

Gen Z is struggling with in-person interactions.

How HR can help

HR Executive | Dawn Kawamoto | March 20, 2024

As employers increasingly ask employees to return to the office to build culture and foster innovation, Gen Z employees may get their first taste of a workplace environment—since many entered the workforce at the height of the pandemic. But that experience is not going well, according to a recent survey by ResumeBuilder.com.

A stunning 46% of Gen Z workers say they have had uncomfortable in-person interactions with colleagues after returning to the office, some of which they describe as “creepy,” saying such encounters have even made them fearful. The interactions include colleagues staring, standing too close or stepping over physical boundaries, says Julia Toothacre, resume and career strategist with ResumeBuilder.com. According to the survey—which queried 557 workers at companies that mandated an in-office presence at least once a week—nearly 40% of Gen Z employees report being bullied at work since returning to the office, which stands at 21% for the rest of the workforce.

This does not bode well for employers, given Gen Z will soon represent one-third of the U.S. workforce and can help fill the millions of vacant jobs in this tight labor market. Apart from rooting out toxic behaviors in the workplace, HR leaders, experts say, should work to ensure a psychologically safe environment and help workers of all generations develop emotional resilience.

“If employees don’t feel physically or psychologically safe, it’s going to take them longer to get engaged with their work, longer to complete things and longer to build relationships with people,” Toothacre warns. “Everything takes longer when you’re dealing with negativity.”

How to help Gen Z with uncomfortable interactions

What’s driving Gen Z employees to feel so uncomfortable at work?

For starters, Gen Z tends to have nascent skills in processing uncomfortable feelings and building tolerance toward them, Kelly Kinnebrew, a clinical and organizational psychologist, noted in her blog post *The Crisis of Managing Generation Z*. This may have, in part, been fueled by generational parenting trends that caused overprotectiveness in their childhood. Now, after perhaps years of working virtually—which may require different skill sets and communication styles than in-person work—they are navigating new ways of interacting with colleagues and the emotions those interactions produce.

“Something that might be creepy and cause discomfort to one person may not be a big deal to another person, especially if they have been in the workforce for a while and are used to

hearing offhand comments,” Toothacre says. “But Gen Z is new to office settings and do not take offhand comments very well.”

Tools to build emotional resilience

HR leaders can work with managers to help Gen Z learn to process their emotions better when they face awkward or fear-inducing situations, experts say.

“You will need to help your Gen Z [employees] learn when and how to appropriately recognize, internally process and then make choices in response to their feelings,” Kinnebrew says in her report, noting Gen Z may need more guidance than other generations to develop healthy coping mechanisms.

For instance, HR leaders can provide journaling tools, Toothacre says. Employees can be encouraged to write in their journals wherever an uncomfortable incident occurs, Toothacre says, describing what happened, how they felt about it and why they felt that way.

“Sometimes when we come back to it, or even when we are writing it down, we may realize this issue is really my issue and has nothing to do with the other person,” she says.

However, if, upon reflection, employees continue to feel the same way, they should be encouraged to report such incidents, Toothacre adds.

Behavior-related training and education

While Gen Z may not have as much experience as previous generations with processing emotions in a work setting, they generally are more self-aware than previous generations and likely to have a lower tolerance for bullying and other inappropriate behaviors, says Matt Enhard, a managing partner with Summit Search Group, in the ResumeBuilder report.

“It is very possible that other generations are experiencing bullying or toxicity at the same rates as Gen Z professionals, but Gen Z is simply more likely to call it out,” Enhard says. “They are more dubious of the traditional workplace model overall.”

To help all workers understand what the company considers appropriate behavior, HR can provide training on office etiquette—from what to wear to how to speak to one another—Toothacre says, along with comprehensive anti-bullying and sexual harassment training.

HR leaders can also specifically offer training to help employees identify sexual harassment and understand reporting protocols, according to the International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management in its report on Gen Z workers and sexual harassment. According to the report, Gen Z tends to discuss workplace sexual harassment with family members and friends, rather than HR—but may be prompted to file a lawsuit after someone else has complained about harassment.

Creating a safe environment for reporting

Although Gen Z workers are broadly aware of workplace anti-retaliation policies and procedures, more than 47% still worry about retaliation, compared to 42% of Baby Boomers, according to Ethisphere's 2023 Ethical Culture Report, which surveyed 2 million employees around the globe. The report found that 41% of Gen Z employees do not believe they will remain anonymous if they file a complaint, versus 32% of Baby Boomers.

To combat this, HR leaders must develop a culture where employees are encouraged to speak up, which is reinforced through positive behavior and accountability, the report states. For instance, Toothacre says, organizations can offer an anonymous platform through which employees can submit complaints about incidents that made them uncomfortable or that could be considered bullying or sexual harassment.

"If organizations wish to take speak-up culture seriously and build robust cultures of accountability," authors of the Ethisphere report write, "then this data suggests a clear mandate to focus on reaching younger employees to get them to report more and to understand the safeguards that protect them when they do report."