

Meeting the Cross-Generational Challenge

by Lani Cathey

Remember your first job? When you were one of the youngest in the company? And you had to deal with a bunch of old guys who just didn't get it?

They probably did get it. They just had a different viewpoint, and a different approach to business. Their lives shaped them in different ways than did yours. Think for a minute about the impression that you must have given the gray-hairs. Brash. Overconfident. All talk, no experience. Smart, but rough.

It's still that way today. More so than ever, because for the first time the workplace is populated by as many as four generations: Veterans, Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y. And some people see a Gen Z (born from the early 1990s to 9/11) that is just beginning to enter the workplace. The world changes so quickly today that the notion of what defines a generation has come loose from the model of discrete waves of parents and children.

Which generation do these reactions sound like?

"A meeting at 5:00? Not me, I have plans."

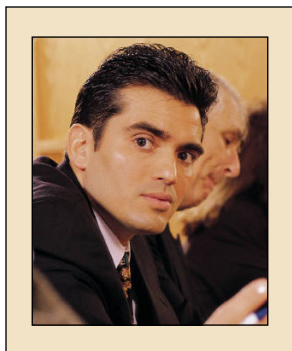
"I know tomorrow's a holiday, but we gotta close this deal."

"Text me if anything comes up."

"Take all those conjunctions out of the memo, and add an executive summary."

You may consider yourself a skilled manager, but ask yourself a couple of questions. How heavily is your management style influenced by your own experiences, and by the experiences of your generation? How likely is it that a management style rooted in a single generation will apply effectively to others? Take a look at this matrix built by Greg Hammill of Silberman College of Business at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Can you find yourself? Your fellow workers?

	Veterans (1922-1945)	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Generation X (1965-1980)	Generation Y (1981-2000)
Work Ethic and Values	Hard work Respect authority Sacrifice Duty before fun Adhere to rules	Workaholics Work efficiently Crusading causes Personal fulfillment Desire quality Question authority	Eliminate the task Self-reliance Want structure and direction Skeptical	What's next Multi-tasking Tenacity Entrepreneurial Tolerant Goal-oriented
Work is....	An obligation	An exciting adventure	A difficult challenge A contract	A means to an end Fulfillment
Leadership Style	Directive Command and control	Consensual Collegial	Everyone is the same Challenge others Ask why	Yet to be determined
Interactive Style	Individual	Team Player Loves to have meetings	Entrepreneur	Participative
Communications	Formal Memo	In person	Direct Immediate	E-mail Voice mail
Feedback and Rewards	No news is good news Satisfaction in a job well done	Don't appreciate it Money Title recognition	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing? Freedom is the best reward	Whenever I want it, at the push of a button Meaningful work
Messages that Motivate	Your experience is respected	You are valued You are needed	Do it your way Forget the rules	You will work with other bright, creative people
Work and Family Life	Ne'er the twain shall meet	No balance Work to live	Balance	Balance



A cross-generational workplace creates special challenges in communication and inspiration. You can't manage someone unless you understand what motivates them, unless you understand their values, perceptions, and expectations. Once you approach that level of understanding, it's up to you to communicate in a way that effectively delivers a message that hits the right buttons.

It is incumbent on you to recognize and adapt to the ways that other generations communicate. If you're somewhere in the middle of the generational spread, you may find the greatest success by sending formal memoranda upward and instant messages downward. One method will not fit all. But if you're scheduling a meeting, is it practical to send memos to some, Microsoft Outlook meeting requests to others, e-mails to a third group, and instant messages to a fourth? You'll have to trim down the options after considering your team's generational mix, and then you will need to coach team members to adopt techniques that work for all. It's as important that they communicate well with you as the other way around.

The loftier your position in the hierarchy, the greater the temptation to attempt to impose your own communication style, not to mention your own values, expectations, and processes. After all, you are the boss. But if you expect that a post-Boomer employee will remain in a workplace run on the "because I said so" principle, you're sadly mistaken. They'll go somewhere that's a better fit.

Fortunately, there are sound management basics that extend across the generations. Once you have spent the time necessary to learn the most comfortable communication style for the various members of your team, once you've worked to blend your communications into a single format that works reasonably well for all of them, you're ready to deliver a coherent management message to the entire team.

Here are the basic management tools that worked for your parents, work for you, and will work when the Intergalactic Generation emerges:

Set clear goals. Are team goals articulated in a way that allows all generations to recognize and embrace their role in achieving success? Does each member understand and value what they are to contribute?

Milestones. What are the definable points of progress toward the goals? What rewards will motivate the team as it works through each milestone?

Accountability. What is the feedback mechanism that monitors each team member's progress, and the performance of the team as a whole? What are the consequences of missing a milestone?

Action. What are the concrete, component acts that move toward the next milestone and the ultimate goal? Exactly what action is expected of each team member? Is the timeframe long enough to perform the actions, but short enough to allow the team to see the finish line?

If you successfully communicate that simple four-point management matrix to a multi-generational team, you've taken a major step toward mastering a novel workplace challenge. And as you puzzle out how to deal with such a diverse collection of people, keep the CPS platinum rule in mind: "Do unto others as THEY would have you do unto them."

