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Focus

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Core: The Secret to Communicating with Four Generations of Employees

Imagine you're a twenty-something trying to discuss