



Bridging the Generation Gaps

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"It's not always easy for a father to understand the interests and ways of his son. It seems the songs of our children may be in keys we've never tried. The melody of each generation emerges from all that's gone before. Each one of us contributes in some unique way to the composition of life."

The World According to Mister Rogers - Important Things to Remember,

by Fred Rogers.

SUMMARY

In his own gentle way, Fred Rogers reminds us that we need to put our stereotypical ideas aside. We need to become familiar with individuals from different generations both as associates and as customers. We must interact with people from different generations as the unique persons that they are, to value the contributions they make as well as to share their life lessons so that **together** we can make the organizations we belong to stronger and more effective. By destroying stereotypes, learning more about individuals and diversifying our employee demographics, we can provide services and products to customers of **all** generations.

The single greatest change over the past 15–20 years is that society has transitioned from the Industrial Age to the Technology Age. In most organizations today, four very distinct generational groups are struggling to work and communicate with each other. As a result, organizations must modernize the way they function while maintaining the values that contributed to their initial success.

BUILD THE FOUNDATION

Values are long-enduring judgments appraising the worth of an idea, object, person, place, or practice. The following example illustrates what happens when an organization's policies and practices create inter-generational values conflicts.

Two women work for a non-profit organization that cherishes family values and encourages activities that include parents and children. The executive director and top

leadership are from the “older” generation without children at home. They value employee loyalty.

This organization sponsors a girls’ soccer team that practices on the weekend. All employees are both encouraged and expected to participate.

One woman is Christian and the other is Jewish; both are committed to participating in their Sabbath services and both want to protect their employment. The children would much prefer soccer practice to attending services. The principal sponsors are “grandparents” who place a high value on family “togetherness.” It’s entirely possible that other families face similar values conflicts.

The organization faces a number of challenges since they rely on parents’ time and support for their success. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed including the following:

- How can the associates support their organization without conflicting with their personal values?
- What conflicts are they causing for the children?
- What can the organization do to achieve their goals as well as respect individual values?
- How can they balance the expectations of management, associates, volunteers and sponsors with the organization’s need for financial and personal support?

While this is just one example of inter-generational values conflict, it is also important to understand that there are specific values that generational members bring to an organization. For instance, prior to the mid-1980s it would have been unheard of to ask a *boss* for flextime or to job share. The hierarchical, male-dominated structure of most organizations didn’t allow for such values-oriented flexibility. Today flextime, job sharing, and more recently, telecommuting are commonplace.

“BUST” THE STEREOTYPES

Millennial’s need direction...**Xer’s** are slackers...**Boomers** are workaholics
...**Traditional’s** are technologically challenged. **Millennial’s** multi-task well...**Xer’s** are creative...**Boomer’s** are team players...**Traditional’s** are hardworking.

These types of stereotypical ideas, like any stereotypical idea, detract from the unique contribution each individual makes to an organization. When organizational members

maintain stereotypical ideas it puts barriers between colleagues and prevents relationship building.

Gaining an understanding of the **general** history and values of the generations can be a very helpful starting point. Scroll down to see the **Overview of Generations**, excerpts from current articles and **Resources**.

FIND THE STRENGTHS

When assembling teams, strategizing to recruit new members or talent, developing future leaders, or planning new product lines, current leaders need to have deep knowledge about the capabilities of individuals within the current talent pool. This knowledge, allows them to create relationships so that strengths and weaknesses complement one another.

Finding strengths requires good listening skills and astute observation of how individuals interact with peers and clients. Seeking strengths encourages colleagues to learn from each other, thus bridging the generational communication gap. This is especially important as organizations begin to identify leadership potential among the younger members of Generation X and the up-and-coming Millennial Generation.

TEST FOR WEAKNESS

The first step in determining if diminished organizational effectiveness and/or productivity are due to a breakdown in intergenerational communication is to assess what the underlying issues really are. If assessment determines that there is an intergenerational culture clash, then the next step is to determine what values and stereotypical ideas the organization and/or the individuals within the organization uphold. Once the flawed foundation has been exposed, then principles of communication can be applied to resolve the conflicts and improve productivity and overall organizational effectiveness.

