Leading Multiple Generations

by Joel DiGirolamo

"I don't get it. I hire these fresh-out-of-college accounting grads and they don't want to work. They just want to spout off all their big ideas for changing the company. Why can't they just put their head down and get to work?"

"Well Fred, don't you remember when you were just out of school, full of vim and vigor, ready to change your first company?"

"Listen, Sally, I may have had all of those ideas, but I got the job done. These kids today want to take time off for this cause and that, for their important party time -"

"Wait just a minute Fred. I seem to recall you once talking about going to Woodstock, and protesting the draft, the Vietnam War, and that nuclear power plant they were building. What about those?"

"Well, that was different..."

We must keep in mind that the differences we observe in behavior between generations can be attributed to five important factors:

- True generational differences
- Maturity levels
- Career levels
- Life stages
- Family stages

Common Elements

Generational research has shown more similarities between generations than differences. Analyses have shown commonality across generations in the following ways:

- Ethics are always important
- Most values are the same
- All want respect, although the definition may be different for some
- To be able to trust the organization
- To learn and develop

Most of the human resource professionals in a 2004 survey reported multiple generations working together effectively. Furthermore, they found the advantages of a multi-generation workforce outweighed the disadvantages.

True Generational Differences

Generational differences are caused by historic economic, social, and political events or situations that have a relatively stable effect on a group over a lifetime.

Gen Y, our youngest generation in the current workforce, is generally more technology savvy, frequently using tools such as instant messaging (IM), text messaging (SMS), Facebook, and Twitter. While these tools are useful for social exchanges they have a tendency to reduce the instances of flow.

Flow is a state of mind conceptualized by positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. You are in the flow state when you are completely absorbed in the task at hand. In these moments time, self (ego), and notions of food fall away. This is the optimal state of intrinsic motivation, providing high productivity and happiness.

The difficulty for younger workers using these latest social technologies is that they will be constantly interrupted and therefore unable to achieve this state of flow. The result is lowered productivity and inability to achieve the highest possible state of happiness.

A related outcome is the inability to communicate clearly and eloquently. The younger generation has reduced communication to sound bites using a sometimes cryptic shorthand, such as "c u l8tr."

It then becomes problematic when these individuals are asked to write an invitation, a proposal, a report, or to chronicle a set of events. The combination of the inability to achieve flow with the continuous use of shorthand and clipped communication streams yields poor communication performance. Remedial efforts are usually the only answer to this situation.

Research surveys of Gen X individuals revealed a shift toward an improved balance between work and family or leisure life. This trend has continued with Gen Y. Couple the Gen Y comfort with technology and this desire for a better work/life balance and you get a strong desire to work remotely. It has become a minimum level of expectation.

Maturity Levels

Let's move on to the seldom discussed aspects of generational differences. The first I'd like to discuss is the difference in maturity levels.

For you Baby Boomers reading this, do you remember the 1960s? Long hair, hippies, free love, burnt bras, drugs, an unfettered freedom of expression. Our parents thought we were going to pot (literally). Were we mature? No, of course not. So why would we expect today's youth to be any different?

We talk about the younger generation's inability to exercise good judgment. Remember that good judgment is learned by making mistakes. Why do we make mistakes - because we used poor judgment. We must provide opportunities for the younger generation to make decisions and learn from their successes - and failures. That's how we all learn. This is no different than every generation of our species.

I'd like to highlight this concept with a recent painful example from a Cisco job candidate. Flush with the job offer, she sent out the following message on Twitter (a Tweet), "Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating the work." A Cisco employee promptly caught this Tweet and responded, "Who is the hiring manager. I'm sure they would love to know that you will hate the work. We here at Cisco are versed in the web."

Research has shown small personality changes over time. The popular Five Factor Model measures a person's openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Not surprisingly, neuroticism tends to decline as we age, with most of the changes taking place before age 30. Conversely, agreeableness and conscientiousness tend to increase over our lifetime.

Career Levels

In general, we become more knowledgeable in our jobs and move to positions of greater responsibility in our organization or ones we move to. This increase in responsibility tends to bring with it increased commitment to the organization and perhaps increased conscientiousness.

Data that includes the number of hours worked per week in an organization shows a clear pattern of more hours worked at higher levels in the organization, but a much smaller effect due to age. The obvious conclusion is that as today's younger generation moves up the corporate ladder, they too may begin to work more hours, reducing their work/life balance.

Life & Family Stages

Reflect for a moment on how you felt when you graduated from college - full of ideas, wanting to make your mark on the world. Your job was your playground. You may have had a desire to create and make something new. You wanted your ideas heard by the upper management in your organization.

Today's younger generation is no different. Their behavior is consistent with this stage of their life.

Younger workers are more frequently single and without families. As they enter monogamous relationships and frequently marry, purchase a home, they begin to build a life with their spouse, and children. This tends to siphon off some of this bold, creative energy at work.

We often talk of the concept of moving from "success to significance," where we strive to rise up the corporate ladder in the early stages of our lives (success) but then move to finding significance in what we do later in life. Once again, today's younger workers are holding true to this model.

Several researchers have looked at life stages through similar lenses. Rhona and Robert N. Rapoport created a comprehensive and useful model in the late 1970s showing how occupational, family, and leisure paths progress and overlap over a lifetime.

Leading

So how do we lead these diverse groups? Most importantly - communicate. All of us, no matter what generation, race, gender, class, nationality, or ethnicity - we all want the same thing. We may have somewhat different values and certainly have different experiences, but if we can sit down and communicate what we desire and how we can help others we can all enlist our creative energy to work together and thrive.

Research has shown that generational conflicts are most often over power or control - whose ideas get heard and implemented, who gets to make the decisions, and so on. This may force you to conjure up all of your leadership skills to outline the big picture for all parties.

Create an environment for all parties to safely reveal their background and express their viewpoint. Pair individuals from different generations to encourage a dialogue and deeper understanding. Again, deep down we all want the same things in life.

Provide assignments where younger folks must exercise their judgment. Hold review sessions with them to discuss their behavior and outcomes - both positive and negative.

Discuss the work/life balance issue, including the needs of the company to survive. Explore with everyone the need to reduce cost, including painful reductions in personnel. This is a worldwide problem, not specific to any individual company although some will be more greatly affected than others.

Talk about opportunities for all employees within the company - both existing opportunities and those that will appear as the company

grows. All employees want respect. The younger generation wants to be heard - as we all do. The older generation wants their status and experience honored.

Provide training opportunities for everyone. In order to reduce out of pocket expense utilize internal personnel to either teach courses or pair skilled individuals with those needing help. Follow up on these assignments!

Honor and respect the desire for a reasonable work/life balance. Be as creative as you can with your approaches. Find out what will work well for your employees and for your organization.

So when you begin to think of Millenials versus Gen Xers versus Baby Boomers or "generational differences," reflect on how the given behaviors might be defined more by each of the five factors I outlined in the beginning and see if that doesn't make it easier to lead.

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