, and language can be used to create an organization of motivated, dedicated employees who will take the Company to the next level of success?

Our research over the last five years, and interviews with hundreds of employees in various industries, has provided us with an encouraging, sometimes humorous outlook.

A Comparison of the Generations: Generation Y (age 18-31)

They are also known as the “Millennium Kids,” the “Net Generation,” and the “Re-boot” Generation. They are perceived by the other generations as very bright but slackers because they always appear to be text messaging. They want some structure in their jobs but have no respect for authority. They want empowerment, even though they are green in terms of business savvy, and want continuous feedback. Their unique contributions include their technical savvy; their high respect for those with wisdom, knowledge and experience; their thirst for business education and continual learning; their unyielding desire to challenge assumptions; their commitment to the goal at hand; and their great desire to contribute their creativity and make a difference in the company.

Because they have typically been raised in an environment where everyone is allowed to win and no one is allowed to lose, they enter the business world filled with self confidence but are afraid to make mistakes. To other generations, they require an unreasonable amount of continuous feedback and encouragement on their work progress.

Generation X (age 32-43)

They are also known as “Baby Busters” and the “NeXt” Generation. They are perceived by the other generations as great problem solvers but too independent, with disdain for consensus building. They are great strategic thinkers but lack good listening skills. They are very good at networking but have little patience with interpersonal skills. Their unique contributions include innovative strategic planning, networking, and partnering across organizations; critical thinking skills in re-assessing the goal; and their appreciation of the need for work/life balance. Because they have typically been raised in an environment where they learned early to take care of themselves and meet their own needs, they entered the business world filled with self confidence but moreover, an impatience for delays in decision making. To other generations, they may unreasonably lack team player skills and/or willingness.

Baby Boomers (age 44-62)

They are also known as the Boomer Generation and the Viet-Nam Generation. They are perceived by the other generations as great sources of experience and business savvy and good mentors but lacking an understanding of the need for work-life balance in the 20's, 30's and 40's (i.e. they tend to be seen as workaholics until approaching retirement themselves). They have good listening skills and are customer focused but still sometimes refuse to realize the extreme possibilities that using modern technology can offer. Their unique contributions include their ability to be role models for customer focus, teamwork, collaboration, and focusing on the goal at hand as well as long term goals. Because they were typically raised in an environment where it was important to give families and children material possessions, they entered the business world with a focus on attracting title, status, and toys that proved their success. They were also raised in an environment that was customer focused, both internal and external to the family. To other generations, they may appear too status conscious and too slow in decision making.

Mature Generation (age 63+)

They are also known as the Traditionalist Generation, the Silent Generation, and the GI Generation. They are perceived by the other generations as being good listeners but still convinced only by their own experience and answers. They are good business mentors but too command/control oriented. They are strong decision makers but not empowering enough to let others make the decisions. Their unique contributions include their business experience, wisdom from life experience, ability to mentor others, and commitment to the long term goal. Because they were typically raised in an environment where integrity, respect for authority and attention to hard work were demanded, they entered the business world with a need for clear structure, chain of command in decision making, and trust in agreements by handshake. To other generations, they may

be perceived as stubborn and overly concerned with respect when it is not warranted.

The Challenge

There are valid reasons for the negative perceptions toward each generation by the others. There are also very logical and effective ways to approach the differences by embracing each group's unique contributions. Dissertation research and hundreds of personal interviews over the past few years have suggested some interesting recommendations. As we share these, audiences tell us our recommendations are innovative and useful!

We know that some things are age and maturity driven – the baby boomers were the rebels of their day who, in their twenties, wanted to do things differently and change the world – just as the Millennial Generation (Gen-Y) employees of today have the need to make a difference in the company they work for and have an impact on their world.

