

Strategies for Cross-Generational Relationship Building

By Kate Berardo and Simma Lieberman

Kate and Simma discuss why generational differences matter and how to overcome age barriers and build cross-generational relationships in the workplace.

Issues of race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation have dominated the diversity arena for some time, leaving lurking in the darkness a difference that causes daily miscommunication and prevents untold numbers of relationships from being built: generational differences. The unsung element of difficulty, communication across generations is often fraught with assumptions, frustrations, and misunderstanding.

Why Generational Differences Matter

The environment that surrounded you as you grew up shaped your life in more ways than you may realize. World events, like wars, depression, or conversely economic prosperity, shape generations. So does technology. Did you grow up with the radio, TV, computer, iPod—or all of the above? Music, politics of the time, and ideas about what it means to be a family—these too shape how different generations view and appreciate the life around them.

Translated into workplace terms, this often means different values, ideas, work ethics, attitudes toward authority, and outlooks on life. Though the U.S. workplace culture values speed ("time is money") and hard work, just how fast you work and what is hard work, will be subject to generational interpretation.

This means the possible combinations of inter-generational conflict can be great. Common complaints you hear from older generations about younger generations are that they are speed-obsessed, too casual and informal, unappreciative of traditional ways of doing things, and technology dependent (as in, they don't value face-to-face communication enough). On the flip side, you can hear younger generations com-

plaining that older generations are out-of-date, stuck in their ways, too stiff, and completely computer unsavvy (as in, they won't IM with me and take too long to respond to my emails). Many generations feel like they are not respected by other generations, and often that they are discriminated against because of their age (age bias).

At the same time, generational differences exist among a field of differences, including race, gender, sexual orientation and culture. These other differences need to be taken into consideration. Some cultures, for example, value youth, while others value the wisdom of old age. Look at how older family members are treated within a family to get an idea of the predominant value in different cultures: are older family members put in old-folk homes when they need assistance or are they cared for by family members?

Like all difference, generalizations about generational differences should be used only as guidelines to help you understand what might be preventing understanding. Your goal should be to move from the categories (be it, white, gay/lesbian, Korean, or Baby Boomer) to the people themselves (Samantha, Chung, Mr. Yamamoto, and Consuelo) quickly and accurately.

Pushing Past Generational Difference

How can you push past generational barriers and build strong intergenerational relationships? Here we've listed both mindset tips (how to approach cross-generational differences) and practical tips (the small things you can do during a conversation to improve your communication).

Mindset Strategies

Approach with Interest. Approach generational differences with interest, not fear or negativity. Take interest in the interests of others. You can learn fascinating things about other people if you choose to do so.

Take a Learning Orientation. The value of difference is that you can learn from each other. If someone from another generation has specific skills that you don't (say, an appreciation for looking at history and tradition, or the ability to use email effectively), consider setting up a skill exchange. These types of self-development opportunities translate into more opportunities for career advancement as well as more fulfilling and successful workplace environments.

Be Mindful of how your assumptions influence your interactions.

Narrow your categories. In your mind, how long do people stay categorized by their generation: "one of the old guys" or "part of that young group"? At what point do they become individuals: Antoine, the man who likes motorcycles, fought in World War II, and thinks Elvis is still the King; Janelle, the woman who runs marathons, loves the city, and is allergic to peanuts? Categorizing people is a natural process that allows us to make sense of the world around us. You'd have a hard time describing an apple without using categories like a type of fruit, sweet or tangy, green or red, Granny Smith or Braeburn. Life is richer and your observations and reflections of people more accurate if you can move away from simple classification and allow for individual variations.

Put yourself in their shoes. Do you know what their day-to-day is like? Do you know what motivates them, excites them, gets them down—or how they want to be treated? Empathize with their situation, needs, and values. You can do this sometimes directly by asking questions and taking an interest in their interests and indirectly by getting involved in some of the traditions and pastimes of another generation. Watch a TV show geared for another generation. Look at a website that focuses on the issues of other generations. Get familiar with music that spans generations like jazz, blues, rock and roll, classic, hip hop, and world music from cultures you are not familiar with.

Behavioral Strategies

Be flexible as to the means of your communication (face-to-face, email, etc.)

Avoid generational jargon. Speak in plain terms and avoid idioms that are not widely understood.

Be attentive. Look for signs that you may be misunderstanding each other, whether it is a confused look, an unclear response, or an unintended reaction.

Practice active listening. Turn up your listening dial across generational differences. Listen for clear expressions of different values or outlooks than you have. Seek to understand the individual better by listening carefully to what they say (or don't say).

Show Respect. Most generations have felt they don't get the respect they deserve. Using the strategies above, you can show coworkers that you do respect them, their background, and their outlook on life—and build powerful relationships as a result. ✧

Contact us to learn more about Kate and Simma's Cross-Generational programs and workshops.

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