Coaching Generations in the Workplace

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Understanding employees' beliefs, attitudes, and values about the world and the workplace can assist a manager in more effectively communicating with and coaching employees. One of the factors that influence an employee's perception of work is the generation in which they were born. The workforce today is composed of three distinct generational cohorts. The term *generational cohort* refers to people born in the same general time span who share key life experiences, which include demographic trends, historical events, public heroes, entertainment pastimes, and early work experiences.[1] These common life experiences create cohesiveness in perspectives and attitudes and define the unspoken assumptions of the generation. As a result, employees of different age groups do not share the same work ethic or expectations. Certainly, each human being is an individual. However, understanding generational experiences and perspectives and learning to coach individuals from different age groups are becoming essential management skills. Key words: *coaching, education, generations, management*

The Silent Generation

The most mature employees in the workforce, those people over age 55, are members of the Silent Generation, born during the Great Depression or World War II. Authoritative, overprotective parents who expected "proper" behavior raised this generation. The school-age experience of this generation was largely structured and regimented with clear rules and guidelines. School discipline problems that would be considered mild today would result in a trip to the principle's office. Authority was clear and respected. As children, the Silent Generation had unmistakable and distinct role models, such as war heroes and political figures. Their heroes had clear, unarguable purposes, such as saving the world or exploring uncharted territory. The rules of life were unambiguous.

After spending their childhood in an era of economic hardship and struggle, they entered their teen years and early adulthood in a time when the country was experiencing unprecedented growth and prosperity. As they entered the workforce, opportunities abounded and they could rely on buying a house and car, as well as raising a family comfortably on one income. At an early age they learned that sacrifice and hard work were rewarded.

During this time, the economy was based on an industrial model. Math was done by hand, letters were typewritten, copies were mimeographed, and long-distance phone calls were only made in emergencies. The workplace was largely a world of factories and business. Organizations were hierarchical, with clear divisions of labor where conformity, consistency, and uniformity were valued. Most members of the Silent Generation intended to work in big corporations that offered longevity and job security. Only 2 percent wished to be self-employed.[2] Members of this generation entered the workforce expecting to work hard and be rewarded for loyalty and their years of service.

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Commitment to the organization would result in a hefty pension in addition to the retirement funding of Social Security.

During their adulthood, members of the Silent Generation experienced some turbulent times. Although younger people and their children largely fueled the revolutionary changes of the 1960s, leaders of these efforts were members of the Silent Generation and all people were affected. In this midlife stage, minority members of this generation became increasingly dissatisfied with the state of affairs and became vocal about it. Simultaneously, armed with education and time, women of the Silent Generation began feeling trapped at home. As a result, women not only entered the workplace but, often for the first time, minorities and women rose to management positions. The entire landscape of the workplace began to change.

Soon, the Information Age arrived. Calculators, automated systems, and personal computers became basic tools in the office. Managing knowledge and information replaced managing tools and machines. Organizations flattened and team-based processes were implemented. The workplace in which the Silents began their careers no longer existed. Experience and seniority were not as important as competence, customer service, and teamwork.

The Baby Boomer Generation

The Baby Boomer generation began just after World War II ended and includes people born between 1945 and 1960. This large wave of the population is currently between the ages of 40 and 55 and is expected to dominate the workplace until the year 2015. Baby Boomers were raised in prosperous, optimistic times and, for the most part, were

doted on as children and tend to think of themselves as the "star of the show." They typically were raised in a nuclear family in a "father knows best" world. If their family life differed from this ideal, it either was not acknowledged or kept a secret. When they were children, man was traveling to the moon, John F. Kennedy was president, and television sets were added to the living room decor. Life was comfortable and had great purpose. Members of this generation are still inspired by the story of a housekeeper at NASA who responded to a question about this line of work with the description that they were "helping to put a man on the moon."

Baby Boomers hit their adolescence with fits of idealism. As teenagers, their adolescent rebelliousness corresponded with an era of questioning of the status quo. Groups set out to change the world through love, music, and nonviolent demonstrations. Civil rights protests and antiwar marches were commonplace. Older members of the Baby Boomers were teenagers during the hippy-youth culture of the 1960s. Younger members of the Baby Boomers had a different teenage experience. The prosperity of the previous twenty years tumbled with the oil embargo and the dramatic discoveries associated with the Watergate political scandal. As a result of these experiences, both sets of Baby Boomers learned not to respect authority. Rather, they learned to challenge authority and to question the integrity of leaders. They still tend to believe that no one in charge is to be trusted. Their heroes, unlike those of previous generations, were not war heroes or leaders in the political arena or large business. On the contrary, their leaders were more likely those who opposed the status quo and rebelled against authority.

