

CHAPTER 4



Engaging the Generations

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NO LONGER JUST a problem for families, the generation gap has donned casual business attire and come to work. For the first time in modern history, four generations are working side by side in most companies. And, just like a multigenerational family, each age group has different motivators, communication styles, and work values.

See if this sounds familiar . . .

- Bill, a 61-year-old company veteran, watches the new crop of interns settle in at his division. He marvels at their selfish outlook and apparent lack of loyalty.
- Susan, a 48-year-old mother of two and caretaker for her aging father, looks at her in-basket and wonders how she'll ever find the time to meet the needs of both her family and her work team.
- Jennifer, a 30-year-old supervisor, chafes under the attention of her boss. "If he doesn't stop micromanaging me and let me do the job my way, I'm out of here," she thinks.
- Greg, a 22-year-old, fresh out of college, is ready to conquer the world. "I'm going to be a director by the time I'm 30," he tells his older coworkers, immediately alienating them.

What's going on in companies today? Why can't the generations get along? What used to be humorous grousing around the water cooler has turned into a serious corporate issue as demographics and company needs collide. It's likely your organization—if not your work team—has members of the Silent Generation (born 1933–1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation Xers (born 1965–1976), and maybe even some Millennials (born 1977–1998). And

that's only half the story. The prominent feature about the workforce in the first half of the 21st century is that it will grow much more slowly than in any other decade since the 1960s. In fact, researchers predict that we face a workforce shortage of somewhere between 15 and 25 million workers in the first 20 years of this century.

Engage the Generations: It Makes Good Business Sense

How can you engage each of these generations, inspire them to stay and succeed? Why is it important that you target each one? If your organization is expanding, your diverse workplace should mirror your diverse marketplace; if you need to attract and retain top talent, your company must appeal to high-quality candidates of all ages; if your company suffers from conflicting attitudes about work, misunderstandings over communication, and miscues about motivation, you need to narrow your generation gap; and if you see employees that have "quit" but are still at their desk every day, you need to not just retain them but also to truly engage them in their work.

Here are the top five reasons that organizations need to proactively work on engaging all four generations:

1. *Slipping away.* Is your precious knowledge capital walking out the door? Are you seeing an onslaught of Silents and Baby Boomers checking out their retirement options? If your workplace is built around Boomers, the average age of your employees is somewhere between the late 30s and mid-50s, which means that capturing their expertise is a high priority.
2. *Whining and walking.* Have you noticed that your Silent Generation and Boomers are inclined to whine when they're dissatisfied—and that Generation Xers and Millennials are inclined to walk? Retaining talented younger workers is a top challenge for many organizations.
3. *Quitting and working.* People can quit and still come to work. Some of your key talent may be physically present at work, but not psychologically there. It's worse to have them stay and do damage than to go and seek work fulfillment elsewhere.
4. *Competing and constraining.* Are you in a race to attract and retain top talent? Recruiting and retaining high-quality knowledge workers remains a core challenge as organizations compete for a smaller pool of workers.
5. *Clashing and complementing.* You've noticed that the people you work with have differences in work ethic, teamwork, expectations of you, and expectations of the organization, and you wonder if the differences are related to their generations.

To engage the generations, you must first understand them. Let's take a look at each generation's portrait.

Get to Know the Generations

THE GENERATIONS DEFINED

There are various opinions on the birth years that define each generation, most differing by only a year or two. There are two reasons for this: First, generations and their characteristics are most clearly defined in retrospect, and there are many opinions as to when a generation began to exhibit its defining characteristics. Second, some researchers and sociologists define subsets of generations. For example, they view the Baby Boomers as two separate groups. Sometimes people born three years on either side of a “dividing” year find themselves identifying with the previous or following generation. Please keep in mind that it’s less important to focus on specific dates than it is to concentrate on what managers can do regarding generational differences.

According to *Rocking the Ages* by generational experts J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman (Harper-Collins, 1997), members of a generation are linked through the shared life experiences of their formative years, such as the economy, world events and politics, and heroes and villains. These common experiences tie a generation’s members together, creating what sociologists call *cohorts*. Because of their shared experiences, cohorts develop similar values and life approaches, which are revealed by everything from their attitude toward saving money to how they raise their children—not to mention how they view work and the workplace.

The Silent Generation: Your Sagely Silents

Meet Bill and his cohort group . . . The oldest generation typically found in today’s workplace was born between 1933 and 1945. These oldest members grew up in a time of economic turmoil in the aftermath of the Great Depression. They dealt with economic hardships by being disciplined and self-sacrificing. They lived and helped reinforce the American Dream. They have enjoyed a lifetime of steadily rising affluence.

