

The Age-Diverse Workplace

Inspiring the troops – all the troops

By Merge Gupta-Sunderji



There has never been such diversity of generations in the workplace as today.

People are living longer and that, coupled with financial necessity, means that more people are working past the age of sixty-five.

At the other end, articulate and confident young workers are making their way into the industry. Which means that it is not unusual to find single departments with each of the four generational demographics present – Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. For reference, Traditionalists are those born before 1946, Boomers were born between 1946 and the mid-60s, Gen-Xers between the mid-60s and 1979 and Millennials from 1980 to 1994.

Diverse generations in the workplace bring differing values and expectations to bear with divergent perspectives on how each views the working world. Think of these perspectives as sunglasses – different coloured lenses mean that each generation views an identical situation in vastly different ways. These varying perspectives lead to dissimilar work styles and diverse work ethics which can (and do) create conflict. These differences can translate into opportunity if you can adapt and flex your leadership style to tap into the potential that each individual brings to the table.

Start by recognizing that there has been a shift in work ethic from one demographic to the next. For the Traditionalist, *dedication* is the password, while the Boomer's magic word is *driven* – concentrating on a single job, coming to work early and staying late. The Gen-Xer was the first generation to start talking about *work-life balance* – a goal aspired to by many but achieved by few. Much to the chagrin of the others, the Millennials are the first generation to truly live work-life balance. This shift in work ethic from one age to the next offers many hints on how to inspire employees of different ages.

For Traditionalists, understand that two of their key values are loyalty and dedication. When you make the effort to not just admit but also applaud your sixty-something staff for their dependability and commitment, you are well on your way to getting the best from them. Get them to share their knowledge with others and you'll show them that you respect their legacy. Acknowledge that they make sacrifices and you'll secure their allegiance.

The Boomer generation was influenced by optimism and an overriding belief that they could change the world. Because achievement and personal growth are paramount, Boomers view how far they have come in their careers as an indicator of their success. To inspire your Boomers, focus on recognizing and verbally acknowledging their value to your operations. Remember that because job success is important to them, visible indicators of status such as titles matter. If one of your Boomers has worked hard to become team leader, then recognize her as such, and you'll inspire her to go even further.

As much as the Boomer generation is optimistic, Generation X is characterized by skepticism. To be fair, this sentiment comes from the stark reality of watching the mass corporate layoffs that occurred in the 90s. So, for Gen-Xers, self-reliance is paramount based on the founding principle that "the only person you can count on is yourself." Their motivation – balance and flexibility. As a leader, emphasize choices. If it's possible in your operation, allow your staff to decide what shifts they'd like to work, based on what fits their individual situations. The flexibility you offer will pay off exponentially in their increased levels of commitment.

To Millennials, collaboration is key; they want to participate fully in creating and managing their work lives on their terms. Offer them variety and flexibility by rotating them in assignments more often and/or changing their responsibilities frequently. Is it possible to move them through different jobs in your food service operations every few months? If that's not practical, involve them in other ancillary initiatives such as organizing your location's annual charity fundraiser or designing the employee newsletter. They'll jump in as long as it's exciting! Don't discount them because of their youth. Millennials crave respect, but they repeatedly come up against the "respect must be earned" refrain from older employees. Change your point of view from "you must earn my respect" to "you have my respect unless you do something to lose it," and watch levels of motivation rise.



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