

Generational Communication: Why the Generations Are So Different and How to Close the Gaps (1,139 words)

Each generation had significant events during their formative years. Different life experiences create generational sub-cultures. A culture that has been shaped by the values, standards, and policies of one generation isn't necessarily going to be compatible with the next generation. Throw in a big dose of technology and the friction gets worse. The generations are different and for good reason. It is sometimes hard to measure the general impact that these historical events have had on our personal and professional values and concerns. But I do know this; our personal history does have an impact on our priorities and expectations today. This article will help you recognize how events have shaped attitudes, the differences in career goals, the different preferences for rewards, the unique challenges for work and life balance, and the choices of communication channels.

Defining Events: Certain events and trends have affected the way each generation sees the world. Veterans or Traditionals experienced the Great Depression and World War II. So, they don't spend money freely and patriotism is very important to this oldest generation. Baby Boomers, grew up during the Vietnam Era, the Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Liberation. This generation experienced being change agents and believe individuals can make a difference. Generation Xers grew up with Watergate and corporate lay-offs. Gen Xers may not be able to fully trust government institutions or big business. Xers grew up in single-parent homes and are self-reliant and are independent. Millennials or Generation Y grew up with school violence, terrorism, and multiculturalism. So, Millennials have a concern for personal safety and expect diversity in the workplace.

Different Career Goals: The oldest generation, the Veterans or Traditionals, expected to work in the same industry and enjoy life-time employment with the same organization. Baby Boomers like a good challenge. The Baby Boomers go to work to make change and to make a difference. Baby Boomers work hard and strive to stand out and to be recognized for their contribution. Generation Xers expect their jobs and career path to be interrupted at times. Xers want keep moving forward by developing a wide variety of skills that keep them employable. Gen Xers believe that you need to plan your career, or you might not have one. The Millennials would like variety in their jobs. They would like to work in customer service one day, maybe operations another, and volunteer for service projects the next. Millennials or Gen Y want a variety of activities, not just in the short term, but in the long-term, too. This youngest generation will experience possibly a dozen career changes in their lifetime with multiple jobs in between. Each generation appears to have different career goals. Recognizing and respecting the differences will go a long way in recruiting and retaining the finest talent of each generation.

Different Reward Systems: The Veterans or Traditionals rely on their own personal appreciation of a job well done. This generation expected to work hard and to enjoy a pension or a defined retirement plan as a reward for loyalty. Baby Boomers like to be recognized with rewards such as money, office space, or job title. Boomers like visible

rewards such as awards, parking spots, expense accounts, and unique personalized treatment. Public recognition is a great reward to Boomers. For Generation Xers, the best reward would be freedom. Autonomy and independence is most appreciated. Providing Gen Xers with flexibility to balance their personal and professional lives is a wonderful reward for this generation. For Millennials or Gen Y, the best reward is recognizing the meaning of their work, understanding the mission of your organization, and the real, positive impact their work has on people's lives. Sure, they like the perks, the money, and the benefits, but they are also interested in the impact. Of course, these are generalities, and individuals within each generation are different, however, with a little thoughtfulness we can make a minor adjustment in the reward programs to make them just a little bit more rewarding.

Balance Issues: Veterans and Traditionals struggle with the transition to retirement with an uncertain meaning or value. They have worked their whole lives demonstrating on-time attendance and the feeling of being needed to complete the tasks. Often, members of this generation aren't retiring to something, just from something. The Baby Boomers feel stretched. Boomers have aging parents, and adult children, and find it hard to have time for balance. As Baby Boomers start to consider retirement, they want to retire to something, rather than from something. Boomers may start a non-profit, a consultancy, or a foundation to lead and to feel meaning in their lives. Generation Xers focus on finding balance now. They want to balance life and work now rather than when they retire. Gen Xers prefer results-oriented work environments rather than clock watching workplaces. Xers will negotiate start-time and end-time schedules to acquire the work/life balance they seek. Millennials or Gen Y seek employers that offer tremendous flexibility so they can attempt to balance all of their activities. They were busy as kids with all sorts of before-school and after-school opportunities and interests and they would like that to continue. Millennials want flexible hours to juggle their schedules. Balance is an issue in today's work world. Balance is a challenge for everybody. At work, openly discuss work/life balance, create a menu of alternatives, and support each other's choices.

Different Communication Channels: Have you noticed that when you call the youngest generation on the phone they don't call you back? Some younger coworkers claim, "I don't do phones." Each generation seems to have a strong preference in how they would like to connect and communication. These different channels of communication need to be considered when trying to effectively interact with a different generation. The Veterans and Traditionals would like a message in the form of a handwritten note or meet face-to-face, maybe for breakfast or lunch. When it comes to the Baby Boomers a quick phone would work well, or face-to-face interactions in their office. Generation Xers would prefer a short email with an attachment. Be sure that the correspondence is brief, scannable, and with bullet points. This generation doesn't need to meet face-to-face. If you stop by their office, don't linger, don't break stride. Finally, you may have more success connecting with Millennials or Gen Y by sending a text message, or heck, you may want to take a picture and send an Instagram. If you want your coworkers to respond to your requests, you have to follow the Platinum Rule: Do

unto others as they would like to be done unto. Reach them through the channel of communication they choose.

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