

From World War II to the World Wide Web

TRADITIONALISTS, BABY BOOMERS, GENERATION XERS, AND MILLENNIALS AT WORK

Not too long ago, David phoned Lynne, sounding really ticked off. When she asked him what was wrong he admitted that he had just been reprimanded by one of our biggest clients. Lynne was amazed. Although the client company's leadership team consisted of high-level Baby Boomers and Traditionalists, and David was one of the youngest consultants they had ever hired, they had excellent rapport with David and liked his work.

"I don't get it," Lynne said. "What on Earth could you have done to have earned yourself a reprimand?"

And David explained that in order to kick off a new project he had typed up a memo outlining the process, put the names of all the recipients at the top of the page, and sent it out to everyone. Fine, so he thought – until a few days later, when he received a very curt voice mail from a vice president.

"Uh, David, I received your memo and you neglected to *alphabetize* the list of recipients at the top of the page. If this project is going to succeed, you're going to have to pay attention to details! I'm sure this won't happen again." Click.

David was stupefied. Spelling and grammar in a formal memo he could understand, but alphabetizing? He didn't get it. So he immediately called Lynne hoping that as a Baby Boomer she could explain this confusing outburst.

The first words out of her mouth were, "David! I can't believe you didn't alphabetize the list of recipients at the top of the page!"

After she had calmed down, she explained that the client team in this large, multi-national company was a competitive group of high-achieving Boomers and Traditionalists who had to fight and claw their way into the positions they held, and to them it was extremely significant where the names appeared at the top of the memo.

A few days later, just as Lynne was feeling really good about having explained a bit of intergenerational business etiquette to a Generation Xer, she received a voicemail from our extreme Generation X video producer. It sounded exactly like this...

"Uh, Dude, I'm a little concerned about the middle montage, it's looking radically raw... Not to worry, we're doin' it digital, we can slice and dice and mix and match, it's gonna look stellar, but hook me with the 411 if you have any questions or I'll just assume you'll call me at three bells." Click.

To David, the expression on Lynne's face when she listened to this message was priceless. He relished every time he had to replay the message so he could actually translate some of the words for her. Meanwhile, all she could say was, "How much money are we *paying* this loser!"

So now David was feeling really good about having decoded Generations X language for a Baby Boomer, until he found himself a couple of weeks later driving a fifteen-year-old Millennial babysitter home. She asked him where he and Sharon had gone for dinner that evening. With two children under the age of four at home, he and Sharon don't get out much, but that night they had gone to Café Brenda, one of those healthy, hip and trendy restaurants in the warehouse district of Minneapolis where every other dish is served with pine nuts or arugula.

"Well," he announced just a little pompously, "we actually ate at Café Brenda."

"Oh, I love that place, it's so *fat*."

"Really?" David replied, "That surprises me because they pride themselves on *low fat* cooking!"

She then explained very slowly and patiently to David that she had said “phat,” which to Millennials means “cool,” at which point he realized he definitely was not.

What just happened here? Clearly the Traditionalists at our client just assumed David, a Generation Xer, understood their rules of etiquette. Lynne, a Boomer, just assumed that “Video Dude” would know how to speak her language. And David, our oh-so-hip-and-cool Generation Xer, just assumed he knew how to connect with any Millennial!

Kaboom! Three generational collisions at their finest.

ACROSS THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

These types of generational misunderstandings happen all the time on the *personal* level, and they can be extremely painful. But think for a moment about how costly they can be on the *institutional* level when companies have to set policies, develop procedures, and create everything from corporate cultures to compensation and benefit plans. And think how challenging these collisions can be for managers who are charged with recruiting, retaining, managing, and motivating up to four generations in the workplace at once.

From the public to the private sector, from the large, multinational corporation to the corner mom-and-pop shop, a conflict of earth-shattering proportions is unfolding right before our eyes. The American business scene is being rocked by a series of generational collisions at every turn.

The ramifications of these generational collisions at work include everything from reduced profitability to the loss of valuable employees, higher payroll costs, poor customer service, derailed careers, wasted human potential, and even potentially serious health problems caused by stress. Corporate cultures are being shaken to the very core as the cost of human capital spirals ever upward.

For years people have analyzed factors like age, life stage, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, educational background, thinking styles, Myers-Briggs profiles, even signs of the zodiac to find ways to understand each other better. Yet somehow we’ve

failed to recognize the form of diversity that affects every human being on a daily basis—*generational differences*.

AGELESS THINKING

For the first time in our history, we now have four separate and distinct generations working shoulder-to-shoulder and face-to-face in a stressful, competitive workplace.

The Traditionalists, born between the turn of the century and the end of World War II (1900-1945), combine two generations who tend to believe and behave very similarly and who number about seventy-five million people. The Baby Boomers (1946-1964) are the largest population ever born in this country and number about eighty million. The Generation Xers (1965-1981) are a much smaller but very influential population at forty-six million. And the Millennials (1981-2000) represent the next great demographic boom at seventy-six million.

While many generational experts have laid out age ranges to define the members of the generations, we believe these are just guidelines. There really is no magic birth date that makes you a part of a particular generation. It's not enough to assume which generation a person identifies with based purely on age. Generational personalities go much deeper. To understand who the generations really are and what makes them tick, one needs to adopt an "ageless thinking" attitude and look at how each generation shares a common history. The events and conditions each of us experiences during our formative years determine who we are and how we see the world. As a result of these events and conditions, each generation has adopted its own unique "generational personality."