As Baby Boomers entered the workforce, they were driven and dedicated. Having grown up with a sense that they are special and that they are capable of changing the world, they equate work with self-worth, contribution, and personal fulfillment. Many selected their profession not based on economic prospects but with the intent to make the world a better place.

Because of the different patterns for having children, people in this age range vary from having small children to having successfully sent their children to college. Many are parenting teenagers while dealing with aging parents. More than any other generation, they are dealing with a time squeeze. Demands of work, expectations of parenting, goals for healthy living, and a strong sense of idealism keep most people in this age range running from morning until night. They have kept a grueling work pace and many have set goals to simplify their life. They have adapted to technology, motivated by the desire to be more productive and have more free time.

Generation X

An often-maligned group, Generation X includes people in the workforce who are younger than 39 years old. People in this generation had a dramatically different childhood than the previous two generations. Most people in this generational cohort grew up with both parents working. Distance from their parents was further exacerbated by high divorce rates and as a result, 40 percent of Generation Xers were in single-parent households as youths.[3] This was truly the first latchkey generation. They came home from school to empty houses, cooked themselves a snack in the microwave, and entertained themselves with video games. Thus "many Generation Xers grew up as underprotected children in overly permissive homes in which parents frequently were absent."[4] At a young age they learned to manage on their own and to be an equal participant in discussions. As teenagers they formed strong bonds with friends, turning to schoolmates when family was not available.

Their friends and classmates were ethnically diverse and Generation Xers learned to be tolerant of alternative lifestyles. In addition, school activities focused less on individual performance and more on team-based learning. Whereas members of the Silent Generation were born into the Industrial Age, and Boomers began using calculators in high school, members of Generation X were born in the Information Age and are innately comfortable with technology. Many had computers in their elementary schools. Automatic teller machines, personal computers, push-button phones, and video games were part of everyday equipment. Their continuous use of technology has promoted members of this generation to expect instant response and satisfaction.

Generation Xers have been "marked most deeply by disappointments, disasters, and diminished expectations of the post-Vietnam era."[5] The economic prosperity of the United States was usurped by the dominance of Japan in the world market. Even the technological prowess of the country was called into question when members of this generation watched the *Challenger* space shuttle explode on TV screens in their classroom. Exposure to violence and adult themes on television forced teenagers to deal with adult subjects, often before they were ready.

Generation Xers carry with them the experience of watching their parents work

extremely long hours and sacrifice leisure time for success at work. As a result, people of this generation desired employment where they could create a balance between work and time off. They want to make money and have job satisfaction, but equally important is time to spend it on things that improve the quality of their lives. In addition, as they entered the workforce, organizations were downsizing, reorganizing, and reengineering. Long-term employees, including their overworked parents and dedicated grandparents, were getting laid off. Employees were told that they would no longer be guaranteed lifetime employment but, by keeping their skills honed, could be guaranteed lifetime employability. Consequently, Generation Xers rapidly learned and accepted that nothing in the job market is certain. Coupled with organizational downsizing was the surge in success of people who started their own companies or worked for small start-up businesses. For this generation, success is more likely to come from participating in a risky venture outside of a formal organization than plodding along in a single corporation for a lifetime. As a result of these factors, members of this generation do not have the same organizational commitment as older members of the workforce.

In many ways, employers got what they asked for in Generation X workers. Generation Xers do not expect to spend a long time with any one company. Certainly, they do not expect an employer to continue their employment if their talents and skills are no longer needed by the organization. Additionally, they do not expect their retirement to be funded by an organization or the federal government. More Xers believe in the existence of UFOs than believe Social Security will fund their retirement![6]

At the same time, Generation Xers have become adept, clever, and resourceful. They are assertive, self-directed, and comfortable with technology. They most likely started their job search on the Internet and have visited your organization's Web site. They adapt well to change, recognizing that the world is a rapidly changing place and that they will continuously need to learn and adjust to be successful. Skill development is extremely important to them, to the degree that they will often take a lesser paying job if they believe that they will develop essential or advantageous skills.

Coaching the Generations

As a manager, how do you respond to the various generational expectations? The savvy manager will approach employees with an awareness that people in each of the three generations think about work differently. Understanding these inherent differences and addressing the fundamental work expectations of members of the generation will assist managers in more effectively meeting the needs of employees. Appreciating the background and influence of generational factors can help managers to more effectively coach and mentor employees.

