



LifeSolutions

The Successful Supervisor

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Understanding employees of all ages

"My employees are of all different ages. I resist buying into stereotypic descriptions of the different generations, but at times I find it difficult not to think "entitled" with my Millennials, "cynical" with my Gen Xers, and "dinosaurs" with my Baby Boomers. Any suggestions to help me better understand and engage my employees, regardless of their age, so we can all work better together?"

This edition of *LifeSolutions' Successful Supervisor* newsletter offers some ideas on building positive relationships with staff of differing ages and generations to increase engagement and productivity. If you have any questions or would like to share your thoughts with us, email us at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com.

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When we as managers feel frustrated, stuck, fed up, bewildered, or confused by not getting what we want or need from our direct reports, our default conceptual approach is likely negative. This is so true with the generational difference. We may tend to fall back on stereotypes such as:

- Millennials aren't motivated by anything. They had everything handed to them on a silver platter!
- Gen Xers are out the door at 5 p.m. Work-life balance is their theme, so how do we engage them?
- Boomers are clueless about technology and talk us to death at meetings!

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But do these stereotypes apply for every Millennial, Gen Xer, and Boomer in the workplace? Of course NOT. And they do not lend themselves to solving problems with communication and teamwork among the different generations.

There are some documented and clear generational differences that may or may not hold true for a particular person. And it can help to acknowledge that these differences may fit for some and may impact how we work together.

So what is a generation? It's a group of people born, raised, educated, and socialized during the same time in history. They share common knowledge and experiences that affect the way they think, what they believe, their attitudes, values, and behavior. So it may help to understand how each generation might have been influenced by their times and what that means in a practical sense in the workplace. Here are some general characteristics that social scientists have used to portray these groups:

- **Baby Boomers** grew up in a time of significant social change (Civil Rights Movement). Optimistic and competitive, boomers are highly focused on personal achievement. They are hard workers, seeking fulfillment through their contributions at work (thus it has been said they invented the 60-hour work week). Consensus building and relationships at work are important to Boomers.

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- **Generation X** was shaped by childhood images of corporate downsizing, political corruption, and the skyrocketing divorce rate that left them to be latchkey kids. They learned to be very independent and self-reliant and have a healthy dose of skepticism. Gen Xers prefer blunt and honest communication in the workplace.
- **Millennials** (some, not all) were raised in a very child-focused era where their parents hovered over them (helicopter parents, soccer moms) and were their coach, advocate, and best friend. So in the workplace, they may be looking for a benevolent manager. Being used to lots of structure, they desire clear work expectations. Because they often worked in collaborative teams at school, they want to be asked about their opinions. They have always known cell phones, pagers, and the Internet (and now Twitter, Snapchat, and Vine), so they are used to instant communication and expect it. They are diverse and socially conscious and expect the companies they work for to be the same.

There are two other generations in the workplace. The **Traditionalists** were shaped by the economic hardship of the Great Depression and by World War II. Discipline, sacrifice, respect for authority, and loyalty are part of this generation's work ethic. And finally, the **Linksters, or Generation Z** (born after 1995), are just entering the workforce as part-time employees, working after school and during summers. They are very close to their parents, technology is second nature to them, and they have an environmental passion that makes them assume greenness should be a priority for all companies.

These generational descriptions/attributes are not useful if we use the information to:

- Pigeonhole or stereotype. Stereotypes are oversimplifications and can be held onto for dear life, even in the face of evidence to the contrary.
- Think we "know" who people are. A surefire way to disengage employees is to assume you know all about them without sitting down with them and asking questions to get to know them as individuals.

The reality of today's workplace is that in order to be successful, we need to connect with people from different generations, with differing values, from many cultures and

varied technological backgrounds. Here are some tips to build productive work relationships across the generations:

1. **There is always a bridge.** No matter how different we are, we always have something in common. Although we see our work project as if we're from different planets, we may both listen to the same music or share a hobby. Finding that bridge helps to forge a stronger connection.
2. **Expect the best.** When we approach each interaction believing the other person has valuable contributions to make and important things to share, we're much more likely to be effective.
3. **Be curious.** Learn about the other. Find out what makes them tick, what's important to them, what their goals are, what worries them. If you're not sure, ask. You will get valuable information, and they will feel valued.
4. **Show you understand.** Be an active listener. It doesn't mean you agree. It simply shows respect.
5. **Don't expect reciprocity.** Don't get invested in the other person's returning your interest. No strings attached.

If you have questions or would like to consult about a generational issue with a staff member, call **1-800-647-3327** and ask to speak to a *LifeSolutions* account manager.

Source: The Art of Connecting by Claire Raines and Lara Ewing, American Management Association, 2006.

This information is not a substitute for professional care or your organization's policies. If you have or suspect you have an issue related to the material presented here, consult an appropriate professional.

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