

Leadership in the Four-Generation Workplace

“It’s Crowded in Here!” ©

by Judy Feld

For the first time we now have four generations in the workplace—presenting interesting challenges and opportunities to leaders, managers, and their teams. It is important to understand the nature of these challenges as we present a brief overview of traits specific to each generation. What’s even more important is to have some insight (and apply it) to each generation’s interactions, issues, styles, experiences and preferences.

Who are the four generations?

You might see some variation in the labels and dates used by other writers, with the following commonly understood:

- **The Silent Generation (a.k.a Traditionalists)** were born before 1946
- **Baby Boomers** were born between 1946 and 1964
- **Gen Xers** were born between 1965 and 1980
- **Millennials** (sometimes called Gen Y or Generation Next) were born after 1981

Why is it important for leaders to pay attention to the four generations?

First of all, in many cases, they are not getting along in the workplace (and elsewhere). They don’t communicate well with each other. It’s important to observe the distinction between **Age vs. Generation**. Different generations care about different approaches to the same problems—at different times. Generational context is not about age, but common experiences. Do you remember “...*don’t trust anyone over 30*”? We heard that back in the 70s, and it was said by the Baby Boomers. Well, the Boomers retain many consistent generational traits, but now the youngest of them are over 40 and the oldest over 60. What a shock!

Leaders, managers and coaches do well to understand the dynamics and the potential outcomes of generational interaction and sometimes misunderstanding. When generations fail to communicate effectively in the workplace we may see a negative impact on the bottom line—through retention rates, grievances and complaints, tangible and intangible costs, morale, etc. We need to ask powerful questions around issues related to the generations, such as:

- What is the impact of differing communication styles?
- What are some pitfalls in inter-generational communications--professionally and personally?
- How can we enhance cross-generational communication?
- How do we recognize each generation, if not by age or hierarchy?
- How do common experiences shape the personality of a generation?
- What are the challenges of leadership, management and team development that pertain to each generation?
- What can we learn and apply from the formative years of each generation?
- What are their favorite forms of entertainment and recreation?

What are some of the traits of each generation?

Considering the limitations of space, we can only present a small sampling of the many observable traits and patterns we see in the generations. Many resources exist for those who would like to delve deeper and/or find more examples.

The Silent Generation (Traditionalists)

- Employees recognize the role of authority in a hierarchical organization.

- Experienced smooth career passages.
- Adopted a "just stick it out" attitude in their jobs (as well as in their marriages).
- Expected traditional retirement at 65 —but now may never want to retire.
- Tom Brokaw calls them *The Greatest Generation*.

Baby Boomers

- Boomers were beat up by downsizings and rightsizings and have always competed fiercely among themselves.
- May have had several careers, employers or types of jobs
- Tend to be workaholics and define themselves through work. May have guilt over putting career before family.
- Tend to be self-centered and self-absorbed. They personify the “me generation.”

Gen Xers

- Saw the layoffs of the '70s, '80s and '90s and distrust big institutions.
- Assume that every job is temporary.
- Parents suffered fatigue, illness and divorce—want a better balance.
- Avoid long hours and keep their work and personal lives separate.
- Viewed as being less driven in their work habits and less loyal than Boomers
- Skeptical, self-focused and self-protective at work.
- Xers seek excitement and want to have fun at work.
- Want relaxed rules and a casual dress codes. Prefer e-mail to long meetings.
- Will confront or publicly disagree with an authoritative manager.

Millennials

- Watched Gen Xers rise and fall before and after 2000 (dot-com bubble-burst)
- Want job security
- Large in numbers; may need to compete for jobs..
- Grew up with protective parents and might fear workplace conflict.
- Great at multitasking; can work effectively on numerous activities at once.
- Get along with their parents; may live at home for longer.
- Thrive in a fast-paced technological world.

What approaches can we use in managing people?

Leaders have long-considered the influences of behavioral styles, company culture and urgency as they made decisions about their approach to communication in the workplace. Now we add to the mix--factors relating to generational differences.

The Silent Generation

- Approach to feedback: “No news is good news.”
- Respond well to a traditional classroom environment and to lectures and presentations given by experts.
- Respond best to language that is logical and non-emotional
- Like information that is organized, well researched and supported by facts, figures, details and examples.
- To motivate Traditionalists: let them know their experience is valued and provide stability and security where possible.

Baby Boomers

- Want feedback once a year and lots of documentation.
- Enjoy a more casual training atmosphere and prefer a more participative, interactive format.
- Want to be rewarded personally and publicly for the many long hours that they give to their work.
- See information and education as rewards.
- Buy books, videos, self-help guides and audiotapes they can listen to on their commutes.

- Boomers like in-person meetings and like to be in control of the message.
- To motivate a Boomer: promote and support lifelong learning, give them public recognition, and provide visible perks

Gen Xers

- Need a lot of positive feedback—frequently—to let them know they’re on the right track.
- Are far more comfortable learning from a computer than the older generations.
- Like role-playing and appreciate the opportunity to practice their skills and get feedback and coaching on the spot.
- Don’t expect to control messages. Expect moderated discussion.
- Messages need to be meaningful, personal and up-to-date.
- Don’t want one-way communication from authorities. Want to interact, add their own insights and be a participant, not a passive listener.
- To Motivate Gen Xers: Support them in staying on the forefront of technology, adopt a management style that promotes honesty and integrity, and provide continuous training, and opportunities to work with a diverse group in a team setting.

Millennials

- Want instantaneous and constant feedback.
- Used to praise and may mistake silence for disapproval.
- Wants to let everyone have a voice--the Wikipedia generation: Everyone has something to add.
- Won’t accept “my way or the highway” approach—they’ll take the highway.
- Hate to be talked down to or told what to think.
- Will use technology to “tune out.”

What’s NEXT?

- Notice who they are and how they respond
- Experiment with your approaches and responses to each generation
- eXtrapolate to future behaviors and choices
- Transition to new ways of relating to the generations

What Does the Future Hold?

- What will a Gen Y world look like?
 - Will Gen Z tolerate it?
 - Who is going to retire and when?
 - What about the “brain drain”?
 - How important are new models of leadership?
 - Where will technology take us?
 - Look to the past to predict the future.
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How can you find out more?

I would encourage you to apply a coaching style of leadership and ask those powerful questions, listen for values and patterns and try some new approaches with your staff. Be curious about what comes up. Create what I call “risk-free experiments” and be open to whatever the results teach you. This topic is addressed in a workshop which can be delivered in a half-day or full-day format, or virtually in a series of TeleForums. We have had enthusiastic response and feedback from our workshops and keynote presentations on multi-generational issues.

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Judy Feld launched her coaching business in 1995, after twenty years of corporate experience in technical, marketing, management and executive roles. In her private coaching Judy serves managers, business owners and professional people, including career changers, CIOs and other technology leaders, scientists and executive women. As a former vice-president of a major airline company, Judy leverages her corporate experience with her clients, including Fortune 500 companies, nonprofits, and entrepreneurial businesses. Judy is a Master Certified Coach, a Certified Mentor Coach, a 1993 graduate of Leadership America, and was 2003 president of the International Coach Federation. She is also the co-founder, training director and on the faculty at the University of Texas at Dallas School of Management Executive Coaching program.
