

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing Across the Generations

•Become educated about generational issues.•Avoid age stereotypes.•Manage to the unique strengths and needs of each generation.•Support learning and career development across all age groups.•Don't assume that conflict at work is due to generational issues.•Build a strong multigenerational work group.

Generational diversity at work is growing, as many older employees are working longer and younger employees continue to join the workforce. Teams are likely to include multiple generations in the years to come. In many cases, your direct supervisor may be someone much younger or older than you.

The more you understand the unique perspectives, work styles, and goals of the generations you work with and manage, the more effective you will be as a manager and an employee.

Here are six ways to effectively manage across the generations in your diverse teams.

Become educated about generational issues.

Learning about generational issues will contribute to your understanding of what motivates your employees at different ages and stages of their careers.

Matures (born between 1927 and 1945). Matures are either retired or preparing to retire. If they are working, it is either because they have to for financial reasons or because they want to. Many have decided to use retirement as an opportunity to scale down their work time, while at the same time finding new areas in which to make contributions. Matures want to be respected for their knowledge and experience and want to continue to make a contribution to the workplace.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). Because they are such a large generation, Baby Boomers have faced intense competition at every step of their careers. They can be found at every level of the organization. Many are looking after both children and aging parents. Many Baby Boomers plan to continue working after age 65, either because they have to for financial reasons or because they want to.

Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1980). Gen Xers are a smaller generation than either Baby Boomers or Millennials, which means there hasn’t been as much competition within the generation as there has been for either Baby Boomers or Millennials. Because they are in their late 30s, 40s, and early 50s, Gen Xers are likely to be married, have children, and own homes, and many are caring for aging parents, which may affect how flexible they can be with their work time and location. They are comfortable with technology and appreciate managers who can help them achieve their career goals.

Millennials appreciate people who can help them be effective at work and who believe, as they do, that life isn't all about work.

Millennials (born between 1981 and 2000). Millennials (sometimes called Gen Y) are in the early-to-middle career stage, and many have been in the workplace for more than a decade. They appreciate people who can help them be effective at work and who believe, as they do, that life isn't all about work. They may be married, and the older ones are likely to own homes and have children. Younger Millennials are likely to have more flexibility regarding work time and location. They are likely to be very comfortable with technology and with diversity of races and cultures at work.
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Avoid age stereotypes.

It falls to you to create a climate that enables all employees to do their best. Avoid stereotypes about age, and reinforce that message to employees.

"Keep an open mind," advises Tamara Erickson, author of three books on generations in the workplace. "Perhaps the most important step in successfully navigating generational diversity is learning to recognize and avoid stereotypical thinking about people from other generations."

Here are some common stereotypes to watch for:

Younger workers aren't as loyal and committed as older employees.
Fact: Research shows younger employees are actually very loyal while they are working for a company. While many would like to stay with their organization for their whole career, they don't believe they'll have that option, says Jennifer Deal, co-author of *What Millennials Want from Work: How to Maximize Engagement in Today's Workforce*.

Younger workers aren't willing to work long hours.
Fact: The willingness or unwillingness to work long hours has nothing to do with age and everything to do with the goals and personal circumstances of the individual. In fact, Millennials are as likely as older workers to work many hours, according to Jennifer Deal.

Younger workers aren't willing to pay their dues before moving up the ladder.
Fact: Everyone likes to advance and to be recognized. Younger people are no different from older people in this regard.

Younger workers don't value the experience of older workers.
Fact: Younger employees very much value mentoring relationships. Once paired with older workers, knowledge transfer often goes both ways.

Younger workers have poor work habits and need a lot of supervision, direction, and structure.
Fact: Younger workers may work differently—for example, working different hours or working from home—and they do appreciate receiving a lot of feedback so they know they're on the right track, but that doesn't mean they don't work hard and get a lot done.

Having been raised with technology, younger employees often work very well independently. Remember that face time does not equal productivity.

Older workers are "technologically challenged."
Fact: Mature workers become skilled users of technology once trained and can be just as interested in receiving technology training as younger workers. Bear in mind that some older workers may feel at a disadvantage with regard to their proficiency with technology, so be sure to show sensitivity in helping them develop more skills. Don't let younger workers intimidate older workers with dazzling but unproductive demonstrations of technical virtuosity.

Older workers are slower and therefore less productive.
Fact: Dozens of studies show that there are only minor differences in performance between younger and older workers at similar jobs. In fact, older workers may be faster at work they know well, because they have become more efficient as a result of their extensive experience.

Older workers aren't interested in personal development or career development.
Fact: New learning for seasoned employees is one of the fastest-growing trends in the training arena. Older employees want to continue to be challenged and learn new skills.

Older workers resent having to work alongside younger workers.
Fact: Older workers enjoy the camaraderie of interacting with every generation at work—as long as they are treated with respect.

