



# Seeing Eye to Eye

How to manage  
generational differences  
in the workplace

By Mary Ellen Collins

You try to find a convenient date for a staff meeting. Two people check their BlackBerrys®, another refers to her bulging day planner and a third heads to his office to check his desk calendar. This is the first time in history that four generations occupy the workplace, and each brings a work style that has been influenced by a range of environmental factors. If your team includes individuals who could be the children or grandchildren of their colleagues, look at it as a terrific opportunity.

“Different perspectives enrich a workplace, and you can get them in different ways, from different backgrounds, life experiences or ages,” says Ellen Galinsky, president of Families and Work Institute in New York ([www.familiesandwork.org](http://www.familiesandwork.org)). “Central to fundraising is the ability to take the perspective of the people who

are going to fund you, so it's an advantage to have a range of perspectives."

Although generational differences do exist, diversity experts emphasize the fact that people are much more than "just" age, race or gender. Anita Rowe, a partner in Gardenswartz & Rowe in Los Angeles ([www.gardenswartzrowe.com](http://www.gardenswartzrowe.com)), describes four "layers of diversity" that form the filters through which we see the world.

"Personality is at the center. The next layer includes internal dimensions of diversity over which we have little or no control, such as gender, age and race. The next layer includes outside influences, such as where you grew up or live now, whether you have children and your education and religion. The final layer includes aspects such as what department you are in, your level, seniority and worksite in the organization."

The time in which people grew up is not the only factor that affects how they perceive the world, but it does have a significant influence. Although

you cannot assign a particular set of traits to every person in a particular generation, experts agree that many members of each group do share common experiences that influence their actions. Understanding the perspectives that are typical of each generation will help you turn what may feel like a dysfunctional family into a cohesive multigenerational team.

### The Definition of Work

Clashes among individuals of different ages can start with something as basic as their perception of what "work" entails.

"For older workers, work is a place you go to," says Tamara Erickson, a researcher and author in Carlisle, Mass. ([www.tammyerickson.com](http://www.tammyerickson.com)). "Younger people tend not to say, 'I'm going to go to work.' They say, 'I'm going to do some work,' and they can do it anywhere—at home, at Starbucks, etc. They may get to the office at noon and feel that they've already put in a pretty big effort."

One 31-year-old woman, who is a former director of development for a performing arts organization, differed with her 62-year-old boss on work-life balance. Like many Gen Xers, she puts a high priority on life outside of work. Although she willingly worked the evenings and weekends that the job required, she resented having to take paid time off when leaving early for a family or other obligation.

"If I was working on a project, but had an appointment or service obligation 45 minutes across town at the end of the day, I would leave, knowing I could finish the project the next morning," she explains. "The CEO thought that demonstrated a lack of commitment to the job, but I viewed it as a strong commitment to my other priorities. He said, 'Look at me and how I manage,' and I said, 'My life isn't like yours.'"

After numerous discussions, the woman realized that the CEO was going to hold firm. She capitulated and

## Meet the Generations

If you think there is only one way to work with and motivate the staff on your team, you most likely are not seeing them at their happiest or most productive. Consider the following generational snapshots:

### Millennials

(also called Generation Y)

Born between 1980 and 2000

Formative events:

- Oklahoma City bombing
- 9/11 terrorist attack
- The Internet boom

In the workplace, Millennials:

- Search for the individual who will help them achieve their goals
- Want open, constant communication and positive reinforcement from their boss
- Search for a job that provides great personal fulfillment
- Are searching for ways to shed the stress in their lives

### Generation X

Born between 1965 and 1979

Formative events:

- Watergate
- Fall of the Berlin Wall
- Challenger explosion
- Gulf War
- PC boom

In the workplace, Gen Xers:

- Eschew the hard-core, super-motivated, do-or-die boomer work ethic
- Want open communication, regardless of position, title or tenure
- Respect production over tenure
- Value control of their time
- Look for a person in whom they can invest loyalty, not a company

### Baby Boomers

Born between 1946 and 1964

Formative events:

- Civil rights movement
- John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King assassinations
- Vietnam War
- Woodstock
- The Cold War
- Roe v. Wade

In the workplace, Boomers:

- Believe in, champion and evaluate themselves and others based on their work ethic
- Measure hours worked; measuring productivity in those hours is less important
- Believe teamwork is critical to success
- Believe relationship building is very important
- Expect loyalty from those they work with

Source: Cam Marston, founder and president of Generational Insight ([www.marstoncomm.com](http://www.marstoncomm.com)) and author of *Motivating the "What's In It For Me?" Workforce: Manage Across the Generational Divide and Increase Profits* (Wiley, 2007), hardcover, 240 pages



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did it his way for a while, before leaving to join a virtual company where everyone works from home on their own schedules.

