Managing Across the Generations

Generational diversity at work is growing as many older employees are working longer and younger employees are increasingly joining the work force. Teams are likely to include multiple generations in the years to come. In many cases, your direct supervisor may be someone much younger or older than you. The more you understand the unique perspectives, work styles, and goals of the generations you work with and manage, the more effective you will be as a manager and an employee.

Here are six ways to lead diverse teams and effectively manage across the generations.

1. **Become educated about generational issues.**
   Learning about generational issues will contribute to your understanding of what motivates your employees at different ages and stages of their careers.

   - *Matures (born between 1927 and 1945).* Matures were taught to put a high premium on loyalty and are accustomed to a top-down approach to management. They may appreciate clear direction and guidelines. Their values often include dedication and self-sacrifice, hard work, consistency, respect for authority, and “duty before pleasure.”

   - *Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964).* Baby boomers have had to compete with each other at every step of their careers. They love challenge and have worked hard to build stellar careers. Some are workaholics. Eighty percent of baby boomers plan to continue working after age 65.

   - *Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1977).* Gen Xers tend to value flexibility, work-life balance, and autonomy on the job. They appreciate managers who can help them define and refine their career goals. Gen Xers tend to be self-reliant; to be technologically savvy; and to value a fun, informal workplace.

   - *Generation Yers (born between 1978 and 2000).* Gen Yers are often excellent team players and like collaboration. They tend to be comfortable with and respectful of authority and relate well to people who are older. They use sophisticated technology with ease. More than any generation that has come before, Gen Yers are comfortable with diversity.

2. **Avoid age stereotypes.**
   It falls to you to create the climate that lets all employees do their best. Avoid stereotypes about age and reinforce that message to employees. “Keep an open
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“mind,” advises Tamara Erickson, author of three books on the generations in the workplace, including her most recent, *Plugged In: The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work*. “Perhaps the most important step in successfully navigating generational diversity is learning to recognize and avoid stereotypical thinking about people from other generations.”

Here are some common stereotypes to watch for:

**Stereotypes about younger employees:**

- They aren’t as loyal and committed as older employees. **Fact:** Research shows younger employees are actually very loyal while they are working for the company; however, younger employees also realize that long-term job security is a thing of the past. Jennifer Deal, author of *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*, says that different generations have about the same levels of loyalty.
- They aren’t willing to work long hours. **Fact:** The willingness or unwillingness to work long hours has nothing to do with age.
- They aren’t willing to pay their dues before moving up the ladder. **Fact:** Everyone likes advancement, recognition, and moving up the ladder. Younger people are no different in this regard.
- They don’t value the experience of older workers. **Fact:** Younger employees very much value mentoring relationships, and once paired with older workers, knowledge transfer often goes both ways.
- They have poor work habits and need a lot of supervision, direction, and structure. **Fact:** Younger workers may work differently -- for example, working different hours or working from home -- but that doesn’t mean they don’t work hard and get a lot done. Having been raised with technology, younger employees often work very well independently.

**Stereotypes about older employees:**

- They are “technologically challenged.” **Fact:** Mature workers become skilled users of technology once trained and can be just as interested in technology training as younger workers. Bear in mind that many older workers are sensitive about their technology skills and the disadvantages they feel. Show sensitivity in helping them toward developing better skills, and don’t let younger workers put them down with dazzling but ill-explained shows of technical virtuosity.
- They are slower and therefore less productive. **Fact:** Dozens of studies show that there are only minor differences in performance between younger and older workers at similar jobs.
- They aren’t interested in personal development or career development. **Fact:** New learning for seasoned employees is one of the fastest-growing trends in the training arena.
- They resent having to work alongside younger workers. **Fact:** They enjoy the camaraderie of interacting with every generation at work.

- They won’t “let go of the reins” and allow younger workers to take on responsibility. **Fact:** While this is true for some, many older workers are the best mentors, managers, and role models in their organizations, campaigning tirelessly for the next generation to be recognized and to succeed.

