

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 workplace 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.