The disconnect likely stemmed from

a clash between typical Gen X and baby boomer work ethics.

“Boomers grew up in a world where there were lots of us, and we’ve always played a game of musical chairs—there aren’t enough seats, and if you win, I lose,” Erickson explains. “Boomers are very competitive, and they’re enormously productive, but I often tell them they’ve done a lousy job of making corporate life more humane.”

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### Communication Errors

Employees who can choose among phone calls, email, texting, or Post-it® notes may go for hours or days without actually seeing the colleagues with whom they are communicating. However, one person’s idea of efficiency can strike someone else as impersonal, and even the best intentions can have negative results.

“Gen Y’s [also called Millennials] who send email think older people are unresponsive because they don’t respond immediately,” Erickson says.

“They may get hurt or angry, or think the person isn’t interested if they don’t respond within an hour. An older person might feel hurt if the person didn’t come and talk to them personally.”

Misperceptions also can evolve from the content as well as the method of communication, according to Patti Digh, a consultant in Asheville, N.C., and co-founder of The Circle Project ([www.37days.typepad.com/thecircleproject](http://www.37days.typepad.com/thecircleproject)). She describes a situation in an organization with older managers and a very young staff.

“One young person said, ‘I feel completely dismissed by the CEO.’ I asked what the behavior was that made him feel that way, and he said that whenever they got into the elevator together, she would say, ‘Hi kiddo.’ The impact of that was that he felt he wasn’t being taken seriously, and she was just trying to be cool.”

Erickson offers another example in which one word elicits different responses in different age groups.

“Most boomers describe feedback as a process that is largely about being judged—the boss evaluates their work once a year and tells them how they did. It irritates older workers when Gen Y’s dog them around an office, saying, ‘Can you give me some feedback?’ The boomers are thinking, ‘I told you it’s fine. It’s

### Matures

(two generations, the Veterans and Silent Generation)

Born between 1901 and 1924 (Veterans) and 1925 and 1945 (Silent Generation)

Formative events:

- The Great Depression
- Pearl Harbor
- World War II
- Hiroshima

In the workplace, Matures:

- Are loyal to their employer and expect the same in return
- Possess superb interpersonal skills
- Are enjoying flextime arrangements today so they can work on their own schedule
- Believe promotions, raises and recognition should come from job tenure
- Measure a work ethic on timeliness, productivity and not drawing attention

still fine. I'll let you know when it's not fine.' But the Y's aren't asking for a judgment. It's how they learn. They're saying, 'Can you teach me something?'"

Not surprisingly, solving communication problems actually requires communicating. Provide a comfortable forum in which you encourage everyone to talk openly about their communication styles and preferences and what they're trying to achieve when they communicate a certain way.

"Focus on the behavior, not your judgment of it," Digh advises. "Use key phrases like 'Help me understand' rather than 'Why do you do that?'"

### Let Me Help

Older managers and employees often think they should assume a mentor role with younger colleagues, only to elicit negative reactions to their attempts at "being helpful." Melinda Rodriguez, development director of El Buen Samaritano in Austin, Texas ([www.elbuen.org](http://www.elbuen.org)), had one boomer staff

member who assumed that the two Gen Y staffers would want to benefit from his experience.

"At every staff meeting, as soon as they finished giving updates on their work, he would say, 'Or you could do it this way,'" says Rodriguez, who is a baby boomer. "They were annoyed and they caught on very quickly that he perceived that they didn't know anything. At his previous job, there were lots of Gen Y's on his level who sort of elevated him because of his age and experience. He made the assumption that they would hold similar views."

Rodriguez did team-building activities, such as having everyone share bits of personal information during a staff outing. That helped, but she also spoke with the baby boomer staff member privately, explaining that the younger staff members were bright, educated people who had earned the respect of everyone else in the organization.

"He did broaden his horizons," she says, "but I think it was more challeng-

ing for him than I realized at the time."

As for the woman who used to work at the performing arts organization, she said another factor in her decision to leave stemmed from her frustration with the CEO's attempts to "groom" her for the director of development job she was already doing and had done at another organization. Despite her 10 years of experience, she says the CEO saw her as "trainable."

"He would say, 'You'll grow into this and be a great director of development someday,' and he thought that was a compliment."

Instead of supporting a teacher-student dynamic that is based on age, savvy managers reinforce a lifelong learning approach that showcases everyone's strengths and emphasizes the fact that every member of the staff has something to teach and something to learn. This is especially true with technology.

