Overcoming Generational Stereotypes in the Workplace

BY TERI CETTINA  Business and finance journalist  @TeriCettina

Millennials act entitled. Baby Boomers are resistant to change. Traditionals can’t
learn new technology. If you’re not careful, age-based stereotypes like these can cause miscommunication and employee dissatisfaction in your company.

However, with some conscious attention and training, you can start debunking generational assumptions and improve the way your employees work together, says Lisa Finkelstein, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Northern Illinois University, who has been studying age and generation stereotypes for more than 20 years.

**Functional Shortcuts**

The obvious starting question may be: Is there some truth to generational stereotypes? According to Finkelstein, certain groups of people do exhibit common traits and attitudes based on the time period in which they were raised— influenced by things like the state of the economy, social norms, education, among other factors.

“However, in general, people are unique and often have many more differences rather than similarities compared to other members of their generation,” she says. “If you really think about it, it just doesn’t make sense to [group people by generation].”

If that’s true, then why do we fall into the habit of stereotyping colleagues based on their ages? According to Finkelstein, it’s part of being human—it’s not a sign of poor character. “We all like shortcuts, or timesaving devices, to simplify our lives,” she explains. “One way our brain does that is to shortcut our understanding of new people by putting them into categories we can understand.” Age is also a very visible stereotype—you can generally tell how old another worker might be, even if you can’t figure out anything else about him/her at first glance.

**Mistaken Assumptions**

The drawback of shortcuts like assuming that Millennials lack a strong work ethic or that Boomers are bureaucratic is, obviously, that they’re not always accurate. Jumping to wrong conclusions about colleagues can derail work projects. “If a manager, without researching the best person for a particular job, automatically assigns a web-based project to a younger employee but doesn’t realize that Joe, who’s in his 50s, is actually a technology whiz, that supervisor is missing out,” explains Finkelstein. “He’s not optimizing the best talent for the job.”

According to a study by the Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, “Age & Generations: Understanding Experiences at the Workplace,”[1] more than a third of workers surveyed weren’t in strong agreement with the statement “My supervisor/team leader makes job assignments fairly based on competencies,
regardless of an employee’s age.” That suggests that managers may still have work to do on overcoming age-based stereotypes.

So what can small businesses do to break down generational silos?

- **Talk openly about it.** Regularly remind employees that age-based assumptions at work are no different than gender or racial stereotypes. In addition to possibly leading to age-based discrimination for older employees, this attitude isn’t a fair or ethical way to conduct business, says Finkelstein.

- **Create multigenerational teams:** Include workers of different ages on projects, suggests Finkelstein. But before putting them to work, she suggests running team-building activities that allow employees to get to know each other better. Once workers talk and interact, they may find that they have more in common than they assumed, and age-based stereotypes will start to naturally fade.

- **Ask, don’t presume.** During performance reviews, make a point of asking workers what tasks they’d like to take on, or what skills they’d like to learn. Try not to assume younger workers will choose tech-based projects or that older workers want to maintain the status quo.

- **Enhance your diversity training.** Many company programs now train employees to be aware of differences such as age and sexual orientation, rather than just gender and cultural/racial issues.

*Editor’s Note: For an interesting look at how small-business owners feel about mentoring, check out a recent Bank of America survey here.*

Remember that old song we learned as kids, "Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other's gold?"

3 Ways to Shake Up Your Mentoring Program for Better Results

BY LINDSEY POLLAK
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It's a good reminder for the workplace.

As individuals, we benefit from having a professional network comprised of both longtime connections and new workplace relationships. If you primarily hang out with the "old guard" in your organization or industry, you risk missing out on fresh perspectives. If you only spend your time with newbies, you miss out on the wisdom of more experienced connections.

To address this issue, many companies offer mentoring programs to help employees forge relationships that might not arise naturally. Historically, such relationships tended to consist of an older, experienced "gold" employee mentoring a younger, less experienced "silver" employee.

But, as with so many elements of the 21st century workplace, the concept of mentoring is in the midst of some serious - and smart - disruption. Today's most progressive companies are adopting the practice of "reverse mentoring" (sometimes called "co-mentoring" or "reciprocal mentoring"), in which a younger and older employee jointly mentor one another.

Here's why unconventional mentoring relationships are so valuable:

1. The multigenerational workplace requires a multigenerational perspective. With four different generations in the workplace (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials), your success depends on your ability to interact with people of different age groups and communication preferences. For example, if you're a Millennial who prefers to communicate via email or text, you might benefit
from having a Baby Boomer mentor who can share some suggestions for making a
great impression during in-person client pitch meetings or high-stakes, face-to-face
negotiations.

2. Too many rules are unwritten. Even the kindest and gentlest workplaces have
some element of office politics. So, it's important to have a trusted mentor to talk to
when you're not quite sure how to approach a particular situation. A more
experienced mentor might provide guidance on how people have successfully earned
promotions from your position. A younger mentor can help you understand the
reason why your younger colleagues don't necessarily want to be your friend on their
personal social media accounts, even though they might really like you.

3. No one can do this alone. Unconventional mentoring relationships foster
relationships and make the workplace less lonely and more fun. Whether you're in the
first year of your career or the thirty-first, you're probably spending a large portion of
your waking hours at work. Those hours will be a lot more pleasant--and, therefore,
more productive for employees and employers--if you know there are people nearby
who've got your back. By having mentors of different generations, you're essentially
creating a workplace family. And, like healthy family relationships, strong mentor-
protégé connections are good for your long-term career goals and your day-to-day
well-being.

If you don't already have a cross-generation mentor--or any mentor, for that
matter--where should you begin? If your organization does not yet offer a formal
mentor-matching program, simply take the initiative to invite an older or younger
colleague out for coffee and discuss ways you might be able to help each other. Then,
repeat this strategy again and again with contacts both new and old--for the rest of
your career.

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