

THEY'RE HERE! MANAGING MULTIPLE GENERATIONS



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By Jo Smith, CMC

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Generational theory tells us each generation is shaped by significant events that occur during that generation's formative years, approximately ages 10-18. For example, baby boomers were shaped by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement; Gen X by the rise of the personal computer and the fall of the Berlin Wall; Gen Y (also known as millennials) by 9/11 and child-centric families; and Gen Z by the internet and continuous disruption. Understanding that generations are shaped by shared events in their formative years can help you embrace their differences, even without knowing what those shared events were. Be open to their differences and assume positive intentions.

More broadly speaking, while working with a county bar association to study generational differences, I became convinced it's the role of every younger generation to poke and prod for change: "There's a better way to do this." And it's the role of every older generation to protect what's working: "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." These two viewpoints often clash, but understanding they actually complement each other will help you embrace those differences and manage across generations. Know both perspectives are critical to the progress and ongoing success of your team and organization, and both need your awareness and attention.

Members of older generations valued hard work and loyalty, and top-down management was the accepted norm. They commonly worked for the same organization for their entire careers. Younger generations have increasingly valued lifestyle over advancement and want to be heard by management. It's common for them to change employers several times during their careers. The COVID-19 pandemic made flexibility and working from home huge and ongoing issues between many employers and employees. Younger employees, especially, have come to expect more opportunities for both.

How can you effectively manage across generations?

- **Start with an open and understanding mindset.** Know yourself and your strengths. Know what your biases might be. Consider identifying what you must have from your employees and what behaviors are deal breakers. For instance, certain skills are clearly a must, and you probably require certain hours. You might require your employees to treat you and their teammates with respect, even when they disagree, while disrespectful or demeaning behavior might be a deal breaker. Be clear about your must-haves and deal breakers, but challenge yourself to be open to differing ideas, values, and behaviors.
- **Appreciate each other.** When I was growing up, I was told to "tolerate" differences, because that was the language of the day. But, tolerating differences isn't enough, not nearly enough. To manage across differences, it's important you embrace those differences. Understand and appreciate the value those differences bring to your team and workplace. And remember we're all more alike than we are different. In addition to our differences, we all have shared values. Build on those shared values and appreciate the differences.
- **Respect diversity with your language and behavior.** Respect is critical to the success of any workplace. In your language and behavior, show respect and appreciation for the diversity on

your team—generational and otherwise. Unfortunately, ageism exists in the workplace. I've seen younger people dismiss the experience of the older generation and I've heard older people complain about the work ethic of the younger generation. Even when they're not spoken, these judgments are surely felt. When I hear these complaints, I remind people of the value each generation brings to the workplace. Older workers generally have historic knowledge and provide stability. Younger workers typically bring new ideas and solid values, even when those values are sometimes different. Referring back to my study with the county bar association, many of the older members acknowledged privately that they wished they had valued family and lifestyle more throughout their careers, as their younger peers were doing. Maybe your values aren't as different as you think.

- **Build on your commonalities.** What commonalities do you and your team members share, regardless of generation? Hopefully, you all take pride in the valuable work you do, providing reliable utilities for your communities. That commonality is a strength you can build on by reminding the members of your team periodically of the important work they do and how each of them contributes to that work. Do you share a commitment to excellent customer service? That, too, is a shared value you can build on across generations.
- **Negotiate or accept your differences.** The younger generation seeks more flexibility and more pay. As a manager, you might not be able to negotiate those differences, but you can recognize them. If appropriate, maybe you can advocate for pay raises or more flexible schedules. Maybe you can manage the work schedule to sometimes accommodate your team members' personal needs. Or maybe you can help them enjoy their work more and advance their careers. Your understanding and support will be appreciated.
- **Provide timely mentoring and feedback.** Young people often don't ask for help, because they're afraid of appearing ignorant or because they simply don't know what they don't know. Take the initiative and offer mentoring, from yourself or others. Remember the purpose of mentoring isn't just to provide corrective feedback but is to develop your team members by improving their skills and sharing your experiences. There was a time when feedback wasn't provided at all. Then annual reviews became the norm. Regular, timely feedback is more effective, however. "Great job," is helpful, but "You did an excellent job of planning and organizing that project," is more helpful. The more detail you provide to help people understand what they did well and what you appreciate about their work, the better. You'll get more of what you compliment, more of what you want. Also, if you compliment frequently and meaningfully, you'll have more freedom to provide useful criticism when it's necessary.
- **Explore new ideas.** Always be open to new ideas, including new technology. It's your job to be open and listen to new ideas from every generation. That doesn't mean you need to incorporate every new idea, but it's important you listen to them. If the ideas are worthy or

simply interesting, try them out or let a team member try them out. If, after consideration, you decide not to try the new idea, say why. Your team members will know they have been heard and will appreciate your openness.

- **Ask and listen.** Some leaders don't ask questions because they think they know the answers or are afraid of admitting they don't know the answers. Asking, however, is a powerful tool of highly successful leaders. Asking and listening are both skills of emotionally intelligent people. It's sometimes thought that emotional intelligence—made up of self-knowledge, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—is stagnant. It is not. You can improve your emotional intelligence throughout your life. Asking and listening are critical skills everyone can improve, and these skills will make you a better manager and person.

These overlapping suggestions, when consciously and regularly applied, will help you manage across generations more successfully and effectively.

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