

Chapter 26

Communicating across the Generations: Implications for Higher Education Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Today's workplace is composed of four generational groups of employees, each with varying degrees of technological expertise, career expectations, and professional experience. As such, higher education administrators need to identify differences among generations of workers and develop a strategic plan for managing and motivating across the generations. This case study addresses the following question: "How do higher education administrators lead and motivate multi-generational employees and online students?" An understanding of the common characteristics of each generational group is the first step for developing a strategy for motivating all employees and students in higher education. Communication, mentoring programs, training, respect, and opportunities for career advancement are components valued by all. It is important for higher education administrators to understand the values, work ethic, and communication style of the different generations. The implications for higher education administrators lie in establishing an organizational culture that promotes satisfaction for all individuals in the higher education setting.

INTRODUCTION

As more individuals are delaying retirement and working several years past the retirement age, it is important for higher education administrators to be knowledgeable about the different generations working in various capacities in the higher education setting. College administrators, such as department chairs or other administrators responsible for training and hiring faculty members, also need to

be aware of the differences across the generations. This is especially true for online instructors who do not meet face-to-face with students.

According to Ferri-Reed, J. (2013), "A mixture of the mature generation, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y (or millennials) can be found working side by side. For the most part, the members of varying generations are capable of working well with one another, but there are generational differences that can create friction

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and, in some cases, cause open conflict,” (p.12). As such, the topic of engaging and managing the multi-generational workforce calls for further research. Educational leaders at all levels are challenged with leading various generations. This has had a major impact on higher education administration in terms of retention, recruitment, motivation, and productivity. Faculty members also need to be aware of the differences between multi-generational students, especially in the online classroom, and establish communication models where all students are motivated to perform at the highest level.

At the present time, there are four generational groupings of employees in the workplace and in the higher education classroom. According to Friesner (2015) the four multi-generational groups in the workplace are:

- **The Traditional Generation:** Born pre-1945;
- **Baby Boomers:** Born 1946-1964;
- **Generation X:** Born 1965-1980;
- **Generation Y or Millennials.**

In the very near future, there will be five generational groupings of employees in the workforce and in the online classroom at the same time. As individuals are working well into their late 60’s or early 70’s, higher education administrators need to adapt their leadership styles to effectively manage, motivate, and retain employees from various generations. Additionally, the flexibility of online learning promotes many adults to return to college. Students across generations have different communication styles and study habits. Online instructors need to be mindful of these generational differences and adapt a teaching style that promotes success for all students in the online classroom.

The diversity of generational workers and students impacts motivation and retention of employees. Additionally, higher education administrators, such as department chairs, need to train instructors

on communicating with multi-generational students. This is especially imperative in the online classroom where nonverbal cues are absent. As such, college administrators and instructors need to be knowledgeable of the differences across generations and leverage the strengths of each group. “When communicating across generations most likely it isn’t just one. Most of us are trying to reach a mix of individuals, but how does each generation like to be reached and how do we combine them,” (Aalgaard, 2015, p.1).

While higher education administrators and instructors may be aware of the various generations in their institutions and classrooms, implications for motivating and managing across the generations may not have been considered. “Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons. Learning how to communicate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace and the world of business,” (Hammill, 2015).

While the core values are similar, college administrators need to take a different approach when attempting to meet the needs of multi-generational employees. “The key is to be able to effectively address and take advantage of the differences in values and expectations of each generation. But experts say managers must be careful not to follow blanket stereotypes,” (*Wall Street Journal*, 2011). Online instructors also need to be mindful of these differences in the classroom and adjust communication styles to meet the needs of the diverse generational groupings of the students.

This chapter discusses the differences in communication, motivation, and work styles of multi-generational workers and students. Having an understanding of the different characteristics of multi-generational employees in the higher education setting will assist in motivating all employees. Regardless of the generational group, employees value a positive work environment, fun environ-

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