

Happy

Workers

Why Understanding Generational Differences Matters

By Tom Wilkowske

Time to rally the troops. Sales are down, expenses are up and the economy looks weak. You've got a brilliant plan. You laid out your vision in a companywide meeting, complete with detailed handouts. You told an edgy joke and dangled overtime pay and the chance at a promotion in front of the staff. The response:

“(Grumble.)”

“What?”

“Why didn't you ask us for ideas?”

“Whatever. E-mail me.”

Congratulations. You succeeded in alienating four generations of your workforce:

- The grumbling, silver-haired traditionalist, who values respect and decorum in the workplace (not edgy jokes, especially if they're profane).
- The incredulous, graying baby boomer, who can't believe you offered promotions to staff who haven't paid their dues.
- The detached, black-clad Generation Xer, who thinks you wasted his time (and should have used a Web-based solution to make your point).
- The audacious, multi-pierced millennial, who values collaboration and hates condescension.

There's hope for managers and business owners who take the time to understand the differences between the generations and how their values, needs and strengths play out in the workplace.

Bob Hartl, professor and director of graduate studies in the College of St. Scholastica's management department, consults with a range of institutions and businesses, including those in the health-care sector. Multi-generational workplace conflicts loom large. “Most health-care organizations are concerned about the issue,” he says. “They're realizing it's affecting how they're delivering services and how it's also changing their patient base.”

For Hartl, awareness of one's own generational identity is key to understanding how to approach employees of different generations.

“Baby boomers like me, we expected to work 60- or 70-hour weeks early on,” he said. “Generation X, that just isn't one of their values,” Hartl says. “I think they sat back and watched people in my generation do that and say, ‘I don't want to live my life that way.’”

What to do? “For people in the traditional and baby boom generations, the motivation of extra pay can still be effective,”

he says. “Now, with Gen Xers, you have to think about other things that motivate them. Greater flexibility and personal time off have a greater value to that generation.”

Communication styles differ between the generations, Hartl says. “I think when the communication is between baby boomers and Generation Xers, the boomers have to try to get to the point a little quicker,” Hartl says. In meetings, try to avoid use of corporate slogans, jargon and buzzwords. Be direct and clear. And speaking of meetings, Gen Xers don't necessarily think the face-to-face meeting is the most efficient way to communicate. “You can take advantage with the technology that a lot of Xers are more comfortable with than boomers,” he says.

Once the incentives are laid out and the mission defined, Generation X employees thrive with autonomy. “They say, ‘Don't micromanage my work; give me a meaningful piece of work and let me figure out how to get it done.’”

At the same time, Generation X managers need to use more face-to-face meetings than they might be comfortable with and take pains to show respect to older employees, he says.



A CASE STUDY

Jeff Thompson, an industrial psychologist by training and former human resources manager, owns a management consulting business in Hermantown and works throughout the Midwest. His list of more than 70 clients includes six-person businesses and organizations with thousands of employees. Generational differences are getting bigger each year.

“You could have a 66-year-old senior manager working with a 24-year-old,” Thompson says. “You've got that age gap with the huge value differences.” The traditionalist values structure, rules and loyalty to the organization and often, the work role is the major piece of the person's identity. For the younger worker, “Job loyalty is secondary, maybe tertiary to that person's identity,” he said. “They may be already thinking about their next job.”

Thompson offered a case study from his files: a 16-employee payroll and benefits company in the Twin Cities, whose manager was 62 years old. The average age of the employees was 27. “The owner called me and said, ‘These people are at war with each other,’” Thompson recalls.

He met with the employees and, to break the ice, he asked them to sit in a U shape and introduce themselves in a way that didn't use their name. Thompson was just making eye contact with a younger employee, who was about to rise, when the manager interrupted, stood up and recited his name, title and spot on the org chart. “He was thinking, ‘I'm on the top and I need to go first.’ The other employees just looked at me with a ‘now you see what we mean’ look.”

But where the employees saw a power trip, Thompson saw something else: a loyal employee expressing his identity within the company.

Before
you choose
the one
you want –



How many shoes
do you try on?



