



Tips for Leading Multi-Generational Teams

In today's workplace, managers and supervisors benefit from and are challenged with the task of managing multiple generations' employees including Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials (also known as Gen Y). A recent study by Ernst & Young identified that 75% of managers reported managing multi-generational teams as a challenge.¹ Each of these generations have progressed through the workforce with different technologies, varied expectations, and evolving methods and processes of working. These substantial differences create unique challenges and opportunities for managers and supervisors who strive to build productive and cohesive teams. This article will highlight how to make a multi-generational team work together more efficiently by understanding the unique ways each generation is motivated and how they approach the workplace.

What defines each generation:

Baby Boomers. Born between 1946 and 1964, this generation is the most mature generation in the workplace, with the youngest of their cohort being in their early 50s, and the oldest approaching their mid-70s. Baby Boomers are

widely viewed as being highly productive, hardworking, team centric, and great mentors. On the other hand, boomers rank the lowest when it comes to adaptability and collaboration. Not surprisingly, boomers are attracted to organizations that offer good robust benefit plans including extended healthcare, pharmaceutical and retirement coverage.²

Gen X. Born between 1965 and 1981, this generation is beginning to move out of middle management roles and into senior leadership. The youngest of this generation is in their late-30s and while the oldest is in their early-50s. Gen X-ers have been viewed as being effective managers when compared to baby boomers. They are considered revenue generators, adaptable to change, critical thinkers, and collaborative. Gen X-ers are often ranked lower when it comes to executive presence and being cost effective. They are attracted to flexibility in the workplace, for example the ability to work from home, flexible work hours, and the ability to manipulate their schedules.²



Millennials. Born between 1982 and 1994, this generation is one of the youngest generations in the workplace, ranging in age from early-20s to mid-30s. Not surprisingly, this generation has been ranked as being the most tech-savvy, knowing how to leverage social media opportunities and computer technology. This generation is considered highly adaptable, brand ambassadors for their organization, having low tolerance for falsehood's and selfish personalities (i.e. workplace politics), and being the most enthusiastic about their jobs. Millennials have been ranked low in their capabilities to perform work in teams (i.e. teamwork) and are challenged when building relationships with colleagues. They are often perceived as lacking in work effort, and being on the lower end of productivity. What motivates Millennials is knowing when and how promotions are achieved, having a fun and engaging work culture (i.e. team building activities), being held accountable and rewarded for their efforts, the ability to collaborate with peers, and understanding the answer to "why".²

Although each of these generations have different workplace expectations (i.e. culture), methods to accomplish organizational goals and objectives, and the most appropriate method to work with each other, one thing remains true; each generation has strengths which other generations lack. As a manager, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each generation can help to identify how employees can be utilized to maximize their strengths, and lend their support to colleagues with shortcomings. Adopting strategies and techniques to engage and motivate employees in different generations can help to foster a healthy and dynamic workforce that works cohesively and efficiently.

Challenges and solutions to leading multi-generational teams

There are various challenges and solutions to managing diverse multi-generational teams. Janice Celeste of Huffington Post sums up this challenge nicely, saying "Each generation comes to the workplace with a distinct set of values, attitudes, and behaviours. In addition, each has their own expectations, priorities, approaches, work and communication styles. When managed properly, businesses will discover their competitive edge by utilizing the talents and skills of each generation to get the optimal performance from each group."³

Katie Wilson-Ditner, Manager of Health Promotion Services at Homewood Health, has worked with leaders across North America to resolve the challenges of leading diverse multi-generational workplaces. Katie notes, "teams benefit from listening to different perspectives and experiences, as it has been shown to improve collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst generations."

Katie has witnessed first-hand the benefits of organizations who embrace diversity within their teams. "When you have different generations with different experiences and varied approaches to a problem, challenge or goal, this wealth of ability and skill can help organizations to create the best and most innovative solutions. Different ideas are not a weakness; they are a strength."

Leaders can face a variety of challenges when developing and retaining a multi-generational team. When leaders lack an understanding of each generation's needs and wants, it affects their ability to effectively communicate and impedes strong working relationships within their team.





Here are some suggestions on how to lead a multi-generational team:³

- 1. Training.** To help each generation understand each other and work more effectively together, working with Human Resources to host a training session on each generation identifying the different styles, characteristics, and opportunities. This education on generational perspectives, motivations and concerns will help to improve intergenerational understanding, multi-generational inclusiveness, respect and productivity. It can also help reduce age discrimination and alleviate potential organizational “brain drain” as older generations leave the workplace.
- 2. Identify team member’s strengths.** If a team member is good at a particular skill, identify and acknowledge their expertise publically. The team will learn from each other and leverage their strengths to increase productivity.
- 3. Develop clear goals and expectations for the team.** Being clear about goals and expectations can help focus the team’s energies, and align capabilities allowing the team to collaborate on the best approach to meet expectations. This approach defines accountabilities and responsibilities for project deliverables.
- 4. Communicate.** Regardless of generation or stage of life, every employee wants to feel successful in their career. Speaking individually to each team member about what they are being measured on, how they fit and contribute to organizational objectives, how to achieve the next level in career development, and what is expected of them, allows the employee to have a clear path to success. Managers who know how to motivate employees from different generations can improve employee engagement, foster internal support and increase morale.⁴

What makes an ideal leader?

Considering the challenges with multi-generational teams, one thing remains true; a good leader is flexible when supporting different team members. Here are some examples of what all three generations agree upon when defining the ideal leader:⁴

- 1. Leads by example.**⁵ The leader takes responsibility for their actions, is truthful and courageous, and acknowledges their failures. The leader is persistent, solutions oriented, listens to their team, delegates liberally, and takes care of themselves ensuring a healthy work-life balance, and knows when to roll up their sleeves to tackle challenges head on.
- 2. Helps their team see how their roles contributes to the organization.** People want to know how their accomplishments contribute to overall organizational success. When communicating tasks, the leader explains the “why”. This encourages pride and excitement around the most mundane work.
- 3. Acts as a coach and mentor.** Sharing personal experiences, investing time to listen to employees, developing individual plans to support employee growth, providing timely feedback, creating a safe environment for questions and feedback, and regularly communicating with employees can help to foster a coach and mentor relationship with employees.
- 4. Challenges others and holds others accountable.**⁶ It’s a delicate balance between being fair, decent, reasonably mannered, and holding employees to expectations. With a balanced approach, employees are willing and motivated when coming to work. A “my way or the highway” or undisciplined and inconsistent authority, will make employees feel undermined and may lack the motivation to be critical thinkers or make decisions on their own.



5. Is accessible. No matter the size of a team, being available is essential to ensuring a team is supported and successful in accomplishing their objectives. Depending on team size, leaders can either setup weekly status meetings with each employee, or dedicate 15 to 30 minutes a day to answering inquiries from team members. Established meetings, clarity surrounding preferred communication methods or fixed days and times within the week, availability and access helps everyone get on the same page with set expectations for accessibility.

It is now more important than ever for managers and leaders not to ignore the differences between each generation. It is best practice to conduct regular training sessions for all employees and to require managers to attend multi-generational management training.³

As identified by Leigh Branham, author of 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave, people are four times more likely to leave a job because of internal politics and dissensions when compared against external opportunities. While more often than not, managers believe the primary reason for turnover is pay.

In actuality, employees leave most often when they have lost trust and confidence in senior leadership.⁴ Practising good leadership skills helps to retain employees and meets the expectations of a dynamic and diverse employee base.

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