Issues that impact productivity or organizational effectiveness may be due to a rise in employee or member conflict as well as the inability to attract new members or talent. An audit of the organization, department or team's internal and external communication can be helpful in determining the root cause of the conflict or issue and may uncover simple solutions. An independent third party, who subsequently makes observations, conducts interviews, and surveys relevant parties to make recommendations for the best plan of action, usually completes this. The independent third party can be an internal/external consultant who specializes in organizational

communication or organizational development, a human resources specialist, or someone within the training department.

BUILD FOR FLEXIBILITY

Among other changes, technological advancements, increasing numbers of two-income families, the flattening of organizations, and an increase in the demand for white collar and service industry jobs have allowed organizations to become more flexible in how they allow individuals to get their job done. Unfortunately, conflict can arise when a worker from a Traditional or early Baby Boom generation de-values the contributions of a younger worker who chooses a less traditional work schedule. In a situation like this, management staff must be trained to clearly outline and communicate the expectations of all workers so that those who might abuse such policies can be corrected without hurting those who work productively on a more flexible schedule. Or, the organization needs to examine its policies and practices to determine if they are causing values conflicts.

When organizational leaders, whether a team leader, manager, CEO or volunteer coach, asks an individual to compromise their values to benefit the needs of someone or something else, organizational productivity or effectiveness will diminish. People within organizations need to respect the values that people bring with them and work to find ways to utilize those values for the benefit of the organization plus its customers. Likewise, individuals must contribute to the organization in such a way that the rest of the organization does not suffer in an effort to accommodate the individual's need for flexibility.

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OVERVIEW OF GENERATIONS
From the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration

Traditionalists, Boomers, X'ers and Nexters
NOAA's Generational Diversity at Work

.... Managing generational tensions is an important challenge for NOAA as we face tightened labor markets and increased competition for talent we must focus on the needs of those we are trying to attract and retain. This article explores how values can collide when members of different generations work together – and conversely, what we can do to better understand others and attract and retain those of different generations.

Who Comprises These Generations?

Traditionalists

Baby Boomers

Generation Xers

Nexters or Generation Y

.... Let's begin by talking about NOAA's dominant group members, the **Baby Boomers**. It should come as no surprise that NOAA's majority group members are Boomers when you consider that they make up the largest percentage of the population according to US Census statistics. Boomers consist of people who are currently between the ages of 36–54 (born between 1947–1965). When we talk about NOAA's mature workers we can't forget the Boomers' parents who are still hard at work throughout the organization. With a trend towards later retirements our **Traditionalists**, War Babies or Veterans-- those in the 55–66 age group serve a vital role in NOAA's workforce.

How about our younger generations? According to a recent Washington Post article, the GAO projects that 45% of the government's SES managers, scientists and technicians will retire by 2005 and an additional 25% will be eligible to retire. Of the 11,972 NOAA employees, 3,530 (29%) will be eligible for retirement by 2005. The **Generation Xers** or people in the 24–35 age group (born between 1966–1977) must be ready to step up to the leadership challenge. Xers represent only 17% of NOAA's population³ yet in a short time they will make up the bulk of our workforce. How about our youngest workers, the **Nexters or Generation Y**. They will have to develop

even more quickly than their Generation X predecessors to help fill the leadership positions because there are far fewer Generation Xers than Baby Boomers in our society. Generation Y represents people age 6–23 (born between 1978 and 1995). These are the people that you might be recruiting from colleges and universities as we speak. Some refer to this generation as the super Xers. These are the cyber kids who grew up with the Internet and speed and access to information is something that they are accustomed to.

What Do The Members of Each Generation Value?

Fundamental value differences exist between those of different generations; understanding these values may help understand differences that may arise in the workplace. Organizational development scholar, Dr. Morris Massey began looking at generational values in his three part video series entitled the Massey Triad. Massey argues that our behaviors are driven by our value system or our value programming. He offers that what we are now is closely rooted to what we were when, or when we were value programmed. If we examine the value system shared by generational groups then we can better understand the diverse beliefs and behaviors. We don't have to agree with the values of different generations but we can strive to understand the mind-sets of different generations and how each group sees the world based on their experiences. While it's important to recognize that many dimensions of diversity from race, sex, sexual orientation, geographic location, etc shape who we are and how we behave we can generalize values based on generations. Let's take a look at some of the espoused values or beliefs held by each of the generations so that you will be better able to appreciate the challenge that we face as an organization trying to create an inclusive environment. ***Please note that these are generalizations and may not apply to all employees of a particular generation.***

Traditionalists

Traditionalists' values are influenced by the experiences of their parents whose values go back to the 1800s. This generation experienced the Great Depression and World War II both of which shape how they view the world.

