



LEADING ACROSS THE GENERATIONS:

BATTLE-TESTED STRATEGIES TO BRIDGE THE GENERATION GAP AT YOUR COMPANY AND SUPERCHARGE COLLABORATION

As a leader in charge of diverse employees, you face an existential challenge that could determine the survival of your business. What is that challenge? It's one that very few business leaders even know exists, let alone address with any sensitive, intentional strategy.

Here's the gist:

There's a "generation gap" at your workplace that's threatening to fracture your team along generational lines, throwing the entire organization out of alignment.

Research studies (and common sense) show that workers from different generations respond to very distinct types of motivational cues. If you have a mix of employees at your company – Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials, for instance – you need to sensitize yourself and your organization to these styles to orchestrate projects better, increase productivity, eliminate "drama," and fuel collaboration.

IS THE GENERATION GAP A PROBLEM FOR YOU?

Are you experiencing some of the following leadership issues? If so, you may need help ASAP:

- Your employees tend to cluster together, socially, along generational lines. The younger employees, for instance, hang out with other younger employees; the older employees have formed cliques of their own;
- On projects, issues like "seniority" create all kinds of sensitivity among the troops.
- You've hired great people, but something's "off" about how they are collaborating, and you just can't put your finger on it;
- You're losing key people to competitors who harbor a more collaborative environment, and you need to stop this "brain drain" ASAP.



HERE'S HOW A [RECENT GALLUP SURVEY](#) FRAMED THE PROBLEM:

“The oldest and youngest workers in the American workplace are the most likely to be engaged, according to Gallup research. Traditionalists (born in 1945 or earlier) have the highest level of engagement at 41% engaged, followed by 33% for Millennials (born in 1981 or later). That's great news -- except those generations are also by far the smallest percentage of the workforce. Together, they comprise only 23% of all employees in the U.S.

The overwhelming majority of workers are either Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) or part of Generation X (born 1965-1980) -- and they are distinctly less engaged. Employers would be wise to find ways to boost engagement among those in the middle generations, as they have comprised 77% of today's workforce at the end of 2014.”

THE ANTIDOTE AWAITS

This brief report will open your eyes to the scope and nature of this problem and give you actionable, practical tools that have been beta-tested successfully in businesses just like yours.

Even if you're not currently aware of any “generation gap” in your business -- maybe you only have 5 to 10 employees, or a generational culture has yet to take hold -- the lessons we'll present about how to get your team working together are in many ways universal. As a leader, you want to extract the most value and profit from your team and your systems. To do so, you need to pay attention to the subtle dynamics that can affect your people as well as the systems that they operate. To that end, prepare to add new insights to your toolbox to gain a competitive edge.

THE PROBLEM IN A NUTSHELL: AN ANALOGY

Imagine that you're a coxswain of an eight men (or eight women) boat that's competing in a prestigious regatta, like the Head of the Charles in Boston. The coxswain's job is to motivate everyone to pull as hard as they can; he or she also strives to get everyone to pull in sync.

The coxswain acts on two basic “motivational dimensions” – **alignment** and **power**. They are not independent, though. If everyone just pulls as hard as they can, the boat will flop around and go off course. The oarsmen will get in each other's way, and the boat will lose. Conversely, if the focus is solely about getting everyone to row together in perfect unison, the strongest rowers may have to hold back, and the crew will lose to boats that “repress” their individual athletes less.

The dynamic trick with being a coxswain – and, analogously, with being a business leader – is to maximize both motivational dimensions at the same time. In other words,



you want to get everyone on the boat **pulling as fast as they can** while **rowing in maximum sync**.

In “rowing speak,” coxswains often use motivational tools like “power tens” -- in which the athletes have to row exceptionally hard for 10 strokes in a row -- to extract more power. But what if only four people on the boat love power tens, while the other four prefer quiet? At first glance, it seems like the coxswain faces a paradox. If he or she orders a lot of power tens, one half of the boat will be happy, while the other half will be miserable. If he or she stays quiet, the other half will be happy and the first half will be likely to underperform.

