Overcoming Business Challenges

The Challenge: Multi-Generational Workforce

The values, skills and preferences of each generation at work are seemingly becoming more and more disparate. It's easy to just look at the differences between age groups and criticize the shortcomings of each, but this mindset only contributes to the challenge and widens the generational gap.

The main culprit in creating that gap is assumptions. Someone with a different work style than their coworker may not understand their contributions and assume they are more of a hindrance than a help. Assumptions are based on stereotypes, and while they are sometimes correct, they should never be accepted before making the effort to understand the other person's values and work style.

The four main aspects of this challenge boil down to:

Culture   **Communication**   **Expectations**   **Stereotypes**

There are several ways to address each of these and bring together a divided workforce, but before jumping to solutions it's important to understand what shapes a generation. Although each person is unique, the cultural events and shifts that their generation has been through have created common threads.

When the threads of the different generations are woven together in an intentional pattern, then they can create an extraordinary tapestry – or in this case, a thriving business.

General Overview

Traditionalists
Born before 1946

The generation with the longest game-time is one with vast amounts of irreplaceable institutional knowledge. Although many of these employees have postponed retirement, when they do leave the workforce they take with them valuable perspectives which come from years of experience.

Events like World War II, rationing, the new atomic age and the first man on the moon are just a taste of what they've lived through.

Traditionalists tend to have strong family values and communities, they believe individual character is important and anything worth getting is worth working for. They've seen success in hierarchical management structures and often struggle with a more collaborative work environment.

Baby Boomers
Born between 1946 to the early 60's

Baby Boomers are still the largest portion of the U.S. population and like the Traditionalists, they also prefer a hierarchy at work to constant collaboration.

Events that shaped Boomers were the economic boom, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and TV becoming a primary form of media.

The 60s saw this generation as non-conformists who wanted greater autonomy and the ability to do things their way. They are often self-reliant and motivated by position, perks and prestige. Face-to-face communication is ideal with this generation.

Gen Xers
Born during the early 60's to early 80's

Gen Xers were the first generation to believe that they wouldn't do as well financially as their parents did and they are more skeptical and cynical about institutions.

There were several major events of incompetence that have shaped the Gen X worldview – Watergate, the Iranian hostage crisis, Three Mile Island and the energy crisis, to name a few.

Their life plans are more cautious and they don't live to work, they work to live. They prompt change in workplace culture and technology and produce high-quality results. They often view themselves as more of a free agent than an older employee would because in their experience, employers usually don't reciprocate loyalty in tough situations.

Millennials
Born during the early 80's to early 2000's

Millennials are particularly uncertain of their futures, surrounded by nationwide political corruption and social unrest. They are pessimistic towards institutions, but highly inclined to find better solutions.

Many of their parents were and are excessively involved in their lives, and their close relationships with parents translate to a strong desire for coaching and feedback at work. They realize that the skills needed to succeed change rapidly and are consistently looking for career development.

Having grown up with internet and instant communication across distances, Millennials are more connected than any other generation, but are also more isolated. Relationships often aren't as deep as older generations have developed, and genuine communities are harder to find.

Find the Common Threads

Would it surprise you to know that each generation's top values are more alike than they are different? When you look deeper than preferences in communication and adeptness with technology, the two common values across every generation are:

Contributing to meaningful work

Developing genuine relationships

Although assumptions without validation can wreak havoc on culture, it's safe to say that seeing employees and colleagues in this light will help to diffuse tensions and encourage focus on common goals.

RESOURCE: Building Relationships Competency Guide:
To learn how to develop stronger relationships with colleagues, download our free guide.

How Differences Can Work Together

By understanding not only the differences, but the values that tie each generation together, you can create solutions customized to your company's workforce.

So now, let's address the four challenges of culture, communication, expectations and stereotypes.

Culture Solutions

Since building relationships is a value shared across generations, give them the time and space to learn more about each other's unique values and perspectives. Host regular happy hours or company events and celebrate joyful events together (like birthdays, anniversaries, new babies or promotions). Encourage everyone to attend and make it clear that these aren't just social events for the "younger" or "older" crowd.

Communication Solutions

Bring people face-to-face for team-building exercises that improve communication and help them understand how each person communicates most effectively. Encourage teammates to think about another person's preferred style of communication and reach out to them that way. This isn't a place to complain about one generation's style or another, but to celebrate and understand the differences that make the company stronger. Be sure not to isolate any particular generation when speaking about differences.

Expectations Solutions

Leadership and management should recognize the strengths of each generation by setting clear expectations on what needs to get done and when, but allow each team or individual to figure out the best "how" for them.

Stereotype Solutions

Leaders must keep an eye out for stereotypes that are becoming barriers. Fostering relationship building will help to dispel stereotypes and allow coworkers to communicate based on what they know about each other, rather than what they assume.

Millennials as Managers

Millennials have been the subject of a lot of study and scrutiny in recent years, and they're quickly overtaking the Boomers as the largest portion of the American workforce. As Boomers retire, more management positions are opening up. Rather than promoting Gen Xers with experience, leaders often find that Millennials have the collaborative energy and tech skills needed in management.

When a business is feeling the tension of younger employees managing their elders, it's especially important to train Millennial managers on how to work with different generations.

Coaching is an essential skill that young managers must learn – it's a balance of active listening, emotional intelligence and business acumen that turns a new manager into a team leader.

Coaching isn't simply telling a subordinate what to do, it's a process-driven relationship, underpinned by seeking success for others.

Since Millennials place a lot of value on personal development but don't have a lot of time, this is a great opportunity to utilize online employee training to deliver knowledge about essential skills and competencies needed for individual and organizational growth. Try creating learning tracks for your new leaders and managers that take them through "bite-sized" online employee training videos. New managers will thrive when they feel they're being developed and invested in.

RESOURCE: Developing The Coaching Skills of Your Managers and Leaders ebook: Learn how to build coaching skills in your Millennial managers by downloading our free ebook.

"As a leader, you have to encourage each generation, each person, to operate at their own best level. That means understanding and accepting different roles, and then designing a process that incorporates each role. It acknowledges and supports an inclusion culture, but also sets the stage for trust. If we share a common intent to do our individual best, we can trust each other even if we are at different levels -- or in different generations."

- Deidre Paknad, CEO and co-founder of Workboard

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