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The generational conundrum at the workplace

By Shankar R. Santhiram - May 10, 2024 @ 8:49am



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These are: the Baby Boomer Generation (1943 to 1964); Generation X (1965 to 1979); and Generation Y and Millennials (1980 to 1994), and Generation Z (1995-2012).

And for perhaps time in human history, we have organisations that have all there generations having to work together. This poses a range of problems at the workplace.

There are many personal challenges associated with age, and these manifest in the workplace. Younger employees desire more flexibility and the opportunity to work from home. Older employees have different needs.

Our values are determined by many factors, including upbringing and experiences. For example, the Baby Boomer Generation expects Millennials and Generation Z to have the same commitment to hard work and long hours. The younger employees on the other hand expect more flexibility and shorter hours in the office with greater autonomy.

Older employees tend to be more conservative in their approach to workplace relationships. They have been conditioned that work is work, and personal issues should be left at the door. However, today mental health and wellbeing is considered of great importance.

Employees are encouraged to discuss a wider range of issues, and organizations accept the overlap between personal and professional lives more readily. This can

create friction between employees, as some wish to discuss subjects that others consider to be distasteful.

The need for feedback also differs between generations. Younger employees tend to thrive on constant feedback, whereas older workers require less. For older employees, feedback should be given, when necessary, not when desired.

The communication predilections of different generations stretch from Millennials and Gen Z's use of social media and digital communication channels, to the Baby Boomers' desire for face-to-face conversations or just old emails.

Historically, approaches at work were always molded to be consistent with the values of the generation it was designed to serve. However, this structure is out-of-date for the majority of workplaces today.

Right now, we live in a world where collaborative work is required all the time. This involves people of differing perspectives who all work in the same team, which throws up a range of very specific problems, for the organisation, and its leaders.

And, the difficulties simply stem from what people from different generations believe to be important.

The Baby Boomer Generation subscribes to the "engage me" culture. This is a generation of workaholics, and they want to be involved in all decision-making and are interested to bring their own perspectives to any discussion.

Therefore, this generation enjoys having regular, long, and unhurried meetings. And, they are happy to call for these meetings at any time. They will not have any issues about these hours being odd, and will feel that it is just part of the rigours of business.

The next generation is the Gen Xers. This generation of people often value independence and self-sufficiency, even as they place a high value on peer-to-peer interaction. They seek balance in their lives between work and family, and they often view large institutions and formal organisations with disdain.

Much of this generation is focused on independence through education, and personal responsibility drives them. Generation X, will not want to discuss office matters outside working hours, and do not appreciate text messages or emails that they feel they are expected to deal with immediately.

Generation Y and Millennials are the "connected" generation. Technology is an extension of their very being. Texting is the preferred mode of communication, even when they are sitting next to each other. Consequently, they expect all parts of their life to replicate this level of pervasive access.

They will not want meetings, as they will find this a profound waste of time. To this cohort, communication is instant and requires no planning.

How can you relate to employees or colleagues from these different age groups?

Organisations must experiment with mixed-age teams, and reverse mentoring programmes that enable older, experienced workers to interact with, and learn from younger hires. The highest value task for the modern workplace leader is to create a suitable environment for this type of co-mingling to take place.

You must ensure that people from different generations understand their colleagues in the light of their values, their personal and lifestyle traits, based on what motivates them.

Baby Boomers have been schooled at being team players. Conversely, the driving spirit behind the Gen Xers is very entrepreneurial. Gen Ys, Millennials, and Gen Zs seek for participative experiences, instead.

In multigenerational workplaces there is a wide diversity of values, preferred communication styles, mental wellbeing issues, and ideal methods of working. Differences even stretch to how employees dress for work.

When leaders understand the different characters of each generation, they will more easily discover the strengths of each generation and use these to improve collaboration. To build a cohesive team, managers must create a workplace environment that allows all generations to contribute fully and embrace the qualities of their work colleagues.

*The writer is managing consultant and executive leadership coach at EQTD Consulting. He is also the author of the national bestseller 'So, You Want To Get Promoted?'