Traditionalists Value...

- Privacy: Traditionalists are the private, silent generation. Don't expect members of this generation to share their inner thoughts.

- **Hard Work:** They believe in paying their dues and become irritated when they perceive others are wasting their time. Members of this generation often feel that their career identifies who they are.
- **Trust:** A leader's word is his/her bond.
- **Formality:** Whether written or in oral communication a formal communication style is preferred. This generation values formal dress and organizational structures.
- **Authority and institutional leadership:** Traditionalists have a great deal of respect for authority.
- **Social Order:** Other generations may view this desire for social order and placement as bias, prejudice or even racism or sexism.
- **Things:** This group loves their stuff and they won't get rid of it. Some may call them pack rats but others would argue that they remember the depression days and going with out. You never know when you might need it.

Supportive Behaviors & Tips for Communicating With Traditionalists...

- By nature traditionalists are private, the "silent generation". Don't expect members of this generation to share their thoughts immediately.
- For the traditionalist a leader's word is his/her bond so it's important to focus on words rather than body language or inferences.
- Face to face or written communication is preferred.
- Don't waste their time, or let them feel as though their time is being wasted.

Baby Boomers

Morris Massey would call this group the Nuagers. This generation represents the children of our World War II veterans. They did not go through economically hard times as their parents did, they had the good life—the Traditionalists wanted them to have the best and as a result the 'Me' decade arrived.

Baby Boomers Value...

- **Competition:** Boomers value peer competition and can be seen by others as being egocentric.
- **Change:** Boomers thrive for possibilities and constant change.
- **Hard Work:** Boomers started the "workaholic" trend. The difference between Traditionalists and Boomers is that Boomers value the hard work because they view it as necessary for moving to the next level of success while Traditionalists work hard

because they feel that it is the right thing to do.

- Success: This generation is committed to climbing the ladder of success.
- Body Language: Boomers are the show me generation and body language is important.
- Teamwork: This group embraces a team based approach to business; they are eager to get rid of the command and control style of their Traditionalist predecessors.
- Anti Rules & Regulations: They don't appreciate rules for the sake of having rules and they will challenge the system.
- Inclusion: This generation will accept people on an equal basis as long as they can perform to their standards.
- Will Fight for a Cause: While they don't like problems, if you give them a cause they will fight for it.

Supportive Behaviors & Tips For Communicating With Baby Boomers...

- Boomers are the "show me" generation, so your body language is important when communicating.
- Speak in an open, direct style but avoid controlling language.
- Answer questions thoroughly and expect to be pressed for the details.
- Present options to demonstrate flexible thinking.

Generation Xers

In 1986 Morris Massey referred to this group as the Syn-Tech generation. This generation is both economically conservative, remembering double digit inflation and the stress that their parents faced during times of on and off unemployment. Unlike their predecessors, they will not rely on institutions for their long-term security.

Generation Xers Value...

- Entrepreneurial Spirit: Xers believe in investing in their own development rather than in their organization's. While others may see them as disloyal they are cautious about investing in relationships with employers because experience has shown that these relationships are not reliable. Cavalier as it may sound, one Xer told a Boomer that if you want loyalty get a dog. To an
- Xer loyalty may mean two-weeks' notice.
- Independence and Creativity: Xers have clear goals and prefer managing their own time and solving their own problems rather than having them managed by a

supervisor.

- Information: They value access to information and love plenty of it.
- Feedback: This group needs continuous feedback and they use the feedback to adapt to new situations. This generation is flexible.
- Quality of Worklife: This generation works hard but they would rather find quicker more efficient ways of working so that they have time for fun. While Boomers are working hard to move up the ladder, Xers are working hard so that they can have more time to balance work and life responsibilities.

Supportive Behaviors & Tips for Communicating With Generation X...

- Use email as a primary communication tool.
- Talk in short sound bites to keep their attention.
- Ask them for their feedback and provide them with regular feedback.
- Share information with them on a regular basis and strive to keep them in the loop.
- Use an informal communication style.

Generation Y (Also Called Nexters)

If you think that Generation Xers were challenging for Boomers to manage just wait until Generation Y moves into the workplace. Generation Y represents people who have grown up during the high tech revolution. They have never known a world without high speed video games, speed dial and ATMs. The secret to motivating this group is to provide systematic and frequent feedback as situations happen.

