Mind the Gap:
Managing the Generational Divide

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MGMT 341 – Principles of Management

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Generation X has no loyalty, and they will change jobs at the drop of a hat.

Those Millennials just expect promotions to be handed to them.

Not another Boomer-led, touchy, feely meeting!

These are just a sample of common complaints heard when workers of several different generations mix in the workplace. Each generation brings its unique stamp to the workforce, and never before have such a wide range of ages—from older workers who lived through the Great Depression, to younger employees who have heard an LP record—worked together on a daily basis. For a business to be effective in today's world, managers will need to address these generational differences. By utilizing each generation's unique strengths, and understanding generational expectations, a manager can create a cohesive and strong work group, with less conflict between the generations.

Currently, four unique generations are working side-by-side in the workplace. The oldest is the Silent Generation, which encompasses everyone born between 1925 and 1945. The next is the Boomer Generation, which includes people born between 1945 and 1964. They are followed by Generation X (GenX or Xers), who were born between 1965 and 1979. Finally, the newest members of the workplace are the Millennial Generation (Generation Y or Millennials), which includes everyone born after 1980 (Mayeda A60). Each generation is a separate entity, with

unique skills and flaws, which all combine to create a powerful mixture of strengths and weaknesses.

Since they have been in the workplace the longest, the first of these for generations—the Silent Generation—is one of the best understood. Members of this generation were children during the Great Depression, young adults during World War II, parents during Vietnam, and grandparents during the Dotcom Boom and Bust. These events have affected this generation's outlook and priorities. Members of the Silent Generation make up about 10 percent of the current workforce ("Managing Generation X" 8), and their numbers are dwindling as this generation is quickly retiring from the workforce.

Sociologists and historians William Howe and Neil Strauss have written several books on the different generations, including Generations, 13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?, The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy, and Millennials Rising. In The Fourth Turning, Strauss and Howe describe members of the Silent Generation as those that grew up too young to be war heroes, and too old to be part of the social revolution of the 1960s (213-214). They are typically perceived as stoic, traditional, and unimaginative, but they are also natural leaders, and quiet trendsetters. Some famous Silents include, musical artists Bob Dylan and John Lennon, as well as leading businesspersons such as Dick Cheney, Dave Thomas, and Martha Stewart. Despite a natural gift for leadership, the Silents have never produced a President (187).

The lack of a Silent Generation president does not mean the Silent are not involved. In truth, the Silents are extremely hard working, and consider work a duty. Silents believe they should always exceed expectations—provided those expectations are clearly spelled out. They are classic overachievers, with the skills to back up this ambition. They hold procedures to be sacred, and are most comfortable in a bureaucratic environment. They seek balance and fairness

in the workplace, and champion legislation that enforces fairness in the workplace. The Silent championed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which many consider the generation's "greatest achievement" (212-214).

Members of the Silent Generation have unique needs and expectations of the workplace. A recent survey cited in Andrew Mayeda's article, "'Show Us the Money' World of Work has a New Generation with New Priorities," revealed the top ten qualities members of the Silent Generation look for in satisfying work. The top two are: "work that is compatible with one's moral values," and "fairness in policies and procedures." This matches the Silent desire for fairness, and its love of bureaucracy. In addition, the rest of the list, in order of priority is: "Fulfilling work…Flexible hours of work…Work that makes use of abilities…Work that provides a sense of accomplishment…Work-life balance…Work that is interesting…Good benefits…Good salary" (A60). This list reveals the main priority for many of the Silent Generation—work is a duty to benefit society.

Silent employees are often viewed by the other generations as traditional and inflexible. Boomers tend to accuse the Silent of being over-cautious. Because of their lack of technical proficiency, Xers tend to consider the Silents' lack of technical proficiency as incompetence. Millennials tend to complain that the Silent are too slow (Francis-Smith).

To combat these negatives, managers should utilize the strengths of the Silent in the workplace. As the elder statesmen of business, the Silent posses an extreme depth and understanding of business. Younger workers, particularly GenX and Millennial employees, have expressed a desire for mentoring in the workplace. The experience, knowledge, and helping attitude the Silent posses, makes for excellent mentors (Kennedy 46). To motivate a Silent employee, managers should regularly provide feedback—especially praise for a job well done.

Silent employees know the meaning of sacrifice for a greater good, and welcome the chance to contribute to the overall betterment of the workplace (Peart 19). Placing Silent employees in facilitator-type positions puts the strengths of this generation to work.

The Boomer Generation is completely different from the Silent Generation. Born in the midst of post-war prosperity, the Boomers outlook and perspectives have been shaped by such events as the Post-War Boom and the Kennedy assassination during childhood, the Vietnam War and the Hippie movement as young adults, and the self-exploratory climate of the 1980s as parents. Claire Raines, in her article "The Boomers & The Xers," states Boomers are typically perceived as idealistic, diplomatic, driven, and process oriented (boomx.htm).