Silents

When interacting with members of this age group, think of traditional American values—family, hard work, honor, respect

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for authority—and you can identify the essential ideals of the Silent Generation. For example, most Silents respect people in authority and think of employees as being in a hierarchical structure. Although you may attempt to create a sense of equality in the workplace, they will expect a clear distinction between the boss and the workers. They may have gotten comfortable with calling their boss by their first name, however they expect the boss to behave in a manner fitting a person in charge. Thus, when being coached, Silents will expect their manager to behave in a professional and official manner. Members of this group are comfortable with a traditional manager, sitting behind a desk, authoritatively giving instructions on how to improve performance. When coaching people in this age group, meet in a formal setting, such as your office, and be fairly proper in communications. Remember that members of the Silent Generation are uncomfortable listening to stories of their manager's personal life events.

At the same time, Silents respond well to the use of good manners. Be respectful and polite when interacting with them. Understand that small symbols of prestige with this group can send a potent message. For instance, making sure that they have a locker and mailbox on their first day on the job will symbolically define for them that they are part of a team. Silents fully expect their managers to display evidence of status and perks of the job. They also expect certain perks to be associated with seniority. Managers of employees in this age group are wise to acknowledge years of service with tangible rewards.

People in the Silent Generation are quite comfortable and clear about the chain of command. Silents want to work with leaders of integrity and will often have a great deal of respect for senior leadership in an organization. You may notice them referring to the members of the executive team using a formal "Mr." or "Mrs." designation. Silents are attracted to organizations that are secure, stable, and wanting to excel. As a manager, share with Silents the history of the organization and the integrity of the leadership. Introducing them to members of senior leadership can be very powerful.

Members of the Silent Generation expect their loyalty and longevity to be rewarded and their age and experiences to be seen as assets, not liabilities. As you implement changes or coach Silents, value and respect their experience, historical perspective, and perseverance. "It's helpful to hear about your experience with this in the past" is a statement that will resonate with people in this age group. Also, keep in mind that Silents, for the most part, value obedience over individualism. Often they will be reticent to question authority and will be confused if young novices are permitted to criticize their manager's decisions. If a Silent disagrees with a decision their manager makes, they most likely will obey and comply, thinking someone at the top gave the direction and must know best. If you would like their honest opinion on a decision, you will be most successful by formally asking them in a private setting.

When developing a new skill, Silents do not like to "learn on the fly." They prefer learning in a traditional classroom environment with lectures and presentations by topic experts. When learning, Silents will avoid situations that will make them look foolish in front of their managers or peers. For example, they will not be comfortable in

role-playing scenarios. Using technology to learn may intimidate them and complicate the learning process. Many will interpret this as having to learn two things—the content under study as well as how to use the technology. Keep in mind that this age group does not rely on technology the way their younger colleagues do. Studies show that people in this age group have been slow to use automatic teller machines and computers.[7] When necessary for them to learn to use technology, give them time. Although it may take them a little longer to learn the technology of the organization, once they have mastered a task they tend to be consistent performers. Although learning to be comfortable with technology, a personal communication—either verbally or hand written—continues to be much more effective with this group than e-mail.

Silents have a strong sense of duty. If they are struggling to meet expectations, it is important to emphasize the skills they have that are needed by the group. If coaching a Silent to develop new skills, they will positively respond to statements such as, "Your perseverance will be rewarded."

When coaching Silents, recognize that they tend to do one thing at a time. Although they may not appear as industrious as their younger colleagues who are "multitasking," this methodical approach is extremely productive for them. Pushing them to multitask will only slow them down.

Largely, people in the Silent Generation believe that workers who give years of service to an organization should be justly rewarded with job security and retirement benefits. They expect to work hard and make sacrifices, but at the same time they expect their hard work and sacrifice to be rewarded. Money continues to be the primary mechanism for measuring the worth of their work. Clearly connecting the outcome of hard work with the expected rewards will help to motivate Silents. Because many Silents are healthier and wealthier than they ever expected to be at this age, if their spouse retires many Silents will move to part-time work. Flexibility in their work schedule, to allow a transition to semi-retirement, can also be seen as a positive reward for employees in this age category.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers have an inner sense that they as individuals can make a difference in the world. They want to work in organizations that are democratic, humane, caring, and positively impacting society. They perform best for a manager who knows them personally and who treats them as a peer. Although they are passionate about teamwork, the "me" generation persona lurks underneath, and most Baby Boomers secretly want to be the star of the team. Where Silents expect their longevity and loyalty to be rewarded, a Boomer expects their individual achievements and contributions to be recognized and rewarded. Even when working in a team, Boomers want their contribution to the team effort to be noticed. Pay for performance is a concept that makes sense to this generation. Although financial rewards are always appreciated, public recognition and respect from colleagues is a strong incentive for this group. A Boomer sees any status marker—role of a preceptor, nurse of the year, clinical ladder advancement—as recognition.

