HOW TO CROSS THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

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Supervisors at a New Hampshire company were grumbling that young employees didn't know how to work hard and weren't loyal to the company. The young employees felt they *were* working hard; they just were text messaging and doing other things at the same time. The HR department was trying to make everyone happy while stemming the turnover of young workers who felt that a year or two at one company was a long time.

Similar scenarios are repeated at all types of companies across America as the workplace struggles to adapt to the newest generation of employees. In fact, a survey conducted by the career management company Lee Hecht Harrison showed that more than 60 percent of employers report that they are experiencing tension between employees of different generations.

What's New about This Generation Gap?

While generational conflict is not a new issue, longer lifetimes and later retirements have created an environment where more generations work together than ever before. At the same time, rapid technological, parenting and lifestyle changes have sharpened the differences between generations. Neurologists are reporting that video games, computers and other technology have actually changed the way the brain develops, which means that our youngest workers – known as Gen Yers, Millennials or Nexters -- might actually process information differently than the preceding generations.

Characteristics of the Generations

While no two individuals are identical, there are patterns of behavior that characterize different generations. The following chart gives a quick overview of some of the typical traits of the four generations currently in the workplace:

	Veterans (Born 1922-1945)	Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)	Generation X (Born 1965-1980)	Generation Y (Born 1980-1995)
% of workforce	5%	43%	38%	14% and growing
Core characteristics	Respects authority & hard work Values tradition and formality	Driven work ethic Values personal achievement	Work/life balance Values independence	Works to enjoy life Values social responsibility and flexibility
Grew up with	Rotary phones, nuclear families, WW II and Great Depression	Touch-tone phones, disintegrating families, Vietnam	Cell phones, working parents, high divorce rates	Internet, text messaging, e-mail, high level of parent involvement and scheduling, merged families, 9/11 and Enron
Workplace style	Memos, formal meetings	Face-to-face interaction, micromanaging, long hours show loyalty	Independent project management, quality of work over quantity of hours spent working	Multi-tasking, work whenever and wherever, want regular feedback
Motivated by	Stability and tradition	Recognition and financial success	Work/life balance	Work that has meaning, freedom to enjoy life

Boomers, with their workaholic and micro-managing tendencies, are often supervising younger generations who have very different priorities and work styles. Ironically, the Boomers may have themselves to blame for the difficulties.

Gen Y – the children of Baby Boomers – were brought up with the notion that they deserve the best of everything, that they could do anything, be anything and always end up on top. Now those kids are entering the workplace, and Boomers are finding that Gen Yers don't hesitate to question authority, demand meaningful work immediately, want flexibility to work on their own terms, expect to be included in decision-making practically from Day 1 and will change jobs in a heartbeat if they are not getting what they feel they deserve.

What's an HR Manager to Do?

Some Boomer bosses have been reluctant to hire or promote any Gen Yers because they "don't understand the workplace." That's a short-sighted approach considering the number of Boomers who will be leaving the workforce in the not-too-distant future.

Those highly educated, highly qualified – but high maintenance – Millennials will be the predominant workforce of the future and the generations have to learn to get along.

Here are a few steps that HR professionals can take to adapt the workplace to younger generations:

Get management on board: Make sure that top management is willing to change with the times in the interest of attracting and retaining young employees. Focus on the benefits of having an engaged younger workforce that values loyalty in new ways.

Review policies: Work with management to establish upfront the rules that are essential for the workplace to function effectively. These are the rules and policies that are non-negotiable. Everything else should be open to evaluation. Look at systems, policies and rules that will turn off a young worker.

Evaluate and enhance managers' ability to adapt: Ask managers and supervisors to complete assessments to measure their adaptability and ability to get along and communicate with other people. Conduct follow-up training to help them understand the needs of younger generations and embrace the changes necessary to attract and retain young employees.

Understand what motivates employees: How do employees define the perfect job? What do they like about the workplace? What would they like to change? Survey employees to identify issues affecting morale, retention and performance. Then, develop strategies with all employees to address common issues and create an appealing work environment for new generations.

Offer flexibility: Gen Yers don't mind working hard; they just don't want to work hard all the time. They want flexibility to enjoy life outside the office and spend time with family and friends. Consider allowing employees to take time off after a busy stretch at work, or even offering personalized work schedules so that employees can do their job in the most effective way for them.

Provide meaningful work: Gen X and Gen Y have little patience for "paying their dues" with less-than-fulfilling work. Make sure they understand how their work fits into the big picture, highlight the importance of the work, and mix challenging assignments in with day-to-day tasks.

Set up a mentoring system and project teams: Millennials want the feedback and sense of community gained from working with others on a project.. Assign a senior employee to get to know the young worker, listen to his or her ideas, answer questions, show how his or her work fits into the overall success of the business, and provide an emotional connection to the company.

Clearly communicate goals for specific projects: Millennials are the products of a testing culture. They want to know what they need to do, how their performance will be measured, and what constitutes a great job. Separate work responsibilities into specific projects and clearly communicate expectations for success. Use multiple ways to communicate to enhance understanding.

Create a coaching culture: Forget annual reviews. Millennials grew up with instant feedback from computer and video games, hovering parents and text messaging friends. Create a high performance coaching culture so all employees get feedback and recognition for a job well done on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis.

Break up information: Gen Yers are accustomed to getting information through quick text messages, instant messages or information-loaded bits on websites. Provide information and requests clearly, succinctly and quickly. If you have a lot of information to impart, break it up into separate memos or meetings- and keep them short!

Invest in technology: Millennials are accustomed to communicating and working with technology. They have been known to leave a company that they feel is technologically behind the times.

Offer forums to provide new ideas: Millennials don't hesitate to challenge authority or think of ways they could do a job better than their boss. Let them voice their opinions and ideas in regular brainstorming sessions where ideas are welcomed from all employees.

In the end, your ability to create a meaningful work environment will depend on your flexibility and adaptability to the many needs of the new workforce. Embracing this fact sooner, rather than later, will reward your organization in enhanced relationships and bottom line results.

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