How many cars
do you test drive?



How many houses
do you tour?

FLEXIBILITY

"We spent the whole day discussing the differences in values about what they wanted on the job," he said. "They wanted more flexibility, a say in how things are done and discretion on some of the policies and procedures."

Thompson also met with the manager and urged him to be more flexible. "I said, 'Look, you hired these people for their computer skills that you don't have. You have to compromise.' And I told the younger people that they needed to appreciate that his value system was not going to change. It ends up being a renegotiating of certain parts of the relationship. He can't have it all the way he wants it and they can't have it all the way they want it."

But flexibility doesn't mean compromising on your company's core mission or beliefs, Thompson says.

If the employees have a lot of public contact and the company prides itself on its professionalism, "Don't compromise on your standards of professional appearance," he said. On the other hand, if public contact isn't great across the board, dress codes could be relaxed.

Thompson also is helping his clients examine their businesses to see how to give employees more flexibility about when and where their work gets done, a key value for Generation Xers and millennials.

"It could mean telecommuting out of your home, connecting to the company's servers, or the schedule, or both," he

says. "I had a recent client who ran a very traditional organization – everybody on the job at 8, work until 4:30 every day. We looked at their business cycle and where the service was provided, and we decided there's no reason it has to be 8 to 4:30. It could be 6 to 2, 10 to 6, depending on their family circumstances or the season. We allowed for adjustments."

Being unwilling to work backbreaking hours for the corporation doesn't mean younger workers are lazy, says Heather Rose Carlson, owner of Calibrate Business Consulting of Duluth. Carlson, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology, has seen the generational clash of workplace values and expectations. It's really more a matter of structure and timing.

"It's really a myth that younger workers aren't motivated," she says. "But if you take an energetic, talented, creative person and plug them into a job with strict parameters, 'They're not going to be happy.'"

TRAINING

Hartl sees an opportunity when an organization has senior employees with valuable knowledge to impart to the youngest workers.

"Millennials, more than Xers, recognize the value that older workers present. They like the idea of mentors from older generations. If I had millennials in the workplace, I'd try to use some mentorships. I think both sides benefit," he says.

Carlson says younger workers tend to like self-directed training programs, whereas middle-age employees might find a classroom-style setting more comfortable. The oldest workers might need a small group setting. "You're going to have to mix those approaches to help keep everybody engaged," she says.

MOTIVATION

Gen Xers have a reputation for wanting to work independently. Millennials, meanwhile, tend to expect collaboration. "They were raised with the team concept in high school and college, which was not so much the case with earlier generations," says Hartl. "I think it's important to challenge them, and offer them more responsibility as a reward for performing well."

Compensation packages can be tailored to attract younger employees, too, Thompson says. A company with lots of boomers and Xers may find it has a benefits-heavy package that's not as appealing to young professionals as it could be. "Young people want immediate gratification," he said. "If you're having trouble recruiting younger professionals at \$16 an hour, bump up the salary to \$19 an hour and go lighter on the benefits," he says.

LEADERSHIP

Business leaders need to move away from the old command-and-control systems of the past, Carlson says. "It kind of goes back to that false idea that if you have the right job description and training, you could plug any individual in there."

"The new leadership needs to be more creating a vision and aligning people with it and inspiring those people to come along," she says.

To illustrate, Carlson distinguishes between so-called authoritarian and authoritative management styles. The authoritarian leader is, she says, "the cop style, my-way-or-the-highway traditionalist." Some of the youngest, brightest employees chafe at such a style. "Should you fight with all of your really smart employees?" she asks.

The authoritative leader meets the employee at his or her level and coaches them to higher performance but allows freedom and flexibility in getting the work done, Carlson says. **D**

Tom Wilkowske is a Duluth-based freelance writer.

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and experience
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Baby Boomers

Unfriendliness
Brusqueness
One-upsmanship
Shows of power

Gen Xers

Schmoozing
Bureaucracy
Corporate buzzwords
Incompetence

Millennials

Cynicism
Sarcasm
Unfairness
Condescension

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