

## Understanding and Managing Different Generations

There are many generations at work, interacting with each other on a daily basis. Sometimes this gives rise to frustration, conflict and misunderstanding. Yet each generation has something worthwhile and exciting to offer.

### Generational work styles

It's helpful for managers to not only identify their own work style but also the style of those they manage. One way to do so is to take a "generational" view. The following are some typical characteristics of each generation.

Traditional Generation members (born between 1922–1945) tend to:

- believe in conformity, authority and rules
- have a very defined sense of right and wrong
- be loyal, disciplined, logical, detail-oriented
- view an understanding of history as a way to plan for the future
- dislike conflict
- seek out technological advancements
- prefer hierarchical organizational structures

Baby boomers (born between 1946-1964) are drawn to:

- long hours at the office, including evenings and weekends
- building their career over the long term and loyalty to their employer
- viewing themselves and their career as one and the same
- commitment to quality and doing a good job
- "hanging tough" through difficult work situations and policies
- finding solutions to problems
- being in charge and respecting authority

Members of Generation X (born between 1965-1980) tend to:

- prefer high-quality end results over quantity
- set and meet goals and are very productive
- multitask
- balance work and life; like flexible working hours, job sharing
- see themselves as free agents and marketable commodities
- be comfortable with authority but not impressed with titles
- be technically competent
- value ethnic diversity
- love independence

Members of Generation Y (born between 1981-1994) tend to prefer:

- effecting change and making an impact
- expressing themselves rather than defining themselves through work
- multitasking all the time
- active involvement
- flexibility in work hours and appearance; a relaxed work environment
- teamwork
- on-the-job training
- getting everything immediately
- a balance of work and life

### Tips for managing different generations

Managing the mixture of ages, faces, values and views is an increasingly difficult task. Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak in their book *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* describe it as “diversity management at its most challenging.”

How do successful companies handle this dilemma? According to *Generations at Work*, they build nontraditional workplaces, exhibit flexibility, emphasize respectful relationships and focus on retaining talented employees. Zemke, Raines and Filipczak recommend five ways to avoid confusion and conflict at work:

- **Accommodate employee differences.** Treat your employees as you do your customers. Learn all you can about them, work to meet their specific needs and serve them according to their unique preferences. Make an effort to accommodate personal scheduling needs, work/life balance issues and nontraditional lifestyles.
- **Create workplace choices.** Allow the workplace to shape itself around the work being done, the customers being served and the people who work there. Shorten the chain of command and decrease bureaucracy.
- **Operate for a sophisticated management style.** Give those who report to you the big picture, specific goals and measures. Then turn them loose. Give them feedback, rewards and recognition as appropriate.
- **Respect competence and initiative.** Treat everyone, from the newest recruit to the most seasoned employee, as if they have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best. Hire carefully to assure a good match between people and work.

- **Nourish retention.** Keeping valuable employees is every bit as important in today's economy as finding and retaining customers. Offer lots of training—from one-on-one coaching sessions, to interactive computer-based classes, to an extensive and varied classroom curriculum. Encourage lots of lateral movement and broader assignments.

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