Bridging the generation gap

Your manager is holding a department meeting after hours to discuss the new dress code. You are close in age to your boss and find meetings the best way to explain the issues, but your co-workers disagree. The intern (who is your daughter's age) thinks it can be covered through e-mail. The older executive assistant wonders why a formal memo isn't issued instead. The younger accountant doesn't care how it's dealt with as long he doesn't have to stay after hours.

Sound familiar?

With the widening age range of people in the workforce, understanding the generational gap is more important now than ever. Navigating generational diversity at work can not only impact your work environment but also the success of your career and your organization.

Understanding the Generation Gap

Although not all traits apply to all people, researchers have found some similarities in work habits for each generation.

Matures (born 1920 to 1940), Boomers (born 1940 to 1960), Generation X (1960 to 1980) and Millennials (1980 to 2000) have distinct goals and work ethics which can make any office relationship challenging. For example:

Matures tend to value:

- Law and order
- Hard work
- Respect for authority
- Routine

Growing up in the midst of WW II matured their value of hard work, patience and commitment. Respect for authority is also a characteristic of this generation.

Many Boomers value:

- Health and wellness
- Personal growth
- Team orientation
- Active involvement

As the largest population in the work pool, Boomers tend to have a positive outlook in work and value team co-operation and input. Boomers are focused on maintaining a work-life balance, which may show in their more relaxed approach to work habits.

As Generation Xers were raised amongst drastic social change, they often embrace:

- Diversity
- Global awareness
- Informality
- Independence

Millennials tend to be focused on:

- Instant gratification
- Confidence
- Personal achievement
- Change of pace and environment

Having grown up with the faster pace of modern technology, they desire immediate results in whatever they do. Raised within a youth-centred culture, millennials generally appreciate praise from authority for their work and frequent reassurance.

Varying Values

While diversity in age can bring insight and knowledge, it can also create conflict. Differences in experience and values can lead to co-workers having trouble seeing eye-to-eye. *So what can you do about it?*

Acknowledge co-workers by praising their values. Let a Traditionalist know you respect her experience, or compliment a Millennial for his ability to juggle several jobs at once. Actively showing appreciation for others' work styles and approaching relationships with a respectful attitude can give you the credibility boost you need when differences arise.

Don't try to force a co-worker to assume your point of view.
As the new kid on the block, you may have some fresh ideas on improving job efficiency. But don't expect the boomer with 20 years experience to instantly change his or her routine. While your ideas may be great, the proposed changes may not gel with other colleagues' work styles or may make others feel like you're stepping on their toes. Instead of imposing your ideas, work together with the team to create solutions that *everyone*is comfortable with.

Appreciate the knowledge experience brings if you're part of a younger generation. Those who've been in the organization or field for a long time offer wisdom and a view of the big picture only time and experience can bring.

Stay open to new ideas. Successful organizations know that keeping or improving what works and reworking what doesn't is important to maintaining a competitive edge. While a Millennial or a Gen Xer may not have the same experience level to draw from, they can often provide a fresh perspective to solving organizational challenges.

As a people leader you can shrink generation gaps and:

Offer workers options. Build on employees' strengths by letting them work in the atmosphere comfortable for them. Allow workers the flexibility and autonomy (where possible) to accommodate different work styles and values. A Gen Xer, for example, might prefer to work from home from time to time, while a Mature might never dream of it.

Encourage team teaching. Create opportunities during meetings for individual team members to share their expertise with the rest of the group. An older employee, for instance, might provide the group with an overview of challenges the organization had in the past and how these were resolved. A younger team member, on the other hand, might lead a team workshop on the most recent technological advances in your industry. Allowing each employee to lead a meeting can not only improve generational relations, but also strengthen the team as a whole.

Build inclusiveness from the top-down. Hold seminars or workshops on diversity in your workplace to explain common differences amongst the generations and provide effective strategies to overcome these challenges and build consensus.

By being respectful of the different generations in your workplace and keeping an open mind, you'll improve your chances of success at work, and may even discover that you and your colleagues-whether they're older or younger-have more in common than you think.