**3. Manage to the unique strengths and needs of each generation.**

Try to meet the needs of different employees with different solutions. “One size no longer fits all when it comes to managing,” explains generational expert David Stillman. “With so much generational diversity in today’s workplace, the best managers will be those who can flex to meet the needs of different employees with different solutions. That might mean flexing on work hours, dress codes, or even rewards, so that diverse preferences can be respected. While this sounds like a lot of work for managers, it can also be a very creative process. And the payoff can be huge.”

**4. Support learning and career development across all age groups.**

Learning on the job is important for employees of all ages.

- **Provide opportunities for older and younger employees to work together.** Encourage training opportunities and project assignments that bring the generations together. It’s a way for people to transfer knowledge, and it provides opportunities for mentoring. Avoid pairing the same people to projects together. Mixing the generations creates excellent opportunities for learning and team building.

- **Offer employees of all ages opportunities to develop new skills.** “People from every generation and at every level want a coach,” says Deal. Every employee should have a personal development plan, no matter how simple. Encourage people of every age group to sign up for trainings, workshops, and courses.

- **Provide opportunities for two-way mentoring.** You may want to ask an employee who is good with technology to mentor a co-worker who has less experience with computers, or ask an employee with management experience to mentor an employee who is assuming a supervisory role on a project for the first time. Let each person know that you expect to see results.

- **Tailor training to people’s individual strengths and learning styles.** Avoid age stereotypes about how people like to learn. “Younger people do not want to learn everything via a computer,” says Deal. “Older people want to learn some things via a computer.”

**5. Don’t assume that conflict at work is due to generational issues.**

There are always going to be conflicts at work, says Deal. Don’t assume that generational differences are the cause of the problem. Conflict can be managed.
with thoughtful planning and sensitivity on the part of managers and organizations.

- **Bring issues into the open and discuss them with employees.** When conflict arises, begin by arranging individual meetings with the employees involved. Identify the root of the conflict. Is it the result of a miscommunication? Personality issues? Different work styles or belief systems? Identifying the cause can help people reach a resolution more quickly.

- **Help people turn negative energy into positive action.** One thing you might do is bring people of diverse ages together on a project so that they can profit from each other’s different points of view, perspectives, and experience. In group meetings and individual conversations, model the respect for the strengths of each group member that you want people to show toward each other. You could say, “Be sure to get some input from Linda. She’s done a lot of these presentations.” Or, “Ask Frank for help with the PowerPoint slides. He’s great at that.” Putting your work group through a training course on generational differences or diverse thinking styles is also an excellent way to help employees acknowledge their differences and work together effectively as a team.

- **Seek support from your manager or the program that provided this publication** if you could use help managing generational issues. Talking it through with someone outside your department can be very helpful. Better yet, ask to speak to someone from another generation who might have the perspective you need.

6. **Build a strong multigenerational work group.**
Building a strong multigenerational work group requires commonsense people management, flexibility, and careful attention to the needs of both individuals and the group you manage.

- **Get to know employees as individuals in one-on-one and group conversations.** Find out what it takes to make your employees happy, advises Catherine Dixon-Kheir in a SHRM article on retaining young, diverse workers. Her advice is relevant across the generations. “Ask each of your direct reports what it will take to keep them with your organization, and use this information to create action plans to retain valuable talent.” Do this sooner rather than later.

- **Be a “generation friendly” manager.** Experts use this term to describe managers who are aware of and inclusive of generational differences and who adapt their management style to individuals’ needs. One way to be a generation friendly manager is to show every employee you manage that everyone’s opinion matters and counts.

- **Point out individuals’ unique contributions to the group in team meetings and in one-on-one meetings.** Compliment an older worker’s insight that comes from experience and a younger worker’s great new idea. Point out successes of those who exemplify teamwork when working with other departments. Over time, people
will begin to understand the positive attributes each generation brings to the workplace.

• Talk about generational issues with your group. You might do this informally at a brown-bag lunch. Use the discussion to share ideas and insights and clear up misunderstandings.

“People from different generations are largely alike in what they think, believe, and want from their work life,” writes Deal in *Retiring the Generation Gap*. Keep that in mind and you’ll bridge generation gaps and turn differences into a strength in your organization by helping people stay focused on common values and goals.

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