

Gap or Pap:

Generational Differences at Work

by Jennifer J. Deal

Editors' note: This article is adapted from Jennifer J. Deal's *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*, Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2007.

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WHEN IT COMES TO OUR UNDERSTANDING of generational differences in the workplace, conventional wisdom has it mostly wrong. The conventional shorthand for the four generations that now share our nation's workplaces goes something like this: the Silent Generation values hard work, baby boomers value loyalty, Gen Xers value work/life balance,

and Generation Y (the generation just entering the workforce) values innovation and change.

Or in terms of negative stereotypes, the Silents are fossilized, the boomers are narcissis-

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Defining the Generations

The Silent Generation (1925–1945). This group is called the Silent Generation because it tends to be quieter than the baby boomers and isn't discussed as much. But if you look at the age range of this group, you will see how powerful its members are.

Early boomers (1946–1954). This group is made up of children born following World War II. The massive increase in the birth rate, known as the baby boom, began shortly after the end of the war.

Late boomers (1955–1963). This is the second half of the baby boom.

Early Xers (1964–1976) The group identified as Gen X began when the birth rate decreased after the end of the baby boom. The term **Generation X** became widespread after the publication in 1991 of Douglas Copeland's book of the same name. Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson's 1964 novel, also titled *Generation X*, described a generation that would come of age at the end of the twentieth century as apathetic and materialistic.

Late Xers (1977–1986) This group includes the youngest part of Generation X.

tic, the Gen Xers are slackers, and the Gen Yers are even more narcissistic than the boomers. But stereotypes aren't as accurate as many people think they are. Research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) shows that the generations now of working age value essentially the same things.

CCL spent seven years gathering information from more than 3,000 leaders in the United States about their work habits, perceptions of other generations, impressions about trust in the workplace, and attitudes about work in general.¹ The data was gathered from people working in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. Interestingly, the results were the same for workers in both sectors.

The research showed that the generations now of working age want essentially the same things from their jobs: to trust their supervisors, to be paid well, to have interesting work, to get feedback, and to have the opportunity to learn.

What about the idea that young people are lazy and don't work as many hours as older people do? The research shows that the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your position in

the organization than on your age; no matter how old you are, the higher your level in your organization, the more hours you work.

What about the fact that older people are more resistant to change than younger people are? The research shows that no one really likes change, primarily because workers think they are going to lose as a result of change.

One of the striking results was about levels of trust. Neither younger workers nor older workers are more trusting at work; all generations are equally trusting or distrustful. For example, 61 percent of respondents say they trust their peers, 64 percent say they trust their direct reports, and 70 percent say that they trust their boss. But only 47 percent say that they trust upper management to do the right thing, and only 54 percent say that they trust their organization to keep its promises. In effect, 53 percent of respondents don't trust upper management, and 46 percent don't trust their organization. Workers of all generations responded similarly, as did men and women of all ages.

Interestingly, people at the top of an organization responded significantly differently from everyone else. More than 70 percent of those at the top and in executive ranks say that they trust their organization, while 56 percent of upper management say they do, 51 percent of management do, and 47 percent of professionals do.

Why does this difference exist? Because we tend to trust people with whom we interact, in large part because we can do a pretty good job of predicting what they are going to do. People in executive positions can do a better job of predicting what an organization is going to do because they are largely responsible for organizational decision making, an advantage that those at lower organizational levels do not have. So it is no surprise that there is a disconnect between people who run organizations and those below them; workers who direct an organization view the organization as more trustworthy than do those below them. Again, people of different generations have remarkably similar opinions about how trustworthy (or untrustworthy) an organization is; the difference is by level.

So if trust at work isn't determined by age, and if people of all generations want the same things at work, why is there so much workplace conflict among people of different generations? The conflict has less to do with age or genera-

tional differences than with clout—that is, who has it and who wants it.

Clout includes control, power, authority, and position. The generation gap is blamed for conflicts that really have nothing to do with fundamental generational differences. Most conflicts have everything to do with the natural desire of older people to maintain their clout and the desire of younger people to increase theirs.

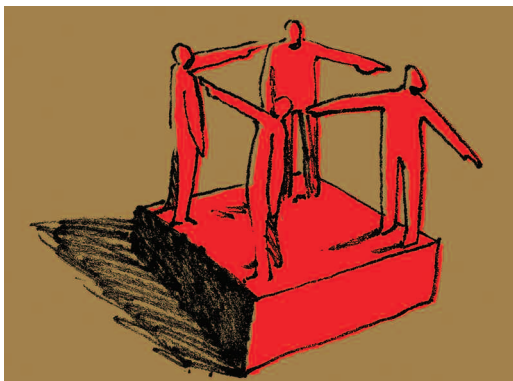
Conflict often stems from one group's notion that it gets to make the rules and that the other group has to follow these rules. If the rules are challenged, so too is the superior position and stature of those who believe they are the rule makers. In most organizations, older people have set the standard; as long as the younger generation complies, no gap or conflict exists. But of course, younger people bring their own views and experiences to the job and, therefore, challenge the status quo.

Organizational authority that comes with position in the hierarchy is one way employees get clout. People also use other attributes—age, political acumen, organizational tenure—to increase their clout within an organization. This is especially true in less hierarchical organizations where the ability to influence others is closely tied to clout.