Some things are generational driven, however, based on the environmental experiences during the formative years. For example, Generation-X employees are typically problem solvers and strategic thinkers who don't like being told to work on teams. They are independent thinkers who have a disdain for forced consensus decision-making. However, they are outstanding at partnering with others throughout the organization to solve problems. This is because they were also typically latch-key children of single parent or working parent households where they were included in family discussions of budget planning and vacation planning. They were taught to be very independent in taking care of themselves, making decisions, and managing their choices. This is a much different environment from the typical Generation-Y employee, even though he or she may also have two working parents. The Generation-Y employee who is seen text-messaging at work is often calling a parent or mentor to discuss a current workplace decision.

Recommendations

Both leaders and peers within organizations can look at a number of approaches and actions that can be taken immediately to (a) understand the other generations' values and expectations in the workplace; (b) take advantage of the strengths and perspectives that each generation offers; (c) recognize the similarities and that a way of thinking, versus numerical age, is key to building a stronger values-based organization; and (d) gain a better appreciation of the generational diversity in the organization.

Generation Y

Generation Y employees tell us one of their biggest frustrations at work is not receiving enough feedback from their managers. They require continual feedback in order to be comfortable that they are making a difference and making progress (and not making mistakes). We have recommended to their managers (usually Generation X) that tasks and projects be assigned with a clearly expressed result

in mind and an agreement for milestones to be reached along the way. The Gen-Y can be comfortable knowing that feedback will be received often, and the Gen-X manager can be comfortable that he or she won't be interrupted constantly with the question, "How am I doing?" The Gen-X leaders tell us they want their younger employees to spread their wings and experiment and do things over if necessary, the same way their own generation learned to be successful.

They want their employees to bring new, innovative ideas to the table. Their Gen-Y employees tell us, however, that while they are excited to do that, they see their gift as enhancing and building upon the contributions made by Generation X. They also fear that their contributions will not be considered good enough in the business environment so they need to know they are on the right track. Therefore a balance of feedback can be beneficial for both generations.

Generation X

What is our recommendation for Gen-X employees who don't want to be part of a team? Our incumbents have agreed that if we ask them to partner with anyone they need, or even specific individuals in various departments, to solve a company problem, and if we say that we want everyone involved to agree on the solution, they have no difficulty in meeting that requirement. We simply called it partnering instead of cross-functional teamwork! There are some nuances to each type of process, of course, but the outcome still has input and agreement from all the necessary stakeholders.

Baby Boomers

Generation X managers often perceive their Baby Boomer supervisors, peers and employees as not being quick enough to make decisions. A balance between focus on process, milestones and end results can address the needs of both generations by focusing on both the short term and long term goal. If timeframes are in place for each of these elements, then the Baby Boomer's need for data, process, and input from others – i.e. decision making in a reasonable manner – can be balanced against the Gen-X's need for decision making in a timely manner.

Mature Generation

Other generations, while thankful for the knowledge and history that the Mature Generation members bring to the organization, are often frustrated by the older generation's insistence on what will or won't work, how things should be, and working through a specific chain of command. We have learned Mature Generation leaders and employees are more open to new, innovative ways of doing things if they have the ability to (a) contribute verbally up front the cautions to be anticipated, and (b) critique afterward what worked and didn't work and offer ways to improve upon the new ways. In this way, they become part of the solution, rather than perpetuators of the old ways and stuck in the same problems. They no longer see the old ways of doing things as the only alternatives and are more able to see new possibilities.

Additional Recommendations

We should also consider other personality style differences, styles of absorbing information, and methods of making decisions and approaching issues, such as the Myers-Briggs styles and the Visual/ Auditory/ Kinesthetic - and we have added Intuitive/Digital styles!

These personality and learning styles add value to the discussion of age diversity and demonstrate that employees may share very strong characteristics across generational lines which bond them in various scenarios regardless of their age. The similarities establish the connection or bond between individuals, so that the differences become the basis for conversation rather than conflict. Establishing commonalities is the key to appreciating differences as unique contributions in any situation.

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