Boomers currently make up the majority of the American workforce—accounting for approximately 46 percent ("Managing…" 8). Boomers are often perceived as self-absorbed, but they are also fiercely driven. As a large generation, Boomers competed for everything from the playground monkey bars to college admissions. Boomers are comfortable with competition, and push themselves to be the best. Many Boomers consider themselves defined by their work, and often adhere to the concept of *live to work* (Raines "Managing Millennials" millenials.htm). Some well-known example of driven Boomers include Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates and Apple co-founders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, as well as artists such as Matt Groening (creator of the Simpsons), Stephen King, and Dave Barry (Strauss, Howe Fourth Turning… 227-229).

When the Boomers took the survey in Mayeda's article, they ranked the most important thing as "work-life balance," which shows an interesting change in attitude as Boomers begin to reach retirement age. The other items Boomers ranked in the top ten list in order is: "Good benefits…Work that is compatible with one's moral values…Fulfilling work…Work that is

interesting…Good salary…Flexible hours of work…Fairness in policies and procedures…Work that provides a sense of accomplishment…Supportive supervisor" (A60).

The Boomers' unique strengths and weaknesses stem from this competitive attitude, and optimism. They "play well with others," seeking consensus before moving forward with any ideas. Silents tend to complain that Boomers are "too self-absorbed," Xers often complain that Boomers are micro-managers, and Millennials see the Boomers as too concerned with making everyone happy, and uncomfortable making decisions (Francis-Smith).

Many of these negative complaints can be changed to positive benefits by realigning the Boomers' natural skills to benefit everyone in the business. In the past, Boomers dedicated themselves to a job, but recent layoffs, and the new attitudes about loyalty that GenX and Millennials are introducing to the workplace, have changed this attitude. Boomers are more likely to leave a job they when unhappy with it, and like their younger counterparts, they now desire benefits such as flexible hours, and other programs that create work-life balance. Based on their sheer numbers, Boomers tend to exert a lot of weight in the workplace, and managers who seek to offer these benefits to employees will reap rewards. In addition, Boomers are excellent negotiators, and work best in positions that allow them to help resolve conflicts between groups throughout the business. Boomers are very social, and tend to form close friendships at work (Kennedy 46). Using Boomers social skills to bring other workers out of their shells, and to help groups work as a team, may be one of the best skills Boomers bring to business.

When compared with Boomers and Silents, Generation X seems a shocking contrast. One of the smallest generations in size, Xers were born during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, facing high divorce rates, the OPEC oil crisis, and the Challenger disaster as children. They were young adults at the center of the Dotcom Boom and Bust of the 1990s, and as they enter parenting

years, they have been deeply scarred by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Most of the victims of the September 11th attacks were members of Generation X (Strauss, Howe, "Generations" generations.html).

Generation X is exerting its largest influence in business right now, making up 29 percent of the workforce. Eventually, Xers will see this percentage dwindle as the generation is squeezed out by the much larger Millennials. Generation X is typically perceived as cynical, pragmatic, and uneducated, but studies show Xers posses an excellence at strategic thinking and planning, a gift for adaptation to changing environments, and the ability incorporate technological solutions in the workplace. ("Managing…" 8). Generation X desires to be challenged in the workplace, and bores easily with routine tasks. Growing up, Xers watched their parents dedicate themselves to one company, only to be downsized. As a result, Generation X has redefined the concept of loyalty. They are loyal, but they are most loyal to their careers, then the people they work with, and finally the company they work for (Mayeda A60). Some notable Xers include, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com, Larry Page, founder of Google, and sporting personalities Tony Hawk and Lance Armstrong (Strauss, Howe, "Generations" generations.html).

In the Mayeda article, when Generation X ranked what they look for in a good workplace, the number one item was "interesting work," followed by "work-life balance." This generation's desire for these qualities is so strong that Xers have been known to leave a job when not satisfied, even without another position lined up—something completely shocking to Silents and Boomers. The rest of the Xers list differs greatly from the ones created by the Boomers and Silent Generations. The rest of Xer list, in order is: "A good salary…Flexible hours of work…Intellectual stimulation…Continuous learning…Fulfilling work…Good benefits…Advancement opportunities…Supportive supervisor/Challenging work (tie)" (A60).

Generation X is a very self-reliant generation—many grew up as latchkey kids, and learned to fend for themselves at a young age. They are extremely adaptable. They tend to prefer to work alone, and eschew groups (Peart 19). The other generations are often shocked and confused by Xers—The Silents view the Xers bluntness and non-conformist attitude as rude, Boomers see them as slackers, and Millennials believe they are too pessimistic—too ready to shoot down ideas before considering them (Francis-Smith).

