

The Generation Gap at Work: Myth or Reality?

Everyone is familiar with the stereotypes people have of different generations—Generation Xers are disloyal jobhoppers who look out for themselves and Baby Boomers are loyal team players, but set in their ways, afraid to learn anything on computers, to name just two examples.

But are these stereotypes true? Are Gen Xers really less loyal than other generations when they were the same age? Are Baby Boomers really set in their ways, afraid of technology? Isn't there always going to be conflict between a group of people who have power and those who want it? Or are generational differences being blamed for bad behavior that exists in every generation? According to Jennifer J. Deal, PhD, a research scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in San Diego, CA, and author of *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground*, her research on the generation gap proves that in reality, the generation gap does not exist. In fact, there are more similarities among generations than differences. She and her research team have formulated 10 basic principles on generational similarities:

1. **All generations have similar values.** The most striking result from CCL's research is how similar the generations are in their values priorities. Family is the value chosen most frequently by people of all generations. Other values named to the top 10 by all generations included integrity, achievement, love, competence, happiness, self respect, wisdom, balance, and responsibility (1). People think the values of differ-

ent generations are so varied because even though the values are the same, the behaviors that go along with those values may be very different.

2. **Everyone wants respect.** They just don't define it the same way. Older people primarily think of respect as having their opinions given the weight they believe is deserved and when people do what they tell them to do. Younger respondents characterized respect as being listened to and having their ideas and talent respected (1).
3. **Trust matters.** The different generations have similar levels of trust in their organization and in upper management, which is to say, not much. People of all generations and at all levels trust the people they work with directly (bosses, peers, and direct reports) more than they trust their organizations. And people trust their organization more than they trust upper management (1).
4. **People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy.** It turns out that age does not appear to matter much. People of all generations want their leaders to be credible, to be trusted, to listen well, to be farsighted, and to be encouraging (1).
5. **Organizational politics is a problem—no matter how old or young you are.** People from all generations are concerned about the effects of organizational politics on their careers, on being recognized for the work they are doing, and for getting access to the resources they need to do their job. Even if they don't like it, employees know that political skills are a critical component in being able to move up and be effective at higher levels of management (1).
6. **No one really likes change.** The stereotype is that older people dislike anything about their

workplace being changed and that younger people love change. These assumptions are not true. In general, people from all generations are uncomfortable with change. Only 12 people in the study said they actually liked change (1). Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it is all about how much one has to gain or lose with the change.

7. **Loyalty depends on the context, not on the generation.** It's often said that young people today are no longer loyal to their organizations in the way that young people were in the past. CCL's research shows that younger generations are not more likely to job-hop than older generations were at the same age. In addition, people of all generations don't necessarily think that being loyal in the old sense is good for their careers. The perception that older people are more loyal is, in fact, associated with context, not age. For example, people who are closer to retirement are more likely to want to stay with the same organization for the rest of their working life, and people higher in an organization work more hours than do people lower in the organization (1).
8. **It's as easy to retain a young person as it is to retain an older one—if you do the right things.** Just about everyone feels overworked and underpaid. People of all generations have the same ideas about what their organization can do to retain them. Among other things, they want:
 - opportunities to advance within their organization;
 - learning and development;
 - respect and recognition;
 - better quality of life; and
 - better compensation (1).
9. **Everyone wants to learn—more than just about anything else.** Learning and devel-

This article was written by **Jim McCaffree**, a freelance writer in Los Angeles, CA.
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opment were among the issues brought up the most frequently by people of all generations. Everyone wants to learn—people of all generations want to make sure they have the training necessary to do their current job well. They are also interested in what they need to be learning to get to the next level in their organization. Five developmental areas have made it onto every generation's list: leadership, skills training in their field of expertise, problem solving and decision making, team building, and communication skills (1).

10. **Almost everyone wants a coach.** We've heard that younger people are constantly asking for feedback and can't get enough of it. We've also heard that older people don't want any feedback at all. According to CCL's research, everyone wants to know how he or she is doing and wants to learn how to do better. Feedback can come in many forms, and people of all generations would love to receive it from a coach (1).

SEEING PAST THE MIRAGE

If the generation gap is more an appearance instead of reality, what can organizations do to at least reduce that appearance? "Helping people understand this is the first step," Deal says. "When people understand this is a mirage, that it's obscuring what is really going on, people will be better able to act on the real differences that cause conflicts and stop paying attention to the mirage." According to Deal, when you see the conflict between the generations, you're often seeing a jockeying for position, social authority, and clout. Conflicts have less to do with age and more to do with clout—who has it and who wants it. Conflict between the generations comes from one group believing it gets to make the rules and that the other group has to follow those rules. Simply put, the conflict comes when Group A believes it gets to make the rules and that Group B has to follow them. Conversely, Group B also believes it gets to make the rules. "There's a fundamental difference in that way, but that's not a generational issue—that's been going on for thousands of years," Deal says.

To reduce this conflict, many organizations try to "flatten" themselves to get rid of authority structure. What Deal's research team found, though, is that when there is no authority structure, people have to figure out on their own "who trumps whom" in the work group. "People look to different social attributes for clout," she says, "and experience and age are two that work." The good news is that when people realize that what's going on is merely jockeying for position, they can deal with the issue directly, instead of indirectly, such as complaining about generational differences. The bad news is that when an organization doesn't see through the mirage, people spend more time in struggling for power instead of getting work done.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

"It's a heck of a lot easier for people and organizations to blame a group for bad behavior," Deal says. "It's not the most accurate or productive way, but it's a lot easier to dismiss somebody because they're old or they're young than it is to actually deal with the real issues that are going on." Again, clout is important: dismissing a group is not only easy, it also increases the clout of the person who is doing the dismissing because people assume that person is not part of the group being dismissed.

How well organizations deal with the generational issue depends on who you ask. Many organizations focus on the stereotypes and myths as real issues that need to be addressed. However, Deal says, other organizations do an excellent job of telling people that generational differences, when "looked at it in a real and rigorous way, don't actually exist. Let's sit down and think really seriously about what is going on and what we need to do about it." By and large, she says, if you treat everybody well in the workplace, there are going to be conflicts among the generations, just like there are conflicts between people of all sorts of different perspectives, but if workplaces treat everybody well, that's as far as it'll go. "If you treat everybody well, there's not going to be a problem with retention. It's when you say, 'we have to treat this particular group better than this other group because they want it,' that you

get into trouble both socially within the workplace and frankly in some cases, legally."

When asked if there are generational issues particular to the health care industry, Deal replied that they have worked with hospitals and nurses' organizations and the results are consistent with other industries. "One of the most interesting things to me in doing this research is how consistent these issues are, across industries and across countries and cultures," she says. "These are general social issues that appear to cross industry lines, professional lines, cultural lines, and national lines."

All this should be encouraging news because if the generational conflicts are addressed properly, people won't have to scramble as much for what they believe is theirs. But what this also means is that you should manage well for everyone. Basically, if the organization is a good place for one generation to work, if learning is focused on what people need to better perform their jobs no matter their age, the organization will be a good place to work for all generations. According to Deal, "All [human resources] people know these things. We all know how to make the work place a good place. We just often choose not to, for whatever reason." While generational conflict may never completely disappear, if it's managed correctly, it won't cause your organization to lose people. "What's going to affect your retention, learning, advancement, and acceptance of change and trust are the bedrock fundamentals that work equally well for all generations."

Reference

1. Deal J. *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground*. San Francisco, CA: John J. Wiley & Sons, Inc; 2007:19-196.