



MAKING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES WORK FOR YOU

By Abe Kane, CPCU,
and Lauren Oliver

For the first time in history, four generations are represented in the workplace at once. On the surface, this presents a significant challenge as miscommunication and conflict across these generations can negatively affect productivity, morale and even increase turnover. If managed incorrectly, the survival of your division, department or entity's long-term viability may be in question.

With this challenge comes a tremendous opportunity. If managed correctly, the diversity of viewpoints represented by the four generations can lay the groundwork for a dynamic and rewarding work experience for all. However, in order to take advantage of this opportunity, one needs to spend some time learning a bit more about what drives each of these groups.

The four generations in the workplace include the following:¹

GENERATION	BIRTH YEARS	AGES AS OF 2011
Traditionalists	1920–1945	66–83
Boomer	1946–1960	51–65
Generation X (Gen X)	1961–1979	32–50
Generation Y (Gen Y) or Millennial	1980–1995	14–31



Each generation has a set of shared experiences. These experiences have shaped many of the thoughts, behaviors and values the generations bring with them into the work environment. (Sidebars 1-4 outline the defining moments each generation has shared.)

While these experiences affect many aspects of the work environment, this article will focus on two areas in which an understanding of generational differences can lead to improved performance and team dynamics: giving feedback to employees and providing them with effective training.

FEEDBACK

Providing feedback through an annual review is a process with which many people struggle. As a manager, not only is it difficult to find the words for valid criticisms, but now we must also think about how the differences between generations may impact the review process.

You are a Boomer managing a Gen Y associate. You provide feedback to the associate that they are doing well in the job, but that they need to start to see the big picture on projects and work on their own. Also, others in the office have mentioned that the employee often leaves early. You remind the associate that the standard hours for a municipal employee are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and that you would like to see them keep to more of a traditional schedule. You believe the review was well-received and are excited to have the review completed. The phone rings the next day and it is the associate's mother complaining about the review of her child. How do you handle this?

Your first response might be, "Wow! How am I supposed to work with someone who thinks so differently than I do and would bring their mother into the discussion? When are

they going to learn that they just need to pay their dues and start assimilating into our culture?"

Well, if you're waiting on the answers to those two questions you might end up waiting a long time and missing an excellent opportunity in the process.

In the example, the first issue we encounter is that the review is part of a **formal annual** review process. Gen Y, or as they often refer to themselves, Millennials, have a desire for constant feedback and frequently struggle under the once-a-year review approach. Millennials also view feedback as a form of coaching as opposed to a critique. They're often stressed out and sometimes even non-responsive to negative criticism. They take constructive criticism as a suggestion as opposed to an order. Some suggestions include, offering frequent feedback instead of yearly reviews, communicating with the employee more often and emphasizing the business reasons behind your suggestions. Don't become offended if they do not take all of your suggestions and when something is a directive, make sure that you are clear that it is not optional.

The second issue raised in this example is "standard" work hours. This is an instance where the values of Millennials and Gen Xers clash with those of their Boomer bosses. The younger generations do not want to spend their entire lives working. Gen Xers are sensitive to this, as they were the first latch-key kids. Millennials view work as just one of their many gigs. Using output-based goals as opposed to time-based ones for these generations can be very effective and in situations where this is not possible, try establishing group norms and explaining why the schedule they may view as "restrictive" is necessary.

The issue of parent involvement in the work relationship is one that we are just beginning to see develop. In some cases, parents have gone as far as to show up at a job interview

TRADITIONALIST SHARED EXPERIENCES

- The Great Depression
- New Deal
- WWII & Korean War
- Booming post-war economy
- Growth of suburbs
- Increased availability of consumer goods
- The rise of labor unions
- Social Security

BOOMERS SHARED EXPERIENCES

- McCarthy Hearings
- Television, Elvis and rock & roll
- Kennedy presidency
- Civil Rights Movement
- Kennedy (John, Bobby) & King Assassinations
- Vietnam War
- Woodstock, "free love," & birth control
- Moon landing
- Women's rights movement
- Credit cards

XERS SHARED EXPERIENCES

- Tripling divorce rate
- "Latch-key kids"
- Video games, cable TV & MTV
- Corporate downsizing
- Women entering the workforce
- Era of "Greed is Good"
- CNN and electronic games
- AIDS
- Challenger explosion
- Persian Gulf War

MILLENNIALS SHARED EXPERIENCES

- Terrorism: 9/11, WTC, Oklahoma City
- "Girls" Movement
- Technology & information driven
- Google, Web references, & text messages
- Pro-child culture
- Clinton/Lewinsky scandal
- Corporate and political corruption as a way of life
- Millennials are known to consume 31 hours of media within a 24-hour period
- School violence

ADDITIONAL GENERATIONAL SUGGESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Use Boomers (**not Xers**) as mentors for Millennials.
- 2 Traditionalists and Boomers require the most training with technology. Technology training can increase both their comfort with the new technology as well as their productivity.
- 3 Loyalty to an individual is the #1 reason younger generations will remain in a job and dissatisfaction with their boss is the #1 reason they will quit.
- 4 Xers and Millennials preferences vary widely when it comes to working in groups or as parts of a team. Millennials often thrive in these situations, while Xers usually prefer to divide the work concentrating on the parts assigned to them by the group.