Generation Y Values...

- Positive Reinforcement: Members of this cyber generation value positive reinforcement at accelerated rates compared to older generations.
- Autonomy: This group wants more input into how they do their job and the independence to do it.
- Positive Attitudes: This group grew up during tranquil times; as a result they have a very optimistic outlook on life in general.
- Diversity: This group grew up with more diversity than their predecessors and if not exposed to it in their community then they were introduced diverse people and cultures through the media.
- Money: This group is used to making and spending money.
- Technology: Technology is valued and is used as a tool for multi-tasking.

Supportive Behaviors & Tips for Communicating With Generation Y...

- Use action words and challenge them at every opportunity.
- They will resent it if you talk down to them.
- They prefer email communication.
- Seek their feedback constantly and provide them with regular feedback.
- Use humor and create a fun work environment. Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Encourage them to take risks and break the rules so that they can explore new ways of doing things.

Managing the Generational Mix

How do we keep a generationally diverse group of NOAA employees motivated and productive in today's environment? The first step to making the generational diversity work is to understand what motivates members of different generations and to institute practices that are flexible enough to meet their needs. Gone are the days when the traditionalists are at home, and everyone who is not a Boomer reports to a Boomer. In today's complex mix of generations Traditionalists also report to Boomers and Boomers report to Generation Xers. Trends toward later retirements mean that traditionalists are still happy working and Generation Xers are quickly moving into positions of power and influence where they are supervising members of older generations.

Companies are beginning to recognize that the changing demographics of the workplace can affect morale and productivity. Companies like Pitney Bowes have incorporated an intergenerational component to leadership training. Executives experience how different generations react and interact with each other. Chairman and CEO Michael Critelli focuses on opening the channels of communication by encouraging employees of all levels to email questions and comments to him. The company has also focused on creating a more fun working environment to address the needs of incoming generations. Pitney Bowes also strives to match people with their jobs and to ensure that they are continuously challenged.⁵

Other successful companies such as TGI Fridays, Ben & Jerry's and Lucent Technologies understand that it is important to focus not only on what needs to get done but on accommodating the work styles of various generations. Lucent Technologies instituted a training center called IdeaVerse that focuses on creativity. Another company created what they call generational play grounds, from Cafe.Com an on-site coffee house

attracting twenty something's to a bookstore which carries the latest in self actualization books which seems to attract the Boomer generation.

NOAA recognizes that generational diversity is an important business issue. Similar to those private sector companies listed above, we are looking at the diverse needs of our employees. Managers and employees at all levels need to understand this dimension of diversity and engage in dialogues around the differences. Why not begin by educating yourself about generational diversity.

BOOKS

http://www.courseilt.com/ilt_searchresults.cfm?searchText=diversity&submit=Go

The New York Times, www.NYTimes.com March 10, 2006

Census Report Foresees No Crisis Over Aging Generation's Health

By [RICK LYMAN](#)

“The next few decades will see an explosion in the percentage of Americans over the age of 65, but the economic and social impact of this baby boomer sunset may be gentler than had been feared because of a significant drop in the percentage of older people with disabilities, a new federal study has concluded.

Released yesterday, the United States Census Bureau's 243-page report on the aging population, among the largest and most comprehensive on the subject that the bureau has ever compiled, showed that today's older Americans are markedly different from previous generations. They are more prosperous, better educated and healthier, and those differences will only accelerate as the first boomers hit retirement age in 2011....”

Recruitment Challenge: When 50% of Workers Retire, How Do You Find New Talent?

By Yoji Cole

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<http://www.diversityinc.com/members/3412.cfm>

“Philip Morris, for the first time in nearly 20 years, is preparing to do something at its Richmond, Va., tobacco-manufacturing plant that will change its outlook.

It's going to hire new employees.

Yes, believe it or not, the manufacturing plant, which employs some 4,000 people, is bracing itself for a massive turnover in the next five years as about 50 percent of its production workers near retirement age, said Craig Schwartz, general manager of the Richmond manufacturing center.

"We have a very experienced, tenured workforce," said Schwartz. "Up to last year, our most junior employee had 20 years of experience -- we had not hired anybody in basically a generation."

[Philip Morris](#) is facing what could be a monumental recruitment task. Not only will it have to fill the positions of those workers who've reached retirement age but redefine the popular notion of a factory worker...."

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