Bridging the Generation Gap

From the older "veteran" worker who stubbornly refuses to accept change, to the inexperienced, fresh out of college "know-it-all," managing a workforce that includes a full spectrum of generations can be a real challenge. For the first time, managers are juggling the different work styles and unique needs of *four generations*—the Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y—and this new dynamic can not only cause tensions, but chaos.

The key to making it all work is by understanding the unique characteristics of each generation and learning to appreciate these differences so you can make the workplace great for every age and life stage. Managers who aren't prepared for these challenges, however, can be in for a rough ride of conflict, poor job performance and low morale.

Who's Who?

The four generations that make up today's workplace all have a different approach to work-life balance, loyalty, authority, expectations and communication styles. Although the names and birth dates of the generations can change from one source to another, it's generally agreed that organizations are made up of:

Veterans (born between 1922-1943): This group typically has a strong work ethic, are loyal to their employer and highly respectful of rules and authority. Veterans often prefer consistency and can be fearful of change.

Baby Boomers (born between 1944-1965): Because of their sheer numbers, baby boomers are very competitive by nature. They are hard workers willing to log long hours and view seniority as extremely important.

Generation X (born between 1965-1980): Gen X-ers prefer self-motivation and independence, embrace change and appreciate regular, constructive feedback. They put job satisfaction before company loyalty and think promotions should be based on competency.

Generation Y (born between 1980-1999): They're young, aggressive, big-picture thinkers and the most well-educated generation yet. Members of the Y Generation want to work, but don't want work to be their life.

Although there are general characteristics of each generation, it's dangerous to stereotype your employees. Recognize these common traits and use them to help you deal with the divide but continue to look at your employees as individuals with their own personalities, preferences and work styles.

With such vast differences, it's not uncommon to hear complaints from each generation that their colleagues are overly rigid, self-absorbed, too traditional, spoiled or out of touch. With this kind of inner (and sometimes outer) dialogue going on, it's not going to be easy to win over people and change minds, but it's not impossible.

Closing the Gap

So how are you supposed to get all these different personality types—who value entirely different things—to work well together as a team? Dealing with the challenges of a multi-generational workplace actually calls for many of the same basic skills used to approach other diversity issues. To close the gap, make sure you:

Set common goals. The single most powerful way of uniting people—who may not necessarily see eye-to-eye—is to constantly communicate a common vision, mission, goals and objectives for everyone to work towards. If they all want the same thing, generational differences won't seem as important.

Encourage mentoring. Take a look at the goals and developmental needs of your newer employees and pair them with older, more experienced team members. The younger employees can benefit from the experience and wisdom of older employees, while older workers can tap into the energy and creativity of their younger counterparts. Also, by encouraging mixed-generational work teams, you will not only unite your employees but the diverse views and perspectives will create better, more inventive results.

Be flexible. Treat your employees like customers and learn all you can about them to meet their unique perspectives. Try your best to accommodate the needs of each generation. Gen X-ers may need to leave work early to attend a school function, while employees in Generation Y may want to pursue another degree part-time and Baby Boomers close to retirement, may want to cut back the number of hours they work in exchange for reduced pay. Allow for these adjustments when possible, but try to make it as fair as you can across the board.

Adapt the talk. One of the most important ways of managing generational diversity is to make sure you adjust the way you send messages. Depending on the size of your organization, you may want to make the same message available in multiple ways. Baby Boomers and Veterans will probably appreciate verbal discussions of things like policy changes, while Gen X and Y typically respond well to social media, podcasts and electronic newsletters. If possible, multiple messaging avenues will ensure you reach everyone. It's also a great chance to introduce new methods of sharing information to the generations that can be less open to change.

Review rewards. In a workplace with such varied generations, you can't assume everyone will respond to the same motivations and rewards, so you're going to have to find creative ways to recruit and retain talent. Recognize that monetary bonuses, promotions, lieu time and the opportunity to learn new skills may be valued differently by each generation. Use trial and error to figure out what works best for each group. Find out what they want and respond accordingly.

Lunches, company sporting events and celebrations will be appreciated by all generations, while being valuable team-building opportunities.

Whether you're dealing with "the old guard" or employees who are "green behind the ears," you must treat everyone with the same level of respect, recognizing the unique skills each employee brings to the table. Close the age gap by capitalizing on each generation's strengths, mitigating their weaknesses and motivating accordingly to reach your shared goals.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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