One solution is for the coxswain to have conversations with the oarsmen and to develop a process that will include both power tens and silent periods. That way, everyone’s needs will be met, and everyone will be effectively motivated. Based on practice, they can then figure out which “motivational recipes” yield the best results.

By acknowledging differences in motivational styles -- and conducting and tracking experiments based on these insights -- a team can maximize its effectiveness. First, **acknowledge** that these different styles exist. Then **build your strategies** around them. Spend time thinking about the generations at your workplace – how they interact, think, communicate, and get motivated -- as opposed to ignoring these differences.

Four generations currently work in the American labor force, as we write this report in 2015. We’re going to look at each generation very briefly and categorize (broadly speaking) their workplace philosophies, motivations and mentalities. Of course, these are broad generalizations. Caveats apply, and avoid pigeonholing on your employees.

1. THE SILENT GENERATION



Warren Buffet, CEO, Berkshire Hathaway

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Born between 1925 and 1945, these men and women were raised either during or in the shadow of the Great Depression, and they were alive to watch America emerge as a great power following its victory during World War II. They came of age prior to the feminist and Civil Rights movements of the 60s. America was a much more patriarchal society at the time. Men, by and large, served as breadwinners for families, and racial divides still loomed large. This generation comprised 3% of the workforce at the end of 2014.



Most members of the Silent Generation have now retired; many, though, remain in the workforce motivated by needs for financial security, social belonging, and the desire to do “great work” that will help them secure a legacy. They are unlikely to be technologically-savvy, and they may find the workplace mores of 2015 -- with their focus on standing desks, strong anti-discrimination policies, and culture of employee self-motivation -- to be foreign or off putting. The Silent Generation puts a lot of emphasis on respect, order, and tradition.

2. THE BABY BOOMERS



Bill Gates, Co-Founder, Microsoft "Bill Gates July 2014" by DFID - UK Department for International Development - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dfid/14590135480/>. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bill_Gates_July_2014.jpg#/media/File:Bill_Gates_July_2014.jpg

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 (roughly speaking) in the wake of America’s victory during World War II. Boomers are an enormous cultural force due to their sheer size. They lived through and created the revolutionary social and economic upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnam War profoundly shaped and refined the Boomers’ ideals and values. Once known for radical ideas like “The Summer of Love” and the Merry Pranksters, they are now older. Many are either at the retirement age or near retirement age. As such, their values and needs are now ironically quite similar to those of the older generations they once rebelled against -- security, an easy retirement, a sense of doing something that’s going to live beyond them, a need to live in ease and health, etc.

Unlike the Silent Generation, however, Boomers are more interested in technology and newer modes of interacting at the workplace. They tend to be a collection of contradictions -- on the one hand, they’re open minded and progressive. On the other hand, they have a reputation for being self-centered and stuck-in-their-ways in how they view business and the world in general. This generation comprised 34% of the workforce at the end of 2014.



3. THE GENERATION XERS



Elon Musk, CEO and CTO of SpaceX, CEO and chief product architect of Tesla Motors, and chairman of SolarCity

Born between 1965 and 1980, Generation Xers generally take pride in being “alienated” and counter cultural. Defined less by profound social movements or wars than by rock music (e.g. Nirvana, Radiohead), Generation Xers are now entering middle age and rising to prominent positions in management.

By and large, Gen Xers understand new technologies, and they’ve been rising in the ranks in the 21st century. At this point, many Gen Xers are established with families, and they have started to “settle down” in many respects. Many have rigid and even reactionary outlooks re: the workplace. The common needs among this generation include autonomy, a need to “make a mark,” a need to meet obligations to family, and the desire to keep up with the Joneses. While Boomers tend to ask for directions and enjoy working in teams, Generation Xers are more likely to be lone wolves who prefer one-on-one coaching. Some Gen Xers are technological dinosaurs. Don’t be surprised if a 39-year-old employee still has an AOL address, for instance. This generation comprised 42% of the workforce at the end of 2014.