There are 52 million Silents, and they defy generalization more than any other generation. So watch those stereotypes!

Employees from the Silent Generation are typically disciplined, loyal team players who work within the system. They have a huge knowledge legacy to share, and they embody a traditional work ethic.

There’s a natural affinity between this generation and the young Millennials. It’s a perfect match to have them mentor the youngest generation of employees, and the Silent Generation’s natural civic-mindedness lends itself to this task.

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Don't dismiss their technical skills as out of date: Del Webb, a major developer of homes for retiring couples, points out that the top requested feature in new homes for retirees is his-and-hers offices. Most Silents have a positive view of technology, so provide your older employees with proactive service and support for technology tasks and let them run with it.

Silents feel unappreciated, but they're open to returning to the workplace after initial retirement, as long as they have the flexibility to put their new-found freedom first. You might consider asking some of your retirees to return as part-time consultants and mentors, as well as instituting phased retirement to gradually ease older employees into retirement at a mutually agreeable pace.

Tips on managing this generation: Assure them that you value their work and that it's respected; ask them to share their knowledge legacy; and give them hands-on training and praise their mastery of new areas; don't take it for granted.

The Baby Boomers: Driven to Succeed

Meet Susan and her hard-driving colleagues . . . The most populous generation in the United States, 76 million Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. They typically grew up amid economic prosperity, suburban affluence, and strong nuclear families with stay-at-home moms. Boomers asked tough questions about social issues, civil rights, war, sexual freedom, and more. They took stock of their radically changing world and got to work with a vengeance.

Boomers tend to be optimistic, competitive, and focused on personal accomplishment. They work hard, maybe too hard. This is the generation that increased our workweek from 40 hours to 70 or 80 hours. As younger generations have entered the workplace, Boomers have waited for them to pick up this traditional approach to work. Some researchers divide the Baby Boomers into two groups: (1) those born between 1946 and 1954 (the "Woodstock" group, known for their idealistic endeavors and social conscience), and (2) those born between 1955 and 1964 (the "Zoomer" group, known for their preoccupation with self).

This generation has ruled the workplace for years and is comfortable in the culture they've created. They view changes as sometimes painful but inevitable. Many companies experience their biggest generational conflict when Boomer managers are confronted with younger employees who don't "fit the mold" that they themselves created.

Tips on managing this generation: Spotlight intangibles such as fulfillment and spirituality; redesign jobs to accommodate family demands of children and aging parents; and encourage them to "lighten up." Let them know how their contributions are unique and important.

Generation X: Declaring Their Independence

Meet Jennifer and her resilient contemporaries . . . The 51 million members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1976, grew up in a very different world than previous generations. Divorce and working moms created "latchkey" kids

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out of many in this generation. This led to traits of independence, resilience, and adaptability. Generation X feels strongly that “I don’t need someone looking over my shoulder.”

At the same time, this generation expects immediate and ongoing feedback and is equally comfortable giving feedback to others. Other traits include working well in multicultural settings, desire for some fun in the workplace, and a pragmatic approach to getting things done.

Generation X saw their parents get laid off or face job insecurity. Many of them also entered the workplace in the early 1980s, when the economy was in a downturn. Because of these factors, they’ve redefined loyalty. Instead of remaining loyal to their companies, they have a commitment to their work, to the teams they work with, and to the bosses they work for. For example, a Baby Boomer complains about his dissatisfaction with management, but figures it’s part of the job. A Gen Xer doesn’t waste time complaining—she sends her résumé out and accepts the best offer she can find at another organization.

At the same time, Generation X takes employability seriously. But for this generation, there isn’t a career ladder. There’s a career lattice. They can move laterally, stop and start . . . their career is more fluid.

Tips on managing this generation: Create a “campus culture” environment that allows flexibility and independence—including flextime and/or telecommuting; mentor them instead of managing them; promote a participatory work environment; provide chances to compete; offer constant feedback; and assign a series of long-term, meaningful projects. Motivate them by eliminating as many rules as possible.

The Millennial Generation: Up and Coming

Meet Greg and his self-confident contemporaries . . . Just beginning to enter the workplace, The Millennial Generation was born between 1977 and 1998. The 75 million members of this generation are being raised at the most child-centric time in our history. Perhaps it’s because of the showers of attention and high expectations from parents that they display a great deal of self-confidence to the point of appearing cocky.