Boomers respond well to messages that they are valued and seen as important

contributors. They absolutely are looking for meaning in their work. This is particularly important in an industry like healthcare, where noble efforts at saving lives and creating health have been, in the mind of the average Boomer, confused with the business demands of making money. When coaching Boomers, reminding them of the powerful impact they make everyday on the lives of patients and their families can help reconnect Boomers with the purpose and meaning of their work.

Boomers are struggling with meeting a number of demanding expectations. They have a strong drive to be successful in their careers, while oftentimes meeting equally demanding expectations of raising a family, caring for aging parents, volunteering in their community, and maintaining their own health and well-being. In a recent study, nurses in the Baby Boomer age range scored higher in both vocational and interpersonal strain than their counterparts in other age groups.[8] Role overload and conflicting demands and loyalties contributed to this stress. Boomers will appreciate support from empathetic managers and organizations when coping with these conflicting demands. Organizational support in the form of time-saving measures, such as on-campus automatic teller machines, post offices, child and elder care services, or laundry services, are attractive enhancements to the workplace for Boomers. Anything that can save them time is seen as supporting their demanding schedule and commitments. In addition, education and programs that assist them in coping with the stress of their demands are also valued. Anything from time management classes to yoga programs will appeal to this age group.

Boomers value life-long learning and see education as a means to promotion or the opportunity to perform better in their job or life. Continuing education, if they have the time for it, is seen as job enhancing and a benefit. In educational sessions, they like interactive sessions more than lectures. Providing various means for learning, such as books, videos, and self-study guides, will appeal to Boomers.

Generation Xers

Generation Xers look for a casual and fun work environment. They want a sense of teamwork and camaraderie. In their early jobs, they look for opportunities to learn and develop skills. When coaching people in this age group, build on their desire for skill development.

The best managerial style for coaching a member of this generation is informal. Taking off your lab coat or jacket, perching on the edge of your desk, and holding the discussion while having a soda will create an informal mentoring environment to which Generation Xers will respond. When coaching Generation Xers, remember that members of this generation are extremely committed to their profession and are looking for opportunities that will provide them with essential skills to further their career. Generation Xers look for employment where there is a clear direction for a career path and some assistance from the organization in meeting their career goals. Managers of Generation X employees should make time for teaching and coaching on a regular basis.

Generation Xers will be extremely appreciative and receptive to any coaching, especially if the skill to be developed has been

associated with the employee's long-term success in their profession. They will not be as motivated if this skill is presented as necessary for success in this one organization. In their mind, they have the option of developing this skill, which will have limited benefit for their long-term goals, or looking for employment elsewhere.

People in this generation prefer to be given a task or to agree on a goal and then be left alone to figure out the process for achieving this objective by themselves. Their attitude is often "who cares how many hours I work or how I get there, as long as the job gets done." Typically, they will be voracious in learning and often will rely on technology such as CD-ROMs, interactive video, Internet courses, or distance learning to meet their educational needs. Generation Xers expect their employers to provide them access to the resources for learning, especially access to the Internet in the workplace. They tend to learn by doing rather than reading. Role playing, seen by Silents and Boomers as exposing their potential weakness to the group, is seen by Xers as giving them the opportunity to practice skills and get feedback and coaching on the spot. People in this age group will risk looking foolish if they believe it will help them develop an essential skill. They can learn from the experience of others and will appreciate a manager or preceptor who candidly shares stories of their own personal shortcomings and learning experiences.

Generation Xers view all team members as equally important. Their manager is viewed as fulfilling a different role in the organization and the role of the manager is no more or less important than any other role. People in this generational cohort will often be cognizant of skills they bring to the orga-

nization that are missing in their manager or more senior employees. As a result, they may need some coaching in valuing the expertise of other members of the team. Once again, once they recognize these skills, they will be extremely receptive to learning. At the same time, they will be interested in providing input into problems or issues at all levels of the organization. They will be frustrated if the organization seems too bureaucratic and will think that it is okay for everyone to talk with everyone. As a result, managers should not be offended if a Gen Xer "goes over your head" to offer a suggestion. Although Generation Xers do not like dealing with "office politics," once they identify that learning to function within an organizational structure is an essential skill for success in any job, they will typically be amenable to coaching in this area. Frequently, members of the Silent Generation will be the best role models and mentors for proficiently learning this competency.

