



Dear Dr. Mazie,

I'm struggling with managing a diverse staff. My younger employees seem to have different needs and expectations than the more seasoned staff. I'm in uncharted territory. Do you have any advice?

– Shirley in South Carolina

I can empathize with your dilemma – it is a real challenge for many managers and supervisors today. Each generation does have different needs and expectations when it comes to the workplace, and recognizing this is a good place to start.

In general, each group has a unique and well-defined set of values, expectations, needs and work behavior. If not clearly understood, many of these unique factors can lead to conflict with management expectations, as well as with the other generations within the workplace.

There are four different generational categories generally acknowledged to describe today's workforce. Let's define each group's attitude about work, with the understanding that there are always exceptions.

Veterans or Traditionalists (born before 1945) have a "work first" attitude. They are known for their strong work ethic, and tend to be conservative and loyal employees. They expect/accept an autocratic leadership and follow authoritative figures. They are reliable, content, often maintain the same job for the majority of their career, and don't really expect to be included in important management decisions.

Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and early 1960s) "live to work." Diligent at work and comfortable in a stable environment, they are quite willing to put in more than the standard office hours to get the job done. They are generally loyal, accept a chain of command and adjust to various leadership styles. Flexible in their habits and attitude, they find it easy to mentor and supervise a younger generation.

Generation X (born between mid 1960s to 1980) is known to "work to live," and expect to be off the clock when they leave the office. They prefer independence, are self motivated, self sufficient and will take responsibility for their work environment. They have broken the traditional hierarchy of needs by challenging the path of individual development concerned with work/life balance. They pursue personal satisfaction.

Generation Y or Millennials (born after 1980) "live, then work," and don't operate within the traditional hierarchy. They are well-educated, individualistic, articulate, technically savvy and comfortable with being part of the global village. Because work is secondary to their personal lives and lifestyle, they are prone to expect many freedoms in the workplace, like being allowed to text and use the internet. They crave further knowledge, prefer group learning, and will move from job to job if the environment doesn't suit them.

So how do you manage these very diverse groups, particularly if they work side by side? The best solution is to get training specifically designed to help you understand and work with the many complexities and differences.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

1. Remember that in defining generational differences, it is not about age as much as common experiences. For example, millennials grew up with technology while traditionalists experienced a worldwide Depression.
2. Focus on understanding and acknowledging the diversity in needs and expectations. Open discussion,

either one-on-one or within groups can work wonders to break down some of the barriers caused by generational differences.

3. Realize that "different" is neither right nor wrong. It is an essential principle.
4. Understanding generational differences is only half the equation. Nothing can take the place of genuine concern for an individual and their specific needs.
5. There is usually more than one solution to a problem. Make a concerted effort to be open-minded.
6. If you are unclear about what your staff needs, ask! An appropriate question might be, "In an ideal world, how would you change your work environment?" Or, "What do you hope to get from this job?" Once they open up, then consider their responses and see if you can accommodate them.

Generational differences are not likely to go away just because we don't want to deal with them. Today's younger workforce requires most of us to stretch ourselves and update those old tried and true management skills. Acceptance is the first step. Understand that differences exist and learn to adapt. Know that you are not alone. And be assured that, although change may be uncomfortable at first, the positive results that follow are usually well worth the effort.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.