As you might expect, this group is technically literate like no one else. Technology has always been part of their lives, whether it’s computers and the Internet or cell phones and text pagers.

Millennials are typically team-oriented, banding together to date and socialize rather than pairing off. They work well in groups, preferring this to individual endeavors, and they’re used to tackling multiple tasks with equal energy. They expect to work hard. They’re good at multitasking, as they’ve juggled sports, school, and social interests as children.

Millennials seem to expect structure in the workplace. They acknowledge and respect positions and titles, and they want a relationship with their boss. This doesn’t always mesh with Generation X’s love of independence and hands-off style.

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Tips on managing this generation: Provide a fun, friendly environment that still has structure and stability; personalize their work; help them become a specialized generalist, boost teamwork; offer flextime and/or telecommuting; and address them personally.

Bridging the Gap

“GEN-FRIENDLY” PRACTICES AND POLICIES

Use these ideas as a starting point for reviewing how generation-friendly your organization is now and for considering how to better engage all generations:

- *Rethink retirement plans.* Accelerate or shorten the vesting period of your 401K, pension plan, or other retirement program to accommodate career mobility, and make sure benefits are transferable between your units or divisions. This promotes flexible careers and provides a way for employees to establish their financial independence early in their careers.
- *Diversify.* This is a desirable hallmark for Gen Xers and Millennials who grew up surrounded by people of all types. They know when companies only give lip service to diversity. If you're known in your industry or community as a diversity-friendly employer, you're miles ahead of the competition in the race for Gen Xer or Millennial talent.
- *Shift your schedule.* The ability to manage work-life balance is the number-one need of all generations. Offering a variety of flexible hours, telecommuting, and options for taking time off will appeal to everyone from Silents transitioning to retirement to Boomers caring for aging parents and children to Gen Xers starting families.
- *Create a career lattice.* Not everyone wants to climb the corporate ladder. Gen-friendly organizations offer encouragement and flexibility for employees who want to ping-pong through the organization, picking up skills along the way. Create nonmanagerial career ladders, and offer promotions and raises tied to building expertise and not just position.
- *Customized career development.* Consider offering career development workshops that target the unique needs of each generation and what they want from work. For the Silents, offer a “Retreading” session on planning for a retirement career or switching to part-time. For Boomers, offer a “Retooling” session on how to acquire the skills to fulfill personal career goals. For Gen Xers, offer a “Reflection” session on taking stock of your career and setting and reaching goals. For Millennials, offer a “Re-Orientation” session to get their careers off to a good start.

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Despite the seemingly radical differences between the generations, there are some core needs we all share, from the 60-year-old veteran behind the desk in operations to the 23-year-old college graduate who just started in sales.

Research shows that salary and benefits aren't the main reasons people choose to stay at a company. Rather, people stay if their work is exciting, focused on growth, and encourages their development. You can increase retention and morale for all your employees by working on the concept of *engagement*.

From a leadership perspective, engagement maximizes the contributions of every person in the workplace, creating a compelling, retention-focused atmosphere that addresses the unique needs of the generations in a way that creates bridges and common ground, not division and discord. From your employees' perspective, engagement means being motivated, fulfilled, and committed to one's work.

Have your managers emphasize specific areas of universal needs and interests, developing them to create strong common ground to engage all employees. We call these areas the "three C's of engagement:" career, climate, and communication.

Careers: Activate Them

Regardless of our view of work and our work ethic, we all want our work to be satisfying and to offer opportunities for growth. There are several ways that even the most time-stressed manager can act as a career coach. For instance, you can have frank, one-on-one discussions with employees about their career aspirations and options. Familiarize yourself with the career goals of employees, and encourage them to have multiple goals that may move them in directions other than straight up the career ladder. These simple practices are often as meaningful as a formalized career path.

Make it a habit to give prompt and useful feedback, letting each employee know what you see as his or her individual strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Share your own lessons of experience. Let employees know how you got to your current position, including any mistakes and missteps, career changes, and alternate paths.

Your company—or individual managers—can encourage informal mentoring to help employees gain new skills and insights. Remember that cross-generational mentoring is a two-way street; don't assume that the Silent Generation is the only age group with skills and knowledge to share. By having managers or, better yet, other employees who mentor individuals of all ages, you'll help build everyone's skills base and keep everyone involved interested, motivated, and engaged.

