

WHY DO THEY DO THAT? GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS IN PRACTICE

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The years in which we matured and the state of the world and technology at that time had a huge impact in forming our personalities and our relationship with our job. While not everyone born in the same year will agree on everything, workers born in the same generation will have a similar outlook on work and expect similar things from their boss and from their job. Currently, there are four generations in the workplace, all with different needs and opinions on the best way to complete work, to communicate, and to obtain fulfillment. How are managers supposed to deal with all of these competing values? How are employees supposed to communicate with and get what they need from their manager? By understanding generational differences as well as communication styles, conflict resolution can be a skill of all employees regardless of birth year.

The first step in understanding how conflict occurs across generational lines is to understand each individual on the team and how their opinions were formed. It is also important to resist stereotyping people simply based on the year they were born, as characteristics of each generation can be seen in everyone. It is also important to note that what we perceive as generational conflict might simply be related to life or career stage. Major life changes such as getting married, having a new baby or parenting children, and receiving a promotion at work can all cause conflict and a change of important values. Solid communication between team members remains the key to resolving these issues regardless of the age of the employees involved.

The Baby Boomer generation was born between 1946 and 1964. While Boomers are not going to make up a majority portion of new hires or even the hospital employees, they still make up almost 1/3 of the management teams in the United States. Even if they are not an official manager, Boomer staff may have the opinion of “I’ve been here so long I might as well be the boss” which can cause definite conflict with fellow employees and with younger management staff. Boomers are often going to be the most experienced members of the team and will also feel a great sense of ownership for what is happening at the hospital regardless of status. One of the defining traits of this generation is their work ethic which is often measured by the number of hours spent at the workplace. This generation tends to stay until the job is done, not taking work home or pushing it to the next day.

Boomers value teamwork and collaboration, they grew up with face to face meetings and telephone conversations. Many have adapted to texting and certainly email, but for business they are used to working face to face with a team. This can lead to intimidating direct communication with younger generations. Because of this connection to teamwork, the Boomer generation like to feel needed and that they are also contributing to the hospital. Many want to mentor younger staff members and participate in any discussion of change in the hospital. As a result of this contribution and engagement, many also desire positive feedback and gratitude for their work. This is an important step for maintaining good relationships with these employees.

Generation X was born between 1964 and 1980. This is the “latchkey kid” generation that grew up independent and skeptical of authority. This group tends to be quite adaptable and generally accepting of change – as evidenced by the massive amount of change this group has experienced in their lifetime. Perhaps because of their independent childhood, most of the employees in this generation desire recognition and one on one time with their supervisor.

However, this one on one desire should not be mistaken for a love of meetings. In true independent fashion, Gen Xers prefer to “work smarter not harder” and want less time wasted in meetings and more time to work on their tasks. They tend to want to research on their own and come back with answers or concerns on decisions that need to be made. They tend to screen phone calls and emails and will respond when they feel they have enough information to contribute to the conversation.

Those born in this generation tends to be cynical and make negative assumptions when faced with a lack of information. They desire trust from their coworkers and supervisors as well as space to do the task they have been assigned. Micromanaging this generation may not go well, so managers of different generations should understand and give this group time. Scheduling weekly or biweekly check-ins can be much more appreciated and productive. One of the most glaring problems with Generation X is their expectation of others. Common among this group of employees and managers is the “I would have never gotten away with that when I was just starting” attitude. In this, they agree with Boomers. Hard work and proof of coming up through the ranks hold value to this generation and they may become resentful of younger employees who have yet to “prove themselves”. When Generation X enters the management ranks, it is important that they are aware of this and work to overcome this sentiment with their team.

The Millennial Generation was born between 1981 and 1997. They make up a large section of the workforce and much has been researched and written about this generation, much of it unfair. This group has come of age in the 1990s and early 2000s meaning they have grown up with social media, economic uncertainty, the growth of global terrorism, political unrest, and the unrealistic expectations of those born before them. This has made many of this generation bitter towards Boomers. Due to the prevalence of the internet, Millennials want to be educated and are eager to learn online. Their online education has taught them to crave instant gratification and they may get frustrated when a decision takes too long or seems to be made without researching all of the angles. Because of their education, many resent being thought of as too young to contribute. Their ideas can be revolutionary to a practice and their input should be considered.

