

Cultivating Culture for New Generations of Employees



By Cynthia Schuler, SHRM-CP, PHR, CPRW

One of the major challenges in today's workplace is understanding how to manage across multiple generations of employees. Why? As stated in the April 27, 2015 article "Five Generations of Employees in Today's Workplace" by Team CGK (Center for Generational Kinetics), Americans are working and living longer than ever before. Traditionalists and baby boomers are working longer because they are not in a financial position to retire. In addition, they want to work longer because work has defined them for decades. And, finally, baby boomers are also supporting their millennial children well into their late 20s and 30s.

What does all of this mean? It means there are at least four, and maybe five, generations working in the same organizations today. That also means that it is likely there are communication barriers and challenges due to the different values that have shaped each generation. In the coming years, in order to achieve organizational success leaders must understand each generation in an effort to cultivate and maintain a positive organizational culture.

Below is a chart showing generational birth years in approximation as stated in "The Six Living Generations in America," by Dr. Jill Novak, University of Phoenix, Texas A&M University. Also listed are some historical and "other" events that have shaped each generation and common stereotypes associated with each generation:

	HISTORICAL/OTHER EVENTS	COMMON STEREOTYPES
Traditionalists [1901-1926]	The Great Depression; WWII; Korean War; outbreak of Spanish influenza	"Silent" generation; rule driven; hard workers; loyal; patriotic; trust in government; no questioning of authority; team players
Baby Boomers [1946-1964]	Civil Rights; Vietnam War; space travel; first TV generation; women's liberation; assassination of Kennedy	"Me" generation; live to work; self-righteous; self-centered; believe in hierarchy and structure
Generation X [1965-1980]	Watergate; dual income households; increased divorce rate; latchkey kids; first generation to incorporate computers into their lives	The latchkey generation; individualistic; entrepreneurial; committed to "self;" love labels and brand names; wary of commitment; cautious; skeptical; independent
Millennials Generation Y [1981-2000]	9/11 terrorist attacks; digital media; children of divorce; schedules; intense competition for jobs, education and homes; great tolerance for diversity	The 9/11 generation; schedule driven; sheltered; need praise; need direction and goal setting; nurtured; enjoy collaboration
Generation Z [Born after 2001]	Terrorism; global recession; record number of births in U.S.; own cell phones	"Boomlets;" consumer savvy; less interested in toys, more interested in electronics and videogames; hardworking; keen to learn

Leaders of organizations must make a valiant effort to understand the experiences and values of each generation in order to be successful in cultivating a positive culture in their particular workplace. With baby boomers leaving the market in droves and millennials (and the people of Generation Z) entering the market, the following holds true:

Understanding = Ability to lead effectively = Success.

The truth of the matter is that over the next several years, millennials will be managing millennials. Generation X and baby boomers who are still in the market may be reporting to a millennial sooner rather than later. As a matter of fact, in some industries, we have millennials already managing other generations in addition to managing people of the millennial generation. Instead of fearing the unknown, we must understand our workforce and capitalize on the diversity in our organizations to achieve success.

Some general tips on cultivating a positive culture with multiple generations in the workplace are listed below:

- 1) **Be Inclusive.** Begin with the offer letter process, continue through the orientation/onboarding process and maintain that inclusiveness throughout the employee's tenure. Team new employees up with a "buddy" of the same or different generation. Make it known that all employees have a unique contribution to make to the organization and that you will make an effort to discover each employee's strengths and utilize those strengths to assist in attempting to help the organization achieve its goals.
- 2) **Empower Employees.** Encourage employees to speak up and share ideas. Communicate that it is healthy to challenge other's ideas as long as it is done in a respectful manner. Make sure employees know that although every idea presented may not be implemented, all ideas are welcome.
- 3) **Give Credit Where Credit is Due.** Praise good work, and give credit where it is due. If a colleague or subordinate creates a more efficient way to accomplish a task or initiative, recognize that individual. Leaders must not fear great ideas presented by others.
- 4) **Coach and Mentor Employees.** Meet with employees on a regular basis to set goals and expectations. Follow up regularly with employees on short-term and long-term goals, and give real-time feedback on performance. Make certain employees understand expectations and set them up for success.
- 5) **Promote Teamwork Across the Generations.** Study and understand the characteristics of each generation. Create teams or assign individuals work based on how employees work best to accomplish tasks or initiatives. Educate employees on how best to work with each other.


These are just a few tips regarding how to begin to understand and be inclusive with multiple generations in the workplace. As Patrick Thean stated in June of 2015 on his blog "Millennials in the Workforce - Engaging Them, Retaining Them," millennials will make up 50 percent of the global workforce by 2020. Don't forget that Generation Z is also here and will continue to flood the marketplace between now and 2020.

With four or five generations in some organizations today, it is likely that there will be some communication barriers. The key to cultivating a positive organizational culture for the four or five generations currently in the market and the new generations of employees entering the market is to understand the different values of each of the generations. Second, we must recruit leaders who are willing to make an effort to understand each generation and cultivate a positive organizational culture by utilizing some of the tips stated in this article. Without these efforts, organizational success will be a difficult task to achieve in today's market and in the markets of the near future.

References

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