

Leading Across the Generational Chasm

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Jeff Halseth is a 58 year old senior manufacturing manager, a high energy, charismatic leader with an MBA from Stanford and broad experience across multiple industries. He has never met a challenge that didn't spark his competitive spirit...until now. Dealing with five generations in the workplace has become his Waterloo. He's perplexed, out of patience, stymied by confusing signals, and downright frustrated. The bottom line is nothing he has tried to bring people together in productive, collaborative teams has worked. Half the time he doesn't think anyone listens or cares, the rest of the time, people respond in fits and starts. He is spending considerable time as an interpreter between the generations, all the while suspecting he doesn't understand any of them anymore. All the motivational techniques and strategies that worked so well for him in the past have come up empty and he is about to run out of ideas.

It is all the more mystifying when he reads the unemployment statistics. He sees no real evidence that people are aware their own jobs could be in jeopardy. It is a buyer's market and companies certainly could be expected to clean house and replace low producers with top notch talent. Why does the workforce appear to have an entitlement attitude? Why is accountability at the lowest level he has seen throughout his career? What can he do to jack up the energy level, encourage innovation and move from preservation of the status quo to preemptive risk taking?

People in a generational cohort are more like each other than they are their families and community cultures and you can't manage or lead them the same way. You have to understand and appeal to them as individuals and generations. That means flexibility, situational leadership, communication based on real listening and honest empathy. It requires thinking and acting outside the box of regulations, formulas and calcified procedures. Learn to ask, "Why not?" rather than look first to find a rule that applies. Relax, be real, relate as people. Anticipate saying, "Yes," rather than "That isn't possible."

An obvious place to start is recognizing generational similarities. The five generations in the workplace can be loosely identified as :

- Elders: over 64, going strong and not very interested in quitting. More than 80% say they

"This is an age of individual aspiration. We want. We need. We demand. We clamor. On Maslow's hierarchy of needs we're off the scale." Generation Entrepreneur",
Stuart Crainer & Des Dearlove

expect to keep working well into their 70's.

- Boomers: ages 46-64, they're the 60 million+ who have changed society at every stage of their lives. They are competitive, high energy, determined, in good health and still acquiring. They aren't about to walk away from the game.
- Gen X: ages 35-46, often more fascinated with technology than people, their personal and professional lives flow together wherever the toys are. Little interest in managing or being managed, they highly value independence and time off and have minimal interest in organizations they don't create.
- Gen Y: ages 24-35, today's flower children value the brother/sisterhood of man/womankind, peace, doing good and caring for the planet. "Caring," whatever the subject, is critical to who they are and what they do. The company that hopes to engage their high level of intelligence and commitment has to be equally value based, and committed to living what they preach.
- Millennials: under 24, this generation is blessed and burdened with "helicopter parents" who hover overhead, protecting them from the world and ensuring their comfort. They need the constant reaffirmation and attention to which they have become accustomed and have yet to make the break to the reality of the marketplace.

Dates and descriptions of the generations are fluid, and certainly there is great variance in the degree an individual reflects his/her generation. Contributing factors include the age of parents, place in the family, cultural mores, personal style characteristics and, quite simply, the uniqueness of the human being. Nevertheless, any leader would do well to take generational similarities to manage them effectively and unite them in some kind of productive workplace.

Managing the Generations

Elders: They can be your greatest assets if you treat them with courtesy and respect, take the time to greet them, be fair, consistent and remember: rules are rules. Emphasize quality, customer service, pride, the good of the organization.

Boomers: Ask, don't tell. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Provide bonus opportunities, competitive challenges, public recognition. Rules are flexible.

Gen X: Provide freedom, autonomy, treat them like equals,

"Not long ago you were considered "old" at 65. As labels go, it was perfectly adequate. No more. Between 2000 and 2050, the 85-plus population is expected to grow from 4.3 million to 18.2 million; the 75-84 year olds will grow from 12.3 million to 25.9 million, those 65-74 will grow from 18.1 million to 34.7 million." The Coming Generational Storm," Laurence Kotlikoff and Scott Burns

Never patronize them. Provide learning opportunities and great technology toys! What are rules?

Gen Y: Over explain, then let go. Avoid process, let them figure out their own way of doing things. Kindness, respect, friendship, the environment, caring for others are all top of their hit list and you must reflect these values if you expect them to stay around. Rules are integrity, ethics, kindness.

Millennials: Provide constant feedback and attention. Opportunity to show and tell, respect for their opinions. Patience! They aren't finished yet, but that's a secret. They come equipped with the answers but may not understand the questions. They learn by doing and listening is not their greatest strength. Rules are irrelevant.

The wise leader recognizes that what works for one will not work for another. There is no magic technique or management style that is going to work across the generational chasm. Bringing them together may be the greatest leadership challenge you will ever face but there are five things to keep in mind:

1. You have no choice
2. The potential benefits are enormous
3. There is more strength and individual talent in the workforce than ever before
4. They compliment each other and the results will be exponential
5. The customer base is equally diverse and the company that can appeal to each of its generations will win the prize.

"We now know where productivity – real and limitless productivity – comes from...It comes from engaging every single mind in the organization." Jack Welch