Icons can be people, places or things that become reference points for a generation. For example, Martin Luther King, Selma, Alabama, and the image of an empty bus are all icons of the Selma bus boycott of 1965. Icons can also be actual events, such as the assassination of a president, D-Day, or the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle.

Conditions are the forces at work in the environment as each generation came of age. The Cold War was a condition that permeated the youth of many Boomers, while Millennials born after 1989 will never know a world in which there were two different cities called East

and West Berlin. Economic upheavals are conditions that profoundly affect the wealth and health of our citizens and permanently shape our way of looking at the world. Those who lived through the Great Depression or who were raised by parents who did, were changed forever by the fear of not being able to put food on the table. Large-scale upheavals in the family, such as major changes in the divorce rate, the marriage rate, or the number of single-parent families can all play a role in shaping the generations' identities.

As these icons and conditions play out in the lives of each of the generations, they shape the attitudes, values and work styles that the generations bring with them when they come to work every day. These differences create the generation gaps that companies of all sizes across all industries are struggling to bridge.

Too many employers and employees ignore these differences because they assume that since we all experience the same life stages, we are bound to see them the same way. Don't we all have to be born, be educated, find work, find partners, create families, age, retire, and eventually die? And don't we perform these functions pretty similarly?

The answer is yes, and no. Yes, we all have certain *life stages* in common, but no, the different generations do not approach them the same way. According to BridgeWorks' Generations Survey, for example, the majority of Boomers plan never to retire. They intend to keep working in some form or another for as long as they can be productive. The majority of Traditionalists, on the other hand, view retirement as a well-earned reward and look forward to the days when they never have to punch the time clock again. In this case, retirement is a life stage the generations have in common, but the way each generation approaches it is going to look very different. Can you imagine what retirement will look like to an Xer or a Millennial?

BEWARE OF AV TECHS IN SUPPORT STOCKINGS

After a long, hard week on the road, we stepped into the heavily paneled lodge in Northern Minnesota to give one last presentation before heading for home. David had somehow contracted food poisoning along the way and was looking green and shaken as he stood under an imposing moose head. Lynne, who was now seven time zones from where she had begun her day, was staring dazedly at a lamp made from a caribou hoof. It was very late; our speech was scheduled for early next the morning, and only the audiovisual check stood between our waiting hotel rooms and us. Both of us were thinking exactly the same thing: Please God, just give us a techno-savvy Xer with an attitude who'll knock this AV set-up together in about ten minutes and get us out of here. When you do a lot of speaking, it's amazing how dependent you get on the people who run the cable and make the lights, sound, laptops and projectors all come alive. We'd gotten pretty good at spotting the winners... or so we thought.

From around the corner we heard the AV cart rattling over the rough pine floors, our cue to swing into action. The cart hove into view followed by our...AV guy? It was Edna. Gray hair, thick glasses, corrective shoes, support hose and a print cotton dress. Our hearts sank. She looked nice enough, but not like anybody who could adjust a mixer. Our hopes of getting this over with any time soon looked dim. But Edna fixed us with a friendly gaze; "You two look pooped. Let's make this quick and get you off to your rooms. Are you using a VCR or running MPEG video right off the laptop?"

"Are we... huh?" David murmured, stunned like a deer caught in headlights. Edna peered at us pityingly over her glasses, then whipped her cart around and headed for the conference hall. "Let's go, dears. Don't worry, we'll get you all figured out."

And she did. Edna was the fastest, most efficient, well-organized and professional AV person we encountered that year, bar none. And she did it without once calling for back up, swearing, or making us feel like idiots.

But of course we did feel like idiots. Because at the moment of our first glimpse of Edna we had both assumed based on her generation and her looks that she wouldn't be able to do the job.

Now if *we* find ourselves stereotyping a member of another generation, when we spend all day every day thinking about the topic, we can only wonder what's going on out there in the rest of the business world. How often are all the generations being stereotyped and what can we do to put a new face on the way the generations see each other?

We've all been exposed to too many media images of the annoyingly precocious Millennial kid, or the tattooed Generation X slacker, or the guilt-ridden, workaholic Boomer, or the lifeless retired Traditionalist leaning back on the porch swing. The media puts negative images into our minds and these affect how we view each of the generations. And *we do* look at each other negatively. In our BridgeWorks Survey, when we asked the generations to respond to the statement "My generation is viewed positively by the other generations," 30 percent of Baby Boomers and 24 percent of Traditionalists answered "No." The problem was even greater for Generation X. Over 60 percent of Xers said they feel they aren't seen in a positive light.

Stereotypes also arise from resentment. Xers resent Traditionalists for being resistant to change and unwilling to hand over the reins. Boomers resent Xers for finding it so easy to change jobs whenever they feel like it and for demanding balance in their lives the Boomers would never have thought to ask for. Traditionalists resent Millennials for their entitlement mentality when Traditionalists had to work for everything they've gotten. Millennials resent the Boomers for leaving the planet a mess when they were supposed to be the ones to clean it up. And on it goes. And on it goes. And the resentment becomes worse at work where the generations are competing for the same turf and fairness is on the line.

The only way we'll ever build bridges is to stop stereotyping and get to know who these generations really are and why they are that way. As we describe the generations below, please take this as an opportunity not to stereotype the generations, but to learn something about them you might not have known before.

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