As organizations increasingly promote younger employees over older ones, or as new (often younger) people take the reins of leadership from older leaders who are retiring, older people left in the workplace naturally work to maintain the balance of power—in their favor—by using their greater age and experience. Fear of potential loss of clout shows itself in complaints about lack of respect, dismissing the ideas of younger people, valuing experience over innovation, and so on.

Younger people engage in clout trumping as often as older people do. In an effort to increase their clout, younger generations may complain about not being taken seriously or may criticize older ones for being resistant to new ideas or for their unwillingness to embrace technology. Others claim that older people are out of touch and not tuned in to the needs of clients and constituency groups.

So what can you do about the inevitable conflicts among the generations? The best thing is to identify the conflicts for what they are: typically the result of miscommunication and misun-



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derstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout. And because you know how much people of different generations share in terms of what they want at work, you'll know that the people involved in the conflict probably want similar things. Understanding its real roots can help you look deeper into the *real* causes of the conflict du jour and help you make more informed decisions about what you can do to eliminate—or at least mitigate it.

A better understanding of the similarities among people of different generations makes work life easier because employees don't have to twist themselves into knots trying to accommodate each generation's individual whims—and they don't have to worry about learning a new set of whims when the next generation comes along. What people in organizations need to do is ensure that everyone is heard and that everyone feels respected. If you can do that, the gap will be retired.

ENDNOTES

1. Respondents are mostly from large organizations; 41 percent of respondents were male, 59 percent were female, a reflection of the high number of nonprofit employees participating in the survey. Eighty-eight percent self-identified as white, 6 percent as black, 1 percent as Asian, 2 percent as multiracial. More than half of respondents had a master's degree or higher, while approximately one-third had a college degree.

Is the dialogue about generations in the workplace full of hype, or do the generations really approach work differently? Share your perspective with the editors at feedback@npqmag.org. Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150104.

Ten Truths for Multigenerational Workplaces

Look past the stereotypes, and learn these ten truths about generational conflicts at work, gleaned from a seven-year study by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).

1. All generations have similar values. Lots of discussion focuses on major differences in values between older and younger people—as if these differences were an established fact. The most striking result from CCL's research is how similar the generations are in terms of their values. Family is the value chosen most frequently by people of all generations. Other values included in the top ten by people of all generations are integrity, achievement, love, competence, happiness, self-respect, wisdom, balance, and responsibility. So why do people at work think the values of different generations are so different? Because even though the values are the same, the behavior that goes along with those values may be very different. Older workers, for example, may show the importance of family by working long hours to give their families a comfortable life. Younger ones may value family equally by working fewer hours and spending more time with their families. The value is the same, even though the behavior is different.

2. Everyone wants respect. We often hear that younger people are disrespectful of older employees and people in authority. We also hear complaints that older people show no respect for younger talent and ideas. The reality is that everyone wants respect, but not everyone defines it the same way. Older people primarily view respect in terms of having their opinions given the weight they deserve and having younger workers do what they are told to do. Younger respondents characterize respect as having others listen and pay attention to their ideas.

3. Trust matters. The different generations have similar levels of trust in their organization and in upper management: they don't trust them much. People of all generations and at all levels trust those they work with directly (e.g., bosses, peers, and direct reports) more than they trust their organizations. And workers trust their organization more than they trust upper management.

4. People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy. What do different generations expect from their leaders? It turns out that age doesn't matter much. People of all generations want leadership to be credible, to be trustworthy, to listen well, to be farsighted, and to be encouraging.

5. No matter your age, organizational politics are a problem. Everyone who isn't winning at the political game dislikes it, and even the winners don't much like it. All generations are concerned about the effect of organizational politics on their careers, on being recognized for the work they do, and for getting access to the resources they need to do their

jobs. Employees know that political skills are a critical component of moving up and being effective at higher levels of management, even if they don't like it.

6. No one likes change. The stereotype is that older people dislike any workplace change and that younger people love change more than they love their iPods. These assumptions are far from true. In general, people of all generations are uncomfortable with change. Only 12 people in the study say they like change. Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it is all about how much one has to gain or lose because of the change.

7. Loyalty depends on the context, not on the generation. It's often said that young people are more disloyal than young people were in the past. Our research shows that younger generations are no more likely to job-hop than older generations were at the same age. In addition, people of all generations don't think that being loyal in the traditional sense (one employer for life in good times and in bad) is good for a career. The trend of greater loyalty among older workers is, in fact, related to context, not to age. For example, employees who are closer to retirement are more likely to want to stay with the same organization for the rest of their working lives.

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. They want the following from a job:

- opportunities to advance within their organization;
- opportunities for learning and development;
- respect and recognition;
- better quality of life; and
- better compensation.

9. Everyone wants to learn—more than just about anything else. Learning and development are central issues for respondents of all generations. People of all generations want to have the training necessary to do their job well. They are also interested in what they need to learn 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, decision making, and team building.

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 feedback at all. According to our research, everyone wants to know how he or she is doing and to learn how to do better. Feedback can come in many forms, and people of all generations prefer to receive it from a coach.