

Network to Work Meeting

Resource Materials – September 2016

Workplace Manners and Codes of Behavior – Working as Part of an Inter-Generational Workforce

1. The Workplace through the Ages

Americans are staying in the workforce longer than ever; at the same time, Generation Y – those workers born between 1977 and 1991 – are now the largest segment of the workforce at 80 million strong. At some point all of us will work for or with people who aren't our age and who bring different work styles and work ethics to their jobs. Therefore, generational diversity is something that all of us – workers and employers alike – must pay attention to.

We each have an identity related to our generation that distinguishes us. Here's an overview of the generations, and their workplace values and attitudes.

Matures - Born 1909-1945:

Matures came of age when loyalty between employer and employee was supreme. Many jobs went from "cradle to grave". They thought that long service to a company would always be rewarded with raises and promotions, and that the company would take care of them even after retirement. They respected company hierarchy, and often resisted "new ways" of doing things.

Boomers - Born 1946-1964:

Boomers saw the collapse of loyalty and longevity at the workplace as they faced layoffs and downsizing when recession hit. They also felt fierce competition as many of those 78 million Boomers hit the job market at the same time. They became workaholics who believed that the number of hours worked was most important, even more important than productivity. Later, Boomers questioned whether that "work 'til you drop" attitude was all worth it.

Generation X - Born 1965 -1976:

The approximately 48 million Gen-Xers in the workplace saw their parents burn out; therefore, they try to strike a balance between work and life. They value their own lives and respect long term productivity. They've seen companies fail so they are loyal to people rather than companies. They approach work thinking of themselves as independent contractors, even when they are actually employees. They also demand open communication at all levels.

Millennials/Generation Y/Generation Next - Born 1977-1991:

No matter what they are called, this generation is a workforce to be reckoned with. 80 million in size, this group has grown larger than the Boomers. They were treasured and pampered as children, and expect the same from their employer – meaning lots of feedback and recognition. They value individual relationships and want personal fulfillment from their work.

2. Generational Diversity – part 1: Tips for Handling Age Differences at Work and in the Job Hunt

If you're over 50 and job hunting, you know ageism can be a stumbling block. Among the worries some employers have about older applicants is that they'll resent reporting to a younger boss.

The secret to making this relationship work is mutual respect. Age is immaterial if you appreciate that even if your boss is decades younger than you, he or she likely earned that position due to impressive skills and talents.

Here are some helpful tips for handling generational differences at work:

1. Speak everyone's language. Communication is one of the biggest problems in an intergenerational workplace. Older workers have a longer attention span and are often more patient, which strikes younger workers as being slow. Younger people speak differently and use slang like "Hey, she looks phat." Even though "P-H-A-T" means cool and hip, not F-A-T, an older worker will likely hear it as an insult. Likewise, using terms like "groovy", "far out", or "that's heavy" will date an older worker. So, be sensitive about slang and try using universally understood adjectives such as "great" or "wonderful".

2. Remember age is just a number and resist the urge to judge and stereotype based on age. Older workers often stereotype younger colleagues as inexperienced, impatient and immature, simply because of their youth. Younger workers often stereotype older colleagues as

inflexible, slow, and resistant to change and new technology. However, we all know many people that don't fit these stereotypes, and competence and ability no longer correlate to one's age or years of experience. So, even though it's easy to let emotions get the best of us when taking orders from someone who could be our kids' age – or managing someone who could be our grandparent - give the people you work with the benefit of the doubt and believe you can learn something valuable from an individual of any age.

3. Encourage candid conversation. If you're having difficulties with a younger or older colleague, face the problem head on and encourage candid conversations. Generational issues should not be a taboo subject. If you feel you're being undermined or ignored because of your age, talk directly to the person and let him or her know that you value their opinions and you aim to have a strong working relationship – and that you'd appreciate their respect for the skills you bring to your position.

4. Manage your attitude and assumptions. Remember you were once that brash young worker or rising star, full of clever ideas and new ways of doing things. So listen carefully to what the boss has to say and respect the title and position. Show a willingness to try new ways of doing things. Also, quiet the superior tone in your voice. How you treat someone, even subliminally, generally is reflected back at you. Likewise, older workers shouldn't assume that their age wins them respect from a younger supervisor. Respect has to be earned.

5. Talk about the elephant in the room. Younger bosses may wonder if older workers will have a tough time reporting to someone their age. They could be concerned that you're not willing to try new approaches, not up to snuff with technology and might lack the grit to do the job. Tell them why they shouldn't worry. Better yet, show it. You could forward an article to your boss that you think is cutting edge with a note that you ran across it on the Internet or LinkedIn.

