



One Size

Does Not Fit All:

Motivating a Multi-Generational Workforce

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With four different generations coexisting in today's workforce, business owners, managers and employees are struggling to bridge the gap. Accommodating the needs of employees ranging in age from 18 to 80, and motivating such a diverse workforce, are not easy tasks. This is the first time so many different generations have worked side by side.

In managing a diverse workforce, we must try to recognize and understand the mindset of different generations and how each group views the world. Understanding our many differences is vital for creating and maintaining harmony in the workplace.

Four Generations... Four Motivators

First, it is important to understand the different motivators of each generation.

Basically, the Traditionalists (born prior to 1947) work best when there is personal contact, strong leadership and direction. The Baby Boomers (born from 1947 to 1966) are the workaholics, and have extended the work week from a standard 38 hours to 60 hours, adding almost a month to the work year. Boomers want work that will give them recognition, praise and fame. The Xers (born from 1967 to 1980), are children of Boomers and want to go home at the stroke of five so they can pursue their other interests. Xers want flexible schedules, independence, professional growth, mentors, interesting work and plenty of time off. Lastly Nexters, more commonly known as Generation Y (born after 1980), the grandchildren of Boomers, are motivated by similar incentives as Xers, but seek more direction.

Generational differences also impact an employee's perception of whether he or she is appropriately recognized. Generations raised to believe that sacrifice and duty are paramount want that aspect celebrated with formal awards, dinners, pictures and handshakes with the upper echelon. Employees who are Traditionalists often don't want anything expensive, while employees from other age groups put personal development first and may prefer recognition in the form of more responsibility. Those who have mastered the art of managing across generations understand how much supervision and instruction is needed by each type of employee.

Educating Across the Generations

As a result of shrinking budgets and increasingly diverse missions, it's critical that education and training be imparted based on generational needs. For example, the Traditionalists and Baby Boomers are typically more comfortable in a traditional classroom, and they can be uncomfortable with role-playing, small groups and "touchy-feely" training. They require constant feedback if given self-directed training. On the other hand, if Xers and Nexters find themselves in classroom settings, they will usually require more interaction. They enjoy computer based or audio/video training and welcome instruction that is self-paced.

While older students are more task-oriented, younger ones are more experimental. If a project requires outside the box thinking, consider giving it to the Generation X and Y employees. Even though they have less experience, they thrive on being creative and pulling something together. Give Boomers projects with a lot of detail that they can understand because of their experience.

Having grown up in the video/computer age, the typical Xer or Nexter assimilates information quickly and can focus on many things at once. Such multi-tasking is useful for consuming massive amounts of information. Many older workers didn't develop these skills because they didn't need them or practice them growing up. They tend to view younger staffers as scattered and inattentive to detail. In most instances, Xers don't need a lot of detailed instruction. They have a good grasp on how to get information quickly. They are organized and they tackle each project differently. Baby Boomers tend to be more comfortable with the way they have always done things and can be resistant to change.

Value Differences Between Generations

According to research, the majority of conflicts in the workplace arise from value differences between the generations. Understanding generational values and how these values developed can help organizations better manage and work across the generations. Since we cannot typically change or reconcile these generational differences, we need to acknowledge the validity of their values. How we choose to respond to coworkers from another generation can either lead to escalating or diffusing the conflict.

Generation Y <i>born after 1980</i>	
Characteristics	Motivational Strategies
Informal attitude, strong social relationships and social conscience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not mistake their informality for sloppiness • Accept that their at-work social relationships may intrude • Accept higher private email/phone usage • Manage their work time without de-motivating them • Create pride in workplace
Optimistic with high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify expectations; provide honest/direct feedback • Document specific duties and performance indicators in advance • Outline career path early on; add responsibility once ready • Discuss performance at monthly or quarterly intervals
Prefer casual work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realize job is not necessarily their highest priority • Recognize past conditioning to casual work • Prepare for diminishing concentration over a full work day • Structure their time to focus on important duties first thing • Allow for flexibility in start, finish and break times
Focus on short-term rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let them know what the organization offers them TODAY • Do not expect annual review/small raise to serve as motivation • Structure instantaneous incentives; give immediate reward
Focus on end result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be specific about what needs to be achieved and by when • Do not be put off by their seemingly disorganized ways • When high performance results, be generous with feedback
Prefer to make decisions through negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commit to high-maintenance management • Accept that they see leadership as a participatory process • Endure time needed to manage this group
High technology and computer literate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize that accessing information online is second nature • Allow independence when sourcing information • Encourage independence; support with experience/wisdom
Prefer unstructured learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show interest in their personal goals • Look for opportunities to chat outside office environment • Avoid formal meetings; use interactive media • Enhance their confidence through one-on-one coaching

Generation X

born from 1967 to 1980

Growing up with double-digit inflation and the stress of parents dealing with times of unsteady employment, Xers tend to be economically conservative. As a result, they do not rely on institutions for their long-term security like their predecessors.

