

How to Address Generational Workforce Challenges

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Are differences in work and communication style in the workplace among the different generations the cause of leadership/supervisory challenges or is it something else?

There have been a plethora of articles, seminars, webinars and discussions around millennials in the workplace and the challenges of managing and working with them due to their different work style.

When we talk about the importance of differences in the workplace, sometimes we forget about one of the most prominent dimensions — age. There are three main generations in our workforce currently, and we are on the brink of adding a fourth. Understanding how to relate to each is critical to successfully keeping them motivated and engaged in their work.

The Baby Boomers: Born between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. Also known as the “Me Generation.” They grew up with television. Mothers were typically home waiting for their children to come home from school, and children were allowed outside of their homes unsupervised. Their relationships with their parents, teachers and others in authority were somewhat contentious.

Boomers came into the workforce in droves. They were the first “workaholics.” Their frame of reference at work was to spend as much time as possible working, sacrificing time with families, so that good things would come to them. Motivating them at work is typically done via the “carrot and stick” approach.

Generation “X”: Born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. Also known as the “Latchkey Kids” or the “Sandwich Generation” because they are sandwiched between the huge baby boomer and millennial groups. They grew up in an era when more mothers entered the workforce and children came home from school to an empty home. They fended for themselves. They were instructed not to answer the door to anyone they didn’t

know. As a result, they became independent and skeptical. They entered the workforce with the frame of reference that they needed to have multiple careers so that they didn’t put all their eggs in one basket. They didn’t want to experience the disappointments of prior generations. They tend to be entrepreneurial and individualistic. Managing them at work became more complicated due to their supercilious attitude and resentment towards the boomers and millennials.

Many feel that they do not have career paths because the boomers aren’t leaving and the millennials are leapfrogging over them.

Generation “Y” (millennials): Born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. Also known as “Echo Boomers.” They represent the largest generation in the workforce and its members generally have high levels of self-esteem. They are highly educated and technologically savvy. Their preferred communication style is text messaging. Their relationships with their parents tend to be that of friends or peers because their parents typically have moved away from the authoritarian style in which they were raised. As a result, they have grown up in an era where their lives are programmed and organized from birth, which doesn’t prepare them to cope with disappointment or help them to make decisions on their own. For example, their nurseries were monitored via the baby monitor. Their parents organized their social activities via “play dates” versus allowing them to go outside unsupervised. Moreover, parents of millennials have instilled within their children entitlement attitudes vis-à-vis “everyone is right” and “everyone gets a trophy.” Many parents become advocates for their children with schools, their friends and even their workplaces. As a result, this generation has expectations that may not be realistic. They’ve entered the workplace with the expectation that they can work whenever and however works best for them. Managers from prior generations tend to have trouble supervising this group, even though they were probably the same parents who raised them,

because this generation's virtual style of working is very different from what older generations are used to.

Generation "Z": Born between early 2000s to the present. This generation is extremely technologically savvy. Many had iPads as toddlers. They are now in high school and college.

Perhaps the upshot to all of this is that it doesn't matter to which generation a person belongs since all workers tend to want the same things:

- Good bosses
- Career paths
- Recognition

If you think back on all the jobs you've ever had and all the bosses you've ever had, which boss would you choose as your favorite and why? Now, give yourself a rating against your favorite boss in order to determine where you would like to develop your supervisory skills. After all, how do people become bosses? Do they go to school to learn how to be a great boss? Not usually. Typically, they do something well from a technical perspective and then they are promoted out of what they do well and placed into a job (managing others) that they may not be familiar with, and for which they get no training. With proper training of managers and supervisors, organizations have a better chance to have skilled employees who care and are productive regardless of which generation they fall in because people join companies — they quit bosses.

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