4. GENERATION YERS/MILLENNIALS



Mark Zuckerberg, Founder of Facebook

Generation Y generally includes people born between 1981 and 2000. The Millennials, as they’re also known, share many values (and shortcomings) of their older Gen X colleagues. They generally are more familiar with technology. A Gen X employee, for instance, may be fluent with e-mail and texting. But odds are that a Millennial employee will be more into things like Instagram, Snapchat, Foursquare, Vine, etc. Their needs are also different from Gen Xer’s needs; they’re far less about family and more about belonging and rising up in the workplace.

Millennials have earned (rightly or wrongly) a reputation for wanting to “skip steps” and avoid “paying their dues.” Newly minted college grads and their older colleagues no longer think about working for 30 years and getting a brass watch; instead, they dream about becoming like Mark Zuckerberg -- inventing a killer app at the age of 20, and making it rich on the internet. This generation comprised 21% of the workforce at the end of 2014.



GETTING ALL OARS TO PULL TOGETHER: STRATEGIES FOR ALIGNING AND COORDINATING YOUR INTER-GENERATIONAL TEAM

1. CLARIFY YOUR PURPOSE AND CORE VALUES, AND USE THEM TO MAKE TEAM DECISIONS.

When you try to motivate using financial incentives or similar “tricks,” inevitably, your style will appeal to one group but not to another. If you’re overly hierarchal and use money and bonuses, you may appeal to the older generations but turn off the Gen Xers and Gen Yers, for instance. Conversely, if you change your office culture to become more freewheeling – ping pong in the lobby, Naked juices and kale sandwiches in the kitchen – you may excite the younger folks but alienate the older workers.

Instead, focus on universal themes, like the broader mission for your company (or division). Promote and build your strategy around core values that everyone shares, and you can dissolve the generation gap. Here is a good article about how to [define your organization’s purpose](#). And here’s one about how to [define your core values](#).

2. WORK TOWARDS A BIG AND AUDACIOUS GOAL.

In order to motivate passion and relentlessness, you need to get specific. You need a goal that everyone can understand and rally around. Here is a good article about [how to develop powerful corporate goals](#). When this is done, you can effectively melt away the generation gap and forge a single, cohesive, collaborative corporate entity.

3. PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT HAPPENS IN THE COMPANY; USE METRICS TO ASSESS SUCCESS OR FAILURE.

It’s easy to get caught up in the drama and politics and to get away from the objective facts on the ground. Think about the metrics that really matter to you. Are they aligned with your big goals or not? Then work backwards to quantify what you need, in order to achieve those goals. For instance, are your teams delivering on time or not? How many revisions do you need to pay for, and how much do those revisions cost you? Create scales and assessments to quantify engagement, creativity, responsiveness, attitude, etc. Use facts to course correct your people.

4. HANDLE YOUR GENERATION GAP RELATED PROBLEMS IN AN ITERATIVE FASHION.

For instance, let’s say that you want to repair cracks that have developed between your Boomer executives and Gen X managers. You want the two groups to socialize more, work together in a better fashion, and so forth. As you’ve been reading this document, you’ve probably already been brainstorming how to make this happen. It’s great to make plans. However, as General (and then President) Dwight Eisenhower once



famously warned: "In preparing for battle I have always found that *plans* are useless, but *planning* is indispensable."

What he meant was plans can help you visualize outcomes and prepare for contingencies. But as soon as you implement, reality will force you to change course.

To be flexible, you need to respond in an intuitive, strategic way both to positive surprises (serendipities) and unexpected setbacks. Create a plan. Then test it. Then reframe, based on what happened and any feedback you get. Then go through the whole process again and again.

5. KEEP THE FAITH THAT YOUR TEAM WILL SUCCEED, BUT ALWAYS OPERATE IN REALITY.

You need to believe that you will be able to fix the problems created by the generation gap in your company, but you also want to avoid fooling yourself or pretending that the problems are getting better, when they are not. Deal with the facts as they present themselves, and maintain steadfast optimism and faith in your own leadership and your team.

CONCLUSION

The workplace generation gap may, right now, be holding your team back from achieving its goals and operating in a truly fluid and collaborative fashion. In this short report, we've talked about the four generations at work in the American workforce (and in your company) and given you insightful strategies and tools to bridge that generation gap and make your business more productive and more likely to succeed. Good luck!