

Navigating Generational Differences in the Modern Workplace



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We have been bombarded with stories of how the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the trends in remote work and team dynamics. What we thought we knew about leadership and how we lead a team has been turned on its head. In today's workplace, we are required to look at our existing leadership style and develop new leadership techniques for both in-person and remote working teams.

In addition to this, throw into the mix the fact that the modern workplace has become multi-generational where within the workforce a given team can have four generations working together simultaneously (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Baby Boomers).

This makes leading, managing or just being part of a team more complex than ever before.

Understanding Generational Differences

It is crucial to understand the generational differences that shape the expectations and behaviours of your team members. Each generation exhibits their own preference for ways of working, how they want to be managed and unique values system. Failure to understand your team leads to a fractured workforce which becomes dysfunctional. You may see a lack of trust, a fear of conflict, a lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and ultimately inattention to results. (Adapted from Patrick Lencioni, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team).

A Brief Overview of the Generations Present in Today's Workforce:

(The table below is a generalisation for illustration - avoid stereotyping)

| BABY BOOMERS Born 1946-1964 Age 77 - 59 | GENERATION X Born 1965-1980 Age 58 – 43 | MILLENNIALS Born 1981-1996 Age 42 – 27 | GENERATION Z Born 1997-2012 Age 26 and below |
|--|--|---|--|
| Value loyalty and job stability. | Value a work-life balance and independence. | Embrace technology and value work flexibility. | Value diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility. |
| Prefer in-person communication and structured work environments. | Adaptable to technology but not digital natives. | Seek purpose in their work and personal growth. | Digital natives with strong tech skills. |
| Tend to have traditional work ethics and hierarchical views. | Often self-reliant and sceptical of authority. | Prefer collaborative and inclusive leadership styles. | Expect fast-paced, dynamic work environments. |
| KNOWN FOR | KNOWN FOR | KNOWN FOR | KNOWN FOR |
| Being loyal to their employer. Being self-motivated. Having a strong work ethic. | Direct in their communication style. Adaptable to new technologies. Independent. | Achievement-oriented. Tech-savvy. Focused on work-life balance. | Open-minded and progressive. Tech-savvy. Individualist and creative. Self-directed. |

What are the Advantages of a Multi-Generational Workforce?

A multi-generational workforce brings new learning opportunities, different perspectives, creative problem-solving skills and diversity. Diverse experiences create diverse ideas and a unique view. A multigenerational team can learn from one another and share different perspectives on the same problem. Often in organisations which champion mentoring programmes, a reverse mentoring programme is recommended.

Suggestion:

Consider not only the traditional mentoring programme but add a reverse mentoring programme. A reverse mentoring programme is where a more experienced team member is mentored by a younger team member. For example, the goal for the younger team member might provide insight and support for the older team member into emerging tech trends.

Younger team members should be encouraged to share their life experiences, IT skills, college projects etc. with the more experienced members of staff.

A two-way mentorship fosters mutual respect and learning and often strengthens trust and psychological safety. Barriers are broken down, stereotyping eliminated, and productivity increased.

This takes a little more effort by the Team Leader as you may be required to deal with the reluctance of Baby Boomers to step outside their comfort zone or the enthusiasm of the other generations to work at a different pace with different priorities.

What are the Disadvantages of a Multi-Generational Workforce?

A multigenerational workforce has different perspectives on the traditional 9 to 5, Monday to Friday work week. Baby Boomers tend to favour the traditional workday in an office. Whereas other generations prioritise flexible working arrangements or an engaging and stimulating environment.

Aligned with this, many Gen Z workers (due to the pandemic) may have only ever experienced the workplace remotely. Therefore, they have missed the experience of “water cooler” chats or grabbing quick lunches / fun chats with their colleagues. If they don't know what they are missing, how can they understand the benefits that these snatched moments with a fellow team member can bring?

Gen Z workers may need encouragement to step back into the office and have some enjoyable moments. Yet this is team building in action, in real time.

Suggestion:

Establish clear expectations for communication, whether it's through regular virtual meetings, email updates, or instant messaging channels. Ensure you communicate the same message using different platforms and methods. Use a variety of communication platforms to accommodate different preferences, from video conferencing to instant messaging.

Offer flexibility in work arrangements, allowing employees to choose whether to work remotely or in the office, depending on their roles and preferences. A Baby Boomer

may want their own dedicated desk, yet other generations may just need a secure locker to store their personal belongings.

However, ensure that as a team you get together regularly so that you can share experiences, achievements and challenges. Mix it up – virtual and face-to-face.

Other Suggestions to Manage a Diverse and Multigeneration Workforce Include:

- Understand the motivators and values of your team members. What makes them tick?
- In meetings, make sure every voice is heard, and put aside any unconscious bias and assumptions on the motivation/driver behind what is being said. Avoid playing favourites with those from your own generation.
- Celebrate achievements and milestones, making sure to acknowledge individual and generational contributions. This means as a leader you should focus on what each of your team is contributing to the overall business. Recognition is important across all generations. However, some may contribute experience and work ethic, while others will contribute to the creativity and positive team culture. Recognise and value all contributions regardless of the experience/age/gender of the contributor.
- Encourage diverse voices and ideas when making strategic decisions, as this can lead to more innovative solutions and higher employee engagement.
- Offer training and upskilling opportunities that cater to the specific needs and interests of different generations. This not only enhances the skills of your team members but also shows your commitment to their growth.
- Encourage a growth mindset among your team members, emphasising the importance of embracing change and learning from challenges. Be open to personal feedback and willing to adjust your leadership approach when necessary.

As a Leader, What Supports Could You Utilise?

Team and individual coaching can be highly beneficial in a multigenerational workforce by addressing the unique challenges and opportunities that arise from generational diversity. This can be done in-house or using an experienced executive/team coach.

Individual coaching focuses on the personal and professional growth of a single individual. An executive coach works closely with the coachee to identify their goals, challenges, and aspirations. Team coaching focuses on improving the performance and dynamics of a team or group of individuals working together toward common goals. Team coaching requires teams to consider both their internal dynamics and external stakeholders, working with the connections and influences within and outside the team.

| TEAM COACHING | INDIVIDUAL COACHING |
|---|---|
| Facilitates open and constructive communication among team members from different generations. | Supports team members to develop better communication skills. It helps them understand different personalities and how to adapt their communication to the preferences of others. |
| Assists teams in resolving conflicts that may arise due to generational differences. A coach will provide strategies for addressing conflicts productively. | Raises awareness of individual reactions to conflicts and provides techniques for resolving issues with colleagues from different generations. |
| Helps teams identify and leverage the strengths of each generation. | Helps individuals recognise their own strengths and how they can contribute to the team's success. |

In addition, Executive Leadership coaching can help leaders regardless of their generation understand the motivations and needs of team members, enabling them to lead with greater empathy and effectiveness.

Coaching can play a vital role in creating a harmonious and productive multigenerational workforce. Both team and individual coaching promote understanding, empathy, and the harnessing of perspectives that different generations bring to the team.