6. Concentrate on what you have to offer / Play to your strengths. Keep your focus on what you have to offer your employer instead of on age concerns. Remember your maturity and experience is an asset that has prepared you to solve problems more quickly.

7. Find the Silver Lining. The enthusiasm that a younger boss brings to the job can be contagious. Soak it up. Managing others is hard work, so your supervisor will appreciate if you make it easy for him or her. Be positive. The key to success is realizing that it is about building a mutually beneficial relationship that allows each of you to be successful at work. Consider, "How can I be a good partner?", and "How might my knowledge and connections help my boss or co-worker succeed?"

8. Get comfortable with email and texting. Don't resist a younger manager's desire to communicate via email or texting. Older workers should adapt to a younger boss's communication style rather than try to fight or change it. **A tip:** Young people assume that a missed cellphone call serves the same purpose as a voicemail message asking for a call back.

9. Steer away from age-centric comments and behaviors. Don't suggest that something younger managers do is similar to something your adult children are doing or bring up what you were doing when you were their age. Skip the chitchat about your personal life that dates you. Most importantly, don't assume that the young boss wants or needs parenting or mentoring.

10. Keep your skills current. Embrace new ways and show that you aren't resistant to change. Learn new technologies and stay current. If you've recently updated any software certifications or are proficient in social media, let your boss know. Your age will be irrelevant if your skills are fresh and your focus is on the future.

11. Don't act old. If you look and sound over the hill, your younger boss may assume your job skills are dated as well. Pay attention to what comes out of your mouth. If you complain about your achy back persistently, remind folks how things were handled back in the day or habitually refer to your age, then you are the one making age an issue. When you're in shape and feel good about yourself, you have a certain vitality and oomph that people want to be around, regardless of your age. It subtly says, "I'm up for the job, bring it on."

In the end, the difference in attitudes and identities between generations will always hold the potential for conflict or misunderstanding. However, staying open to new learning, asking questions when something goes awry, and genuinely wanting a win-win situation will go a long way.

3. Generational Diversity – part 2: Key Areas of Difference

We can't completely deny our generational identity and the effect it has on the work styles we bring to our jobs every day. Therefore, the best way to navigate our generational differences is to understand them, talk about them, and keep an open mind.

These are some of the key areas of difference among the generation:

1. Authority and chain of command. This is perhaps where age differences and bias are most prominent. Older workers believe authority is earned over time. You put in your years – and after time has passed and experience has been acquired, you earn authority. Younger workers often reject this idea. Instead, they believe that talent, skill and performance drive authority. To a younger worker, it doesn't matter how old you are: if you can prove your value – even in a very short period of time – then you deserve to run the department and make the decisions.

2. Money and advancement. Boomers believe that time drives raises and promotions. After each year or two of service, they feel they deserve a raise. And as they put in their time, they expect their career to advance along a track from A to B to C and so on.

Gen X and Gen Y don't see it that way. They believe performance and results should drive compensation and promotion. They're more likely to ask for a raise after doing a great job on a big project after only six months of employment. They have no problem asking to leap frog titles and positions, ignoring practices traditionally based on years of service.

So, if you work for a younger person, you should know the attitude he or she has in this regard. The boss's perspective – not yours – will likely determine raises and promotions. You can ask your boss outright: what's your philosophy on awarding raises and promotions? What must I do to earn more money or be promoted? Asking directly helps to avoid any misunderstandings.

3. Technology. Another difference relates to comfort with technology. Many younger bosses assume that older workers aren't comfortable with technology. Ideally, a prospective employer won't assume but rather will ask; in many cases an older person might have superior computer skills, despite their age. Likewise, if your younger boss is a computer whiz, don't be intimidated but rather be proactive. Try saying, "You've no doubt grown up with all things technology and I can see you're strong in this area. I'm not afraid of technology and I enjoy learning, so I'd welcome the chance to work with you to improve my skills."

4. Communication styles. Many of the differences here are driven by technology. Younger workers have grown up communicating personally via text messages, instant messaging and email, and they bring those methods to work. Older people, on the other hand, have long favored face to face communication, and when they get orders or news via email, it's often seen as rude or inconsiderate. An older worker with a younger boss must realize that email is often preferred: it is fast and efficient. Don't assume you must always see the boss directly when communicating.

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