Characteristics

Motivational Strategies

Work to enhance future opportunities (grass is always greener mentality)

- Reinforce full range of internal opportunities available
- Fund their learning and development
- Tie advanced learning to promotional opportunities

Value freedom, work/life balance; own sense of achievement

- Need more time to accommodate busy lifestyle
- Identify what they really value
- Reward with flex hours, extra time off, working from home and other non-monetary rewards

Motivated by individuality; ability to relate to peers

- Allow for strong individuality in attitude, dress, customization of workspace and non-work related conversation

Questioning approach to work

- Let them in on ground floor when planning anything
- Accommodate their questioning
- Use a coaching style of management
- Overload with information

Laid-back as managers with respect for creativity

- Be sure not to micromanage
- Encourage an open approach to team management
- Let them take control of prioritization
- Hold them accountable for results - not the process
- Realize their casual management style can be credible and effective
- Be prepared to help them manage less creative members of their team

Baby Boomers

born from 1947 to 1966

As children of World War II veterans, Baby Boomers did not experience the same economically hard times as their parents, the Traditionalists. Their parents wanted them to have the good life, and the "me" era was born.

Characteristics

Motivational Strategies

Loyal

- Don't take loyalty for granted
- Repay loyalty with public recognition of contributions
- Acknowledge their importance and successes
- Consider perks that give sense of status

Motivated by security, work ethic, responsibility

- Reinforce the importance of their continuing role
- Use positive feedback
- Acknowledge work focus/ability to carry greater workload

Authority figure

- Acknowledge them as subject matter experts
- Recognize their expertise in front of other staff
- Encourage them to express their knowledge in a time-efficient manner, so they are not perceived negatively by others

They lean on reputation and experience

- Structured mentoring programs are often effective
- Use them to manage Nexters (many have kids that age and are experienced communicators) **Note:** For an Xer managing a Boomer, recognize and respect their experience. This is vital to their self esteem.

Auditory learning style; prefer hard facts

- Best suited for traditional conference-table meetings
- Solicit their opinions in meetings
- Bring formal agendas and keep minutes

Analytical and non-authoritarian management style

- Encourage them to report on projects/staff in writing
- Be non-prescriptive
- Allow flexibility and freedom to manage in their own style

The Traditionalists'

born prior to 1947

Their values are influenced by experiences that often include the hardships of their parents and grandparents immigrating to a new country. Experiences they had during the Great Depression and World War II shape how they view the world.

Characteristics	Motivational Strategies
Private	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value their privacy • Be sure not to reprimand in public
Trustworthy, loyal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't take loyalty for granted • Recognize/reward with public recognition of contributions
Motivated by security, work ethic, responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce importance of their continuing role • Use positive feedback • Acknowledge work focus/ability to carry greater workload
Value "things"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciate incentives like "gold watch" • Like perks to symbolize success • Won't do well in a small cubicle
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize need for formality in day-to-day work
Authority figure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize/respect their experience as vital to self esteem • Outwardly acknowledge their perseverance
Auditory learning style; prefer hard facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best suited for traditional conference-table meetings • Solicit their opinions in meetings • Bring formal agendas and keep minutes

In Summary

Whether you are in senior management, a front line manager or simply someone who has an interest in what makes people tick, understanding generational differences is vital in creating more effective workplace communication and preventing problems that may result in poor staff retention. Getting to know how each generation perceives the other, providing communications skills training and fostering respect for generational diversity are imperative if our programs are going to work. Busy staff cannot simply be trained in "how to supervise." They need to recognize the very real differences among age groups in how they respond to direction from older or younger managers.

In order to manage a multi-generational workforce successfully, a manager must take into consideration each generation's unique priorities, motivators, skills, communication styles, and experiences. I encourage you to bridge any potential generational communication gap before it leads to miscommunication or staff conflict.

Effective leaders are those who are prepared to recognize generational diversity within their teams and who practice more than a "one size fits all" approach. They find ways to close the generation gaps so that every generation can be happy and fulfilled in their work environment. When that happens, everybody wins. ●