¹This article discusses the four generations currently inhabiting the workplace. Generational studies are *generalizations* and this article approaches them as such. The information in this article is based on American influences.

²Demographers differ on the exact dates (sometimes by several years) and individuals who were born on the extremes often exhibit many of the traits of the generation that precedes or follows them.



with their Millennial children and while the trend is disconcerting to some, it highlights the powerful role that parents have in the lives of many Millennials and is a trend that is likely to accelerate. No generation has had as much positive attention focused on them as this one. Millennials view parents as their friends and consistently involve them in decision-making. Instead of being turned off or mortified at the parent calling and asking about the review, engage them and have the parent become your advocate. Chances are you will see the changes you requested in the employee.

While our first example focuses on communicating with Millennials, understanding the preferred communication methods of other generations is also important.

Members of Gen X also prefer to receive feedback often throughout the year. They place a high value on understanding how their work fits into the entity's mission and their review and the feedback they expect is just not part of the "process." Xers tend to trust and bond with exceptional bosses and are often reluctant to trust organizations or institutions. Gen Xers will want to know how this review will give them access to other career paths and options, as they prefer flexibility in their careers as opposed to putting all of their eggs in one basket.

When providing feedback to a Boomer, we need to evaluate what Boomers value in the workplace. First, they tend not to be nearly as hungry as the younger generations for feedback and are often happy with a quarterly or even annual review schedule. Competition is a big driver for them; throughout their careers they have had to compete to obtain and then hold onto each position they have achieved. Action plans work well for Boomers, specifically ones to improve skills or change behavior. This translates to showing them how to get a leg up on the competition. Boomers also have a greater appreciation for public feedback than do the younger generations, whether through titles and status or a workplace that celebrates their success.

Although Traditionalists may remain in the workplace due to economic need, many still value the recognition they receive and often most importantly the feeling of being part of a team. When providing feedback to a Traditionalist, expressing appreciation for their efforts and acknowledging that they have the best interests of



the organization at heart go a long way. Articulate how making a few changes in their behavior will increase the value of the organization and you will usually find a willing ally.

TRAINING

Training is another area where an awareness of generational differences can allow you to more effectively convey your message and increase the chance that your target audience is receptive to it.

You've been trying to think of new ways to energize and motivate your team and have developed a new training session to do so. Your concern, however, is that in the past training efforts have fallen somewhat flat. It feels as if you are continually repeating the same information and yet the group doesn't appear to retain anything. What can you do to get your message across to your group that consists of members from all four generations?

The first thing you might consider is breaking up the training, tailoring it to your group or audience and presenting it to them in separate groups. The training methods preferred by each generation vary widely and by focusing your message, you are likely to have greater success. If this is not an option, then at least keeping the following preferences in mind can help keep you from losing the attention of a portion of your group.

Traditionalists like to show up early for presentations and can handle long lecture formats. They will show respect for the person presenting (authority figures) right away and will respond well to case studies.

Boomers like to use the coffee breaks and lunch breaks as a way to network and be social with other employees. They prefer to train in small groups in order to show off their skills and gain recognition from their peers. Boomers often respond best when there is an element of competition.

For Gen Xers, they may view training as a complete waste of time. Case studies should be directly on point and given to individuals, instead of team training. If you are presenting in front of a group of Xers, you should be prepared to earn their respect before you have their attention. Xers do not take kindly to presenters who do not stick with the planned agenda and start/end time.

For Millennials, it is important to capture their attention and keep them from multi-tasking and texting. They prefer the team-training concept. Activities where they can get up and out of their seat and use different skills are helpful.

These are just a few of the items to consider when providing feedback to an employee or planning for your next training session. While there is no perfect solution, it is important to address the different values each generation brings to the workplace. The challenge is yours to make these differences work for you. ■

Abe Kane, CPCU, is a Second Vice President and Underwriting Executive for the Public Entity Division for Genesis Management and Insurance Services Corporation.

Lauren Oliver, JD, is a Second Vice President and Underwriting Executive for the Public Entity Division for Genesis Management and Insurance Services Corporation and serves as a facilitator and as an Effective Intelligence instructor.

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For more information, please contact
Dave Erazmus at 312.526.7559 or David.Erazmus@gumc.com