Generation Xers tend to perform tasks quickly, often several at the same time. They expect more immediate gratification than their seniors and will get frustrated if they perceive that they are working hard and not making progress toward their goal. When coaching them, breaking long-term goals into shorter targets with deadlines will be helpful.

While being committed to their career and self-development, Generation X employees also expect their employer to recognize that they have a personal life outside of work. Acknowledge their need to balance work and professional development with personal time and goals. Generation X employees will be more than willing to work hard, but when they schedule time off they expect their manager to respect this.

Recognizing Your Generational Biases

As a manager, recognizing your own unique generational biases and how they may influence your interactions can help to improve your interactions and relationships with employees. For example, if you are a member of the Silent Generation, realize that employees from other generations view you as a peer. They expect you to "loosen up" with them. When they ask questions about a new policy or practice, they are not necessarily questioning your authority—and may even be viewing themselves as a good employee who is trying to understand the rationale behind the change so they can better comply. If you have not yet begun to use the technology of e-mail and the Internet, employees will increasingly view you as incapable.

If you are a Baby Boomer manager, understand that members of the Silent Generation do not want to hear your personal life events. They want you to behave in a "boss-like" manner and will expect you to have certain "perks" related to your position. On the other hand, Generation Xers will be impressed if you share evidence of your continued education and development. However, they will be frustrated if you do not respect their personal life commitments, and they will view you as "out of balance" if you consistently work overtime.

If you are a Generation X manager, listen to and respect the historical perspective of members of the Silent Generation. Acknowledge that their methodical approach to work is extremely productive for them. Be patient as they learn to use technology. When interacting with Baby Boomers, do not treat them as if they are old. Although they may be 20 years your senior, their men-

tal view is that they are continuously learning and developing in an eternally youth-like manner. Respect the commitment and long hours they spent in pioneering as women in the workplace or managing as a couple in a dual-career lifestyle.

Working Together: Creating Intergenerational Teams

Historically, three generations have often been in the workforce simultaneously. However, the current workplace carries a distinctive mixture.[9] In the past, members of different generations were stratified based upon seniority and years of experience. The oldest members of the workplace supervised the youngest. Generational interaction was balanced by position and protocol. Today, all three generations work side by side, positional hierarchy is no longer related to age, and the least senior members of the workplace (regardless of age) are frequently expected to participate in decision making. Concurrently, the unique circumstance of the youngest members of the workforce often being the most expert in the use of technology has literally flipped the traditional work experience where senior members of the workplace mentor younger, less experienced and less knowledgeable novices. Consequently, intergenerational interaction is dramatically increased and unstated assumptions, perspectives, and expectations of people from different generational cohorts can trigger conflict.

As a manager, you may need to mediate intergenerational conflict. As people from different generations interact, their generational paradigms may influence them to interpret the same behavior in different ways. Recognizing and responding to generational

expectations can help the manager to dramatically improve communications and the effectiveness of work teams. Diversity in perspectives has the potential of enhancing creativity in problem solving. Managers who understand the viewpoints of the three generations are better prepared to foster mutual respect in team members.

For instance, when workload is high, Silents and Boomers think that Generation Xers are lazy or whiny when they do not volunteer or complain about working extra hours. At the same time, Xers believe that Silents and Boomers place too much value on work and often let their lives get out of balance. Assisting employees in understanding each other's perspectives can often help to mediate conflicts. In addition, focusing on the competencies that each individual brings to the team, rather than the differences, can assist colleagues in learning to value the unique set of life experiences and skills that each employee contributes. As a manager, helping employees to identify role models or mentors can assist in all employees reaching their highest level of competency. For example, partner a Generation X employee who is struggling with physician interactions with a Silent Generation employee who has developed expertise in this area. A technologically adept Generation X employee may get frustrated teaching a Silent Generation employee about the basics of using a computer, but they may be a fabulous resource once the Silent Generation employee is looking for an expert to help them enhance this skill.

Conclusion

To demonstrate the differences in generations, stereotypical examples have been used. Stereotyping is oversimplified and can create self-fulfilling expectations. The challenge as a manager is to acknowledge the inherent differences in generations without approaching individuals with preconceived biases.

To a large extent all employees, regardless of their generation, are looking for the same things from their manager: clearly set goals, challenging work, accurate and timely feedback, praise, and tangible rewards for a job well done. Managers should set clear job expectations and expect all employees to comply. Each employee's skills and developmental needs should be addressed for effective coaching. However, understanding life and work experiences of people from various generations can assist the manager in more effectively coaching and meeting the needs of employees.

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