As Generation X was the latchkey kid generation, they have raised the Millennials as the self-esteem generation. Growing up with participation trophies and praise for existing, as employees they continue to crave that positive feedback. Managers from older generations may find themselves resisting against “praise for just doing their job”, but by giving this praise and gratitude Millennials will respond with a positive work ethic. This group also craves flexibility and may request time off with short notice, quickly use their sick and vacation time, and request time off for mental health days. The Millennial Generation wants to change the world, and they desire a job that fits that image. They need to see that what they are doing is going to impact more than just a small area; managers should work with them to help them see the impact they are making. They will in turn value that manager and want to perform well for them.

Generation Z was born starting in 1997 and are just starting to enter the workforce. An educated and innovative generation, this group has great passion for making change. Many do not remember a pre 9/11 world and that uncertainty has created a passionate generation eager to change the world for the better. While more information will emerge as this generation declares itself in the workplace, they should be looked to for innovative ideas and allowed to run with their passion. They do crave individual attention and want to be recognized for their ideas.

With possibly four generations all working together in one hospital, the potential for conflict at times can be quite high. Everyone needs to consider where their coworkers are coming from

and what might be driving a difference in opinion. Consider what other people might need (a challenge for people of every generation) and not only what is best for you. Empathy should not be reserved for patients and clients; it should be exercised for those coworkers who are struggling. Managers need to carefully examine their team and make plans for individuals. Direct communication about feedback should happen, and adjustments made as needed. Phone calls, texts, emails, and in-person information may need to happen at the same time to ensure everyone is receiving what they need. Teams, but managers especially, need to be comfortable admitting and discussing their mistakes. By asking for feedback and accepting negative feedback, managers can head off a team revolt before it happens. Transparency can also lead to new ideas and a new direction that one person alone cannot do.

Setting expectations can help get everyone on the same page. Are employees expected to check email at home? Should they respond at 11pm? Should the manager respond immediately? Should an employee respond immediately to a text message? Are text messages an appropriate way to communicate important information? Completing a project "as soon as possible" means a different deadline to different people. Is that by the end of the day? Tomorrow? Next time the employee works a shift? Respect needs to be shown to all team members and expectations determined and agreed upon. Boundaries should be set by both the managers and employees.

Managers should focus on the strengths of the team and not weaknesses. Look for similarities that cross generational lines and build plans for communication on those similarities. See people as individuals and find their strengths and allow them to flourish in those strengths. Social media pages, client information packets, community outreach ideas, texting photos and updates to clients, and team training are all tasks that play to the strengths of different generations. By valuing individual input and assigning individual responsibility, a manager can expect an engaged team that is willing to stay and work hard. Generalizing workers into their generational buckets may be a fun activity, but can cause a team to miss out on some great opportunities to move forward.

Managers and employees alike need to be aware of their natural state. For example, a manager born in 1977 will probably value independence and not understand why an employee born in 1982 is frustrated by a perceived lack of communication. They are each falling into their generational comfort zone and may become frustrated with each other without realizing why, or how to fix it. If the GenX manager knows that Millennials desire meetings, feedback, and praise along the way, they can provide that and encourage their team. If the Millennial understands that their manager praises independence, they can work towards that. Each side needs to communicate their expectations to avoid conflict.

Teams should get together and talk about their differences. Admitting communication difficulties is the first step to overcoming them. Not all new ideas are terrible ideas! Younger generations are asking for benefits that may seem silly to older generations, but we can all benefit from actual lunch breaks, yoga in the afternoons, mental health awareness, healthy snacks, and a bigger purpose through our jobs. By being open to new ideas everyone can benefit.

Conflict is all about power and control. If managers and coworkers do not make the effort to understand their teammates, there can be a struggle for power and confusion about who is really calling the shots. Rather than cede that control, an effort needs to be made to determine why there is a struggle and work to fulfill the needs of the individual. By using the generational guidelines, managers can begin to determine the steps to take to restore trust and regain control.

Discussion of case studies