



Communicating Across The Generations

by Laura Daugherty



Have you ever felt as if your boss doesn't understand you because s/he is just so old-fashioned? Or have you ever felt like the young person sharing a cubicle wall with you doesn't take his/her job seriously? Sometimes it seems downright impossible to see eye-to-eye with our co-workers.

However, as office professionals, we know communication is vital to building and maintaining healthy relationships in both our professional and personal lives. Yet many people still have difficulty communicating effectively. In the workplace it can be especially difficult because there are so many different

people with whom we interact on a daily basis. Perhaps one of the biggest differences we have is age, or in other words, a "generational diversity." As the philosopher, Voltaire, wrote in his French satire, *Candide*, ou *l'Optimisme*, in 1759, "every man is the creature of the age in which he lives; very few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time." Even in 1759, some people realized we are influenced by the generation in which we were born and raised, and that can greatly affect how we communicate with others.

Today, we are communicating with four different generations in the workplace for the first time in American history. In order to help us communicate effectively, identified below are the four generations and some of their characteristics.

	Traditionalists or Veterans (Born 1922-1945)	Baby Boomers (Born 1945-1965)	Generation X (Born 1965-1980)	Generation Y or Millennials (Born 1980-2000)
Core values	respect for authority, conformers, disciplined	optimism, involvement	skepticism, fun, informality	realism, confidence, extreme fun, social
Work ethic	hard work, respect authority, sacrifice, duty before fun, follow the rules	workaholics, work efficiently, crusading causes, personal fulfillment	eliminate the task, self-reliance, want structure and direction, skeptical	what's next, multi-tasking, tenacity, tolerant, goal-oriented
Interactive style	individual	team player, likes to have meetings	entrepreneur	participative
Communications	formal, write a memo	in person	direct, immediate	e-mail, voicemail
Messages that motivate	"Your experience is respected."	"You are valued." "You are needed."	"Do it your way." "Forget the rules."	"You will work with other bright, creative people."

While not everyone will possess all the characteristics of a generation, these are just a few of the more common ones. As you can see, there are vast differences in communication and interactive styles, work ethics, and even core values. It is no wonder we can encounter frustrations when communicating with one another!

For instance, a Baby Boomer hears the words, "we need to get the report done," and s/he will perceive this to be an order. However, a Generation Xer hears the same words,

and s/he hears a factual statement, not a command, and may not do it immediately. A Millennial may hear the same words and ask why the report needs to be done and then expect a team of other creative employees to share in the task. Additionally, Generation Xers and Millennials who were taught to speak up may be confused when a Traditionalist or Baby Boomer doesn't question or challenge authority.

(Continued on page 3)



Education begins a gentleman, conversation completes him.

Dr. Thomas Fuller (1654-1734)

Who gossips to you will gossip of you.

Turkish Proverb

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(continued from page 1)

So, how do we bridge the communication gap? Here are a few guidelines to help us communicate across the generations:

Communicating with . . .

Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation Xers	Millennials
Since members of this generation tend to be more private, do not expect this generation to share their thoughts immediately	Body language is important to them	Use e-mail as a primary communication tool	Use action words and challenge them at every opportunity
Focus on words rather than body language or inferences	Speak in an open, direct style but avoid controlling language	Talk in short sound bites to hold their attention	Do not talk down to them
Face-to-face or written communication is preferred	Answer questions thoroughly and expect to be pressed for details	Share information with them regularly and try to keep them in the loop	Email is their preferred communication style
Do not waste their time, or let them feel as though their time is being wasted	Present options to demonstrate flexibility in your thinking	Use an informal communication style	Use humor and create a fun learning environment
Allow them to work independently	Allow them to work in teams or have meetings	Allow them to do things their way, if possible	Encourage them to take risks so they can explore new ways of learning
Notice and praise their vast knowledge and experiences	Tell them how much they are appreciated	Ask them for their feedback and provide them with regular feedback	Seek their feedback constantly and provide them with regular feedback

Each generation approaches communication, perceives ideas, and receives feedback differently. However, just realizing our differences and altering our communication styles may be enough to help reduce frustrations and avoid misunderstandings in the workplace.

So . . . which generation are you?

