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The New Melting Pot: How to Effectively Lead Different Generations in the Workplace

[By Anne Houlihan]

Put a group of strangers together, ask them to work side by side in the same building or office for eight or more hours each day, and you're bound to have some conflict. And when that group contains people from differing generations, all with different values and views of the world, the amount of conflict your office experiences can greatly increase.

Managing and motivating a diverse workforce can certainly be challenging. As more and more people from the youngest generation enter the workforce and work alongside the most senior employees, many managers are learning that a one-size-fits-all management style simply does not exist. That's because each of the four generations now working side-by-side brings unique viewpoints to the table and lets generation-specific values guide daily actions.

If you want to effectively lead your staff despite generational differences and encourage others to learn from the diversity of the group, then consider the following guidelines.

1. Identify whom each of the four generations encompasses.

The first step to reducing conflict caused by generational differences is knowing which generation each of your employees falls into. The four generations are:

- The Veterans (also called the Traditionals), born between 1922 and 1946
- The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964
- Generation X, born between 1964 and 1980
- The Millennials (also called Generation Y or the Nexters), born between 1980 and 2000

Realize that each of these four generations grew up experiencing significantly different

events—events that have shaped their values and their perceptions of work. For example, the Veterans went through World War II and grew up with a strict regimen. As such, quality, respect, and authority are important to them. Baby Boomers embraced the value of having to sacrifice to get ahead. All that sacrifice makes them very loyal. Generation Xers were the latchkey children who watched their Boomer parents forge a new workplace. They were also the first generation to grow up with technology. As such, this generation cares more about productivity and less about the number of hours spent on the job. Millennials are a generation entrenched in technology. They are the consummate multitaskers and bore easily. Because they best understand how to maximize and leverage the new technology, they value a balanced lifestyle and equality on the job.

2. Draw on the strengths of each generation.

Once you know which of your employees fall into the various generation groups, you can help them understand each other so they can focus on each other's strengths. Current research indicates that the majority of conflicts arise from the value differences of the age groups rather than the actual age differences themselves. So it's more about "my values are the right ones, and yours are not." For example, Veterans may think the "young kids" in the workplace are lazy, while the Millennials or Generation Xers may think the Veterans and even Baby Boomers are too rigid. However, if all the generations are open-minded, they can learn much from each other.

Realize that each generation brings wonderful strengths to the workplace.

And while focusing on our own individual strengths is certainly important, imagine how much more effective everyone on your team could be if you each learned from the strengths of others as well. Publicly acknowledge what each generation's strengths are, and encourage everyone to share his or her viewpoints and values with the group. Once you get the dialogue started, the learning naturally follows.

3. Adapt your management style for each generation.

Leading four different generations often requires you to have four different management styles. For example, a Baby Boomer manager was managing a Millennial employee. Every day at 5:00 p.m., the employee finished his work for the day, shut down his computer, and headed home. Even though the employee was scheduled to leave work at 5:00 p.m. and there were no major projects or deadlines looming, the manager wanted to write up the employee for not staying later. The real problem was that the Baby Boomer manager valued long hours on the job, while the Millennial employee valued life balance. The point is that you can't manage according to your value system. Rather, you need to manage according to the employee's value system.

Likewise, when conflict does arise, you need to put your biases aside. If a Veteran and a Gen Xer are having challenges with each other, and you're a Gen X manager, you can't naturally side with your fellow Gen Xer just because you share the same values. Rather, you need to be objective, understand the communication style of each person involved, and manage according to the situation and the people involved.



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4. Accept what you cannot change.

No matter how hard you try, you cannot change the generations. Instead, acknowledge the validity of each generation's values, and change how you motivate the different generations. That is, incorporate different motivational techniques into your management style. Find out what each person wants as a motivational incentive. For example, a Gen Xer may want time off for a good job, while a Veteran may want a monetary bonus. Ask your employees what they find motivating, and then offer that incentive. Give people choices. After all, if someone really values family and wants time off to spend with his or her loved ones, all the money in the world won't make that person happy. Rather, he or she will seek out a company that offers ample time off, even if it means accepting a lower salary.

A Successful Company...for Generations to Come

Business is challenging enough. Don't let generational differences complicate your company. By following these guidelines for managing a generationally diverse workplace, you can more effectively draw on all the strengths of your team, which in turn makes you a stronger company. And in a marketplace where only the strong survive, you need all your team members—young and old—focused on the same objectives and working together effectively.

About the Author

Anne Houlihan is President of Satori Seal, where she tripled revenues in one year and increased profits 140% with her innovative budgeting and leadership techniques.

Despite her husband's death, Anne managed to grow their business, Satori Seal, into the international company it is today. As founder of Golden Key Leadership, Anne combines more than 25 years of hands-on corporate experience and coaching to help companies of all sizes. With her speaking and consulting, she helps improve management techniques, empower employees to be decision makers, bridge the generational gap, and overcome adversity. For more information on her speaking and consulting, go to www.goldenkeyleadership.com or call 951-235-5405.

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