Despite the cliché stating that all Xers are slackers, the truth is they are extremely hard working, but tend to prefer to work alone—which often places them out of the spotlight, and away from minute-to-minute observation. Xers see the same team-building meetings Boomers tend to adore as frustrating and counterproductive. They desire meetings to outline "specific tasks to be done within a set time frame so they can check them off a list" (Kennedy 46). They see work as a means to an end—they *work to live*. Like Millennials, Xers are extremely comfortable with technology, and often prefer to exchange e-mails rather than meet face-to-face. To keep Xers motivated, which helps them stay at a job, managers should provide constant challenges, with clear and explicit requirements. Meetings should be kept to a minimum, but likewise getting Xers out of their cubicles benefits the workplace, because of the strategic thinking that Xers can bring to teams and workflows in the business (Kennedy 46).

On the surface, Millennials seem to be just like GenX, but they are actually emerging to be quite different from their older counterparts. The Millennials are still just entering the workforce—nearly half the generation is still too young to work—but the older members are forging a new type of employee in the workplace.

In their article "Generations," Strauss and Howe state that the Millennials "first arrived when 'Baby on Board' bumper stickers attached to child-friendly minivans began appearing

across America" (generations.html). Millennials are the products of Head Start programs, and

"No Child Left Behind." They are the owners of declining teen birth rates, higher test scores, and

the highest level of voluntary community service since the Silent generation (<u>Fourth</u>

<u>Turning</u>…244-245). They are plugged in—having been around technology since birth.

Millennials are a generation that has never lived without cable television, and considers instant

global communications a birthright. Still in their infancy in the workplace, some notable rising

Millennials include: tennis player Andy Roddick, swimmer Michael Phelps, and country singer

LeAnn Rimes ("Generation Y" <u>Wikipedia</u>).

In the workplace, Millennials are a refreshing change from cynical Xers. They are

considered optimistic, very social, and advancement-seeking, but they also tend to be too

driven—expecting instant rewards and constant stimulation in the workplace. Millennials will

quickly leave a job if they perceive that they are not being promoted or paid enough for their

efforts. Likewise though, they are great communicators and collaborators, and are extremely

comfortable with diverse groups of people (Raines "Managing" millenails.htm).

When polled, Millennials citied their number one priority as a "good salary" followed by

"advancement opportunities," which reveals just how different this rising generation will be in

the workplace, and how difficult it will be to retain Millennials going forward. In addition to the

above, the rest of the list, in order, is: "Interesting work…Work-life balance…Good

benefits…Job security…Continuous learning…Friendly-coworkers…Flexible hours of

work…Fairness in policies and procedures" (Mayeda A60).

In many respects, the Millennials are emerging as a bridge between the other three

generations—they are facilitators like the Silent, collaborators like the Boomers, and comfortable

with technology like the Xers. There are still some issues and conflict in regards to other's

perceptions of Millennials. The Silents tend to coddle Millennials—many of which are the same age as the Silent employee's grandchildren, Boomers consider Millennials too attention-hungry, and Xers see them as naïve newcomers (Francis-Smith). Millennials, who have never known a time without computers and instantaneous technology, tend to forget older counterparts may not be as comfortable with technology as they are.

Millennials, however, have a deep respect for older workers—something that hasn't been seen since the Silent were emerging into the workforce, and managers who put Millennials in positions where they can teach and older person technology, and learn the workplace from that person will reap large rewards. Millennials are gifted multi-taskers, but they bore easily, and require immediate feedback from management on performance. They prefer an "inclusive" style of management—having a say in their own future with a company. The Millennials bring a particular unique skill to the workplace—they are able to work effectively both on teams and alone, and can develop strong relationships with coworkers—including the aloof Xers (Kennedy 46). Using Millennials as a bridge between the generations may be one of the best things to happen to the generation gap in years.

Despite all these seeming differences, there is a common ground between generations, as Graeme Condrington spells out in his article "Strategies to Close the Generation Gaps;"

Some retention findings and recommendations suggested by consulting firms, academics and others, which would appeal across the generations, include:

- Allow employees to develop additional job skills.

- Make work meaningful and challenging.

- Actively work to improve employee morale by, among other things, holding managers accountable for treating employees with respect.

- Pay competitive wages, but don't overdo it.

- Reward your employees for their performances and efforts.

- Ensure that they people who come on board are a good fit with the culture of the organisation.

- Beef up benefits, particularly retirement plans and health insurance.

- Prevent problems by encouraging open communication.

  (040915_cape.html)

When the different generations are looked at separately, differences abound—and each generation comes to the workplace with conflicting concepts regarding the ideal workplace. Mixing the generations, despite what it seems on the surface, can be very beneficial to moving a company into the future. Each generation brings its own perspective and insight to the business, and companies that successfully mix the generations, and strive to meet each's needs are poised to become leaders.

Mixing these four disparate generations into a successful whole, however, takes a skilled and perceptive manager, one who understands what each generation needs, and strives to mix the benefits of each generation's unique personality into the workplace. From the Silent Generation's stoic traditionalism, the Boomer's cooperative spirit, Generation X's ability to get it done fast, and the fresh insight that the Millennials bring, when the mix of generations work, a business really works.

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