

Chapter 5

Effective Management of Generational Dynamics in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

For the first time in history there are four generations co-existing in the workplace. Each generation, Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, has very distinct attitudes, values, ideas, behaviors, ways of communicating, and expectations. These generational differences can affect everything in the organization including recruiting and retaining employees, team building, communicating, motivating, and managing. To successfully integrate these diverse generations, companies will need to embrace changes that actively demonstrates respect and inclusion for all generations. Organizations that find a way to accommodate all generations may create a more productive work environment resulting in a powerful competitive advantage.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing problem in the workplace today and it has nothing to do with global competition, downsizing, or unethical CEOs. Today's organizations are facing some unique problems. For the first time in history there are four generations co-existing in the workplace. Each generation has very distinct attitudes, values, ambitions,

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ideas, habits, behaviors, ways of communicating, and expectations all influenced by their historical, economic, and cultural experiences. Today's workplace is "the most age- and value-diverse workforce this country has known since our great-great grandparents abandoned the field for factory and office" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 9). As a leader, this can be a recipe for disaster, or if you find a way to marry the experience of the older generations with the technology skills of the younger generations, may lead to more productivity and profitability.

The four generations of American workers include the:

1. The Traditional generation (1922-1945), the oldest generation of which most are retired but some remain in the workforce either out of choice or necessity;
2. The Baby Boomer generation (1945-1964), until just recently represented the largest group of workers and the largest group in leadership and management positions;
3. Generation X (1965-1976), sometimes referred to as the baby bust generation because it is much smaller than the preceding generation; and
4. Generation Y (1977-1994), now the largest group of workers in the workforce, were shaped by computers and dramatic technological advances (Glass, 2007).

Today, people are living and working longer. Retiring at the age of 65 is becoming a thing of the past (Shah, 2015). The median age of the American worker in 2012 was 41.8 for men and 42.1 for women. This is the highest it has been since the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. It is anticipated that by the year 2020, approximately 25% of the US workforce will be comprised of workers over age 55 (Department of Labor Statistics, 2015). Keeping older workers in the workforce promotes a broader range of talent but can lead to conflict because of generation gaps.

Generation gaps are as old as history so what is different today? Traditionally, the older workers were the bosses, and the younger workers did what they were told, paid their dues and waited their turn to be promoted into leadership positions, which usually happened after the older workers retired. There was a well-respected order to the workplace. Today, there is a growing trend of younger generations managing older generations. This can create conflict and friction if not appropriately managed. The older workers may be thinking: why am I being bossed around by someone who doesn't have nearly as much experience as I do? On the other hand, maybe the younger person feels insecure, intimidated, and inadequate in supervising the older workers.

Workers in the younger generations possess technology skills and a global perspective that may be lacking in older generations, but workers in the older generations have a historical perspective that is impossible for the younger generation

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