

# managing generations at work

Diversity is a hot topic in business nowadays. However, one form of diversity that may be overlooked, and is responsible for conflict and miscommunication, is generational diversity. For the first time in our history, four generations are sharing the workplace and the resulting clash of work ethics is creating cultural chaos. Generations have identifying factors that distinguish us but need not divide us. The key to working together lies in our ability to understand the generational motivations, values and distinctions and to appreciate and utilize these differences in ways to enhance the workplace environment.

Managers and business owners whose style is collaborative and open will be able to bridge the "generation gap" easier than those whose style is more dictatorial and rigid. These are two important elements that will lead to a better work environment, happier employees and higher productivity.

The first is the evaluation of the standard of performance measurement used. How one defines performance may well be a matter of what generation one belongs to. The GenXer will be results oriented, achieving the desired outcome in less time and therefore not willing to accept the need to be at work longer than necessary to accomplish the goal. A Veteran will see an 8-12 hour day as conforming to a certain work ethic, regardless of when the goal is achieved. The Boomer, who may prefer to work in teams, will use a team orientation to accomplish the goal, being sure to position him/herself for accolades. The youngest generation, known as the Y Generation or NexTers or Millennials, may be interested in understanding how their role contributes to the well-being of the company or client. As you can see, each group is motivated by a different set of values.

The second key element is the ability to incorporate what Ron Zemke, author of *Generations At Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, GenXers and NexTers in Your Workplace*, calls the "ACORN Imperatives."

These are:

1. **A**ccommodate employee differences. These differences can create a holistic solution to problems and provide differing and creative perspectives.
2. **C**reate workplace choices. Instead of adhering to outdated organizational models, allow the workplace to shape itself around the work being done, the client being served and the people who work there.
3. **O**perate from a sophisticated management style. A management style that sets forth goals and specific measurements, allows for autonomy and empowerment, and that holds people accountable through reward and feedback, will create a positive environment.
4. **R**espect competence and initiative. People live up to or down to expectations. Managers who expect more from their employees and provide support will get more as well.
5. **N**ourish retention. Companies are becoming aware of the cost associated with turnover and with the challenge of hiring the best person for the job. Generation friendly policies will keep the best employees while attracting other qualified candidates.

If you give this some thought, it sounds like common sense. But managers are caught up in the day-to-day operations of a business and don't stop long enough to understand

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the source of behaviors by their employees. Simple shifts such as matching the employee to the task, balancing results and relationships, and clear communication can improve the workplace environment and increase productivity.

Next time you become frustrated with a co-worker or employee or manager at work, consider their perspective. Seek common ground or at the very least, seek to hear and understand the other person. Transform liabilities into assets where possible. Emphasize positive traits. Consider different perspectives as the holders of creative solutions. Focus on your mutual goals and vision. Your organization will thrive from the diversity and your employees will reap the intangible rewards of working in a place where they are appreciated and recognized for their unique contributions.

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