### The Digital Divide

Although many older workers are



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computer-savvy, their perspective is not the same as that of their colleagues who grew up without ever touching a manual typewriter. Rowe offers an example of how people who appear to be on the same technology wavelength could actually make a bad decision based on assumptions that stem from their own experience.

“What if the people in charge of buying the new technology for the organization come from a baby boomer generation that looks at work as being done at work, sitting in a cubicle? They may think desktop computers make sense,” Rowe explains. “But what if they have a younger workforce that believes work can be done anywhere, any time—at the coffee shop, on the couch, at 3 in the morning? For them, laptops would make more sense.”

Gen Y staff members who have had technology at their fingertips since preschool can be a blessing or a challenge, according to Rodriguez. On one hand, her staff’s reliance on email as the go-to strategy means they occasionally lose sight of the organizational big picture.

“We needed volunteers for an event, and the staff member sent out an email blast to his friends, encouraging them to help out and telling them they would get a free ticket if they did. I said, ‘You’re comping people who are totally new to the organization. I would have preferred the first filter to be engagement with the organization, so we could move our top-tier volunteers through the process of eventually becoming donors.’

“They forgot that volunteerism has a dual purpose. They do what they need to do to get the task done, but they don’t always do it within the context of development principles and organizational need. But when I explain that, they accept it. There’s no resistance.”

On the flip side, who better than Gen Y’s to extend your organization’s outreach to their contemporaries?

“My staff launched our Facebook presence and marketed an event on Facebook, MySpace, Constant Contact and Craig’s List for the first time,” Rodriguez explains. “It’s been a wonder-

ful communication tool for marketing to a new audience, and they got right in there and absolutely catapulted our effort in this area.”

Indeed, a multigenerational staff that works well together needs an environment in which everyone acknowledges shared values while respecting different approaches.

### Bridging the Gaps

As Galinsky points out, most people value the same things, and an effective workplace is an environment in which people’s thoughts are valued. “There are opportunities to learn,” she says. “You have input into decision making, and people are seen through their strengths and given the support to succeed.”

The pros agree that getting things out on the table—even when it is awkward—can help to dispel harmful perceptions and assumptions. “Political correctness keeps us from having the conversations we should be having,” Digh admits. “We’ve confused noticing a difference with making a judgment.”

She recalls an incident during which her young daughter saw a man with no legs and loudly announced that fact. “My immediate reaction was to say, ‘Sssshhhh!’ and that taught her that to notice a difference is bad. That mind-set keeps us out of honest conversations.”

Digh recommends using abstract knowledge as a way to lead into potentially prickly conversations about perceived generational differences. “Say something like, ‘Here’s what I’ve heard. Is that true for you? I’d like to figure out how we can work better together.’”

Managers can use human resources professionals or other facilitators, or they can simply open dialogues about conflicts that may be keeping the team from interacting effectively.

“Every single staff meeting needs to be a team-building opportunity,” Rowe says. “Have the whole team talk about essentials of a good work environment, come up with a consensus, and out of that ask, ‘What are the specific rules we all can ascribe to?’

“Have a session where you talk about the assumptions people have

## Resources

To learn more about the multigenerational workplace, check out the following books. Those marked with an asterisk (\*) are available in the AFP Bookstore at [www.afpnet.org/afp\\_marketplace\\_and\\_bookstore](http://www.afpnet.org/afp_marketplace_and_bookstore).

*Bridging the Generation Gap: How to Get Radio Babies, Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers to Work Together And Achieve More* by Linda Gravett and Robin Throckmorton (Career Press, 2007), paperback, 222 pages

*Connecting Generations\** by Claire Raines (Crisp Learning, 2003), hardcover, 208 pages

*Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Nonprofit Leadership\** by Frances Kunreuther, Helen Kim and Robby Rodriguez (Jossey-Bass, 2008), hardcover, 194 pages

about each other—‘You think we’re change resistant and technophobic. We think you have a sense of entitlement and don’t want to put in your time.’ Pair people up across generations to work on tasks together.”

Effective fundraising involves a lot of people and ideas, and it is particularly important to develop creative new ways of educating, engaging, soliciting and stewarding donors.

“Innovation requires multiple perspectives,” says Erickson, “and having people with multiple perspectives enriches opportunities for organizations to come up with innovative ideas.”

For open-minded, flexible nonprofit managers, the four-generation workplace offers a leg up on the competition and unprecedented opportunities for growth and success—for the organization and every member of the team. 



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