Many older workers are great mentors, managers, and role models in their organizations.

Older workers won't "let go of the reins" and allow younger workers to take on responsibility.
Fact: While this is true for some, many older workers are great mentors, managers, and role models in their organizations. Many campaign tirelessly for the next generation to be recognized and to succeed.

Manage to the unique strengths and needs of each generation.

Try to meet the needs of different employees with different solutions. "One size no longer fits all when it comes to managing," explains generational expert David Stillman. "With so much generational diversity in today's workplace, the best managers will be those who can flex to meet the needs of different employees with different solutions. That might mean flexing on work hours, dress codes, or even rewards, so that diverse preferences can be accommodated. While this sounds like a lot of work for managers, it can also be a very creative process. And the payoff can be huge."

Support learning and career development across all age groups.

Learning on the job is important for employees of all ages.

Provide opportunities for older and younger employees to work together. Encourage training opportunities and project assignments that bring the generations together. It's a way for people to transfer knowledge, and it provides opportunities for mentoring. Avoid repeatedly pairing the same people—or the same-aged people—together when assigning teams to work on projects. Mixing the generations creates excellent opportunities for learning and team building.

Offer employees of all ages opportunities to develop new skills. "People from every generation and at every level want to learn and want a coach," says Deal. Every employee should have a personal development plan, no matter how simple.

Encourage people of every age group to sign up for trainings, workshops, and courses.

Provide opportunities for two-way mentoring. You may want to ask an employee who is good with technology to mentor a co-worker who has less experience with computers or ask an employee with management experience to mentor an employee who is assuming a supervisory role on a project for the first time. Let each person know that you expect to see results.

Tailor training to people's individual strengths and learning styles. Avoid age stereotypes about how people like to learn. "Younger people do not want to learn everything via a computer," says Deal. She also notes that, "Older people want to learn some things via a computer."

Don't assume that conflict at work is due to generational issues.

There are always going to be conflicts at work, says Deal. Don't assume that generational differences are the cause of the problem. Conflict can be managed with thoughtful planning and sensitivity on the part of managers and organizations.

Bring issues into the open and discuss them with employees. When conflict arises, begin by arranging individual meetings with the employees involved. Identify the root of the conflict. Is it the result of a miscommunication? Personality issues? Different work styles or belief systems? Identifying the cause can help people reach a resolution more quickly.

Help people turn negative energy into positive action. You might try bringing people of diverse ages together on a project so that the work can benefit from their different viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.

In group meetings and individual conversations, model the respect for the strengths of each group member that you want people to show each other.

You could say, "Be sure to get some input from Linda. She's done a lot of these presentations." Or you might say, "Ask Frank for help with the PowerPoint slides. He's great at that." Putting your work group through a training course on generational differences or diverse thinking styles is also an excellent way to help employees acknowledge their differences, see their similarities, and work together effectively as a team.

Seek support from your manager or your employee assistance program (EAP) if you could use help managing generational issues. Talking things through with someone outside your department can be very helpful. Better yet, ask to speak with someone from another generation who might have the perspective you need.

Build a strong multigenerational work group.

Building a strong multigenerational work group requires flexibility, a commonsense approach to people management, and careful attention to the needs of both individuals and the group you manage.

Get to know employees as individuals. In an article for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) about retaining young, diverse workers, Catherine Dixon-Khari advises finding out what it takes to make your employees happy. Her advice is relevant across the generations: "Ask each of your direct reports what it will take to keep them with your organization, and use this information to create action plans to retain valuable talent." Do this sooner rather than later.

Be a "generation-friendly" manager. Experts use this term to describe managers who are aware of and inclusive of generational or life-stage differences, and who adapt their management style to meet individuals' needs.

One way to be a generation-friendly manager is to show every employee you manage that everyone's opinion matters and counts.

Point out individuals' unique contributions to the group in team meetings and in one-on-one meetings. Compliment an older worker's insight that comes from experience and a younger worker's great new idea—and an older worker's great new idea and a younger worker's insight that comes from their experience. Point out successes that come from teamwork when working with other departments. Over time, people will begin to understand the positive attributes each individual brings to the workplace regardless of their generation, and realize that the contribution is ultimately more important than the age of the person who makes the contribution.

Talk about generational issues with your group. You might do this informally at a brown-bag lunch. Use the discussion to share ideas and insights and to clear up any misunderstandings.

"People from different generations are largely alike in what they think, believe, and want from their work life," writes Deal in Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground.

Remember that by keeping people focused on common values and goals, you'll bridge generation gaps, help people work together effectively, and turn differences into strengths within your organization.

Edited by Jennifer J. Deal, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership, and author of *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground* and *What Millennials Want from Work.*