

Chapter 6

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.

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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 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.

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