If your company is undergoing downsizing, a merger, or other stressful changes, don't forget to keep a focus on careers. Often in these circumstances, the attitude is one of "be thankful you're getting a paycheck," instead of

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focusing on individual growth. There are many things that managers can do to energize careers during corporate change: it may look different than business as usual, but it still works.

You can activate the careers of Silents like Bill by involving them as mentors, giving them a chance to share their wisdom, and assuring them you value their expertise. Provide job security and demonstrate your appreciation for the things they've learned the hard way and can still contribute. Finally, make sure they understand their future lifestyle needs and link them to organizational resources.

Help Boomers like Alice explore their next set of workplace options, including consulting or part-time work. When possible, redesign their jobs to accommodate multiple family demands. Encourage them to enrich their present jobs and grow in place if they need to slow their career pace.

Generation Xers respond to candid feedback and discussion about their careers. Tell them what they'll need to learn and look for in their current jobs to succeed. Acknowledge their ability to work independently and encourage them to leverage their entrepreneurial aptitude.

Engage the Millennials by demonstrating the stability and long-term value of your organization and of their jobs. Provide work schedules that help them build careers and families at the same time. Make groups and teams part of their work experience.

Climate: Create One

A good working climate is another value we all desire. Everyone wants a workplace that's trusting and open—and every manager has the opportunity to create his or her own “weather system,” regardless of the overall climate of the organization.

Managers can create an ideal climate by delegating tasks to develop employees and shaping the work to the needs of each individual. Even members of the Silent Generation are interested in trying new things at work, so challenge each individual to learn new skills.

You should also celebrate individual and team accomplishments, whether through verbal praise or more tangible rewards (from a handmade certificate to a \$100 gift allowance). Preferably, use as many different means of recognition as possible to appeal to all generations; Boomers prefer practical rewards like time off or monetary incentives, while Millennials actually enjoy more responsibility on the job.

To create an ideal climate, you must prove your openness to ideas and innovations from your employees. Don't just listen to them. Act on their ideas or let them know why you can't.

Consider adding or increasing camaraderie-building events for employees, such as a team breakfast or off-hours picnic. If possible, add or increase flexible work schedules. Nearly 80 percent of Americans of all ages report that having a

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work schedule that enables them to spend time with their families is one of their top priorities.

Create a microclimate for Silents by verbally and publicly acknowledging their experience. Provide proactive technology support services if they aren't computer savvy and use due process.

Encourage Baby Boomers to "lighten up" and send a clear message that long hours are no longer a badge of honor. Give them flexibility and spotlight personal fulfillment and meaningful work.

With Generation Xers, resist micromanaging and provide a flexible and participatory work environment. Give them more opportunities, such as jobs in different departments or new tasks.

And for Millennials, encourage group work, try to personalize their work (one size *doesn't* fit all), and communicate the civic side of your company, such as pro bono work for a local charity.

Communication: Emphasize It

Another way you can engage all generations is to communicate often and in as many different ways as possible. We all need feedback and different types of communication, but people of different ages respond to different methods of communication. The solution: Use them all: e-mail, voicemail, newsletters, staff meetings, and a favorite of the Boomers: management-by-walking-around.

Communication that engages others is seldom seen in a written memo. Most often it's direct and in person. Remember, managers don't have to know all the answers. They just need to listen to all the questions, respond with what they know, and be straight about what's unknown. Keep those lines open, especially during tough times.

Make it a personal goal to beat the rumor mill with proactive communication. When you get information, share it. Let your employees see the big picture of what's happening in your organization, especially regarding upcoming changes or events that will affect them. Don't forget to include long-term plans and outlooks in your staff meetings.

As straight shooters, Silents appreciate straightforward messages that are balanced and reasonable. Make sure your communications with them are "say what you mean and mean what you say." Summarize information for them. They grew up with newspapers.

Baby Boomers want to hear what's new, innovative, and different. They prefer a news magazine format for written communication. Be expeditious. They appreciate saving time.

Generation Xers need communication that's frequent, truthful, specific, and concrete. They want to know how the news impacts them personally.

With Millennials, emphasize your commitment to them as individuals. Personalize your communications. Share your vision and invite them to participate.

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It is possible to bridge those generation gaps and engage employees of all ages, through understanding each cohort group and expanding the common ground we all share: The desire for meaningful work, a good climate to work in, and the desire for open communication. Add a positive and unbiased attitude toward employees of all generations, and you can build even greater unity. We need everyone's energy and ideas, and organizations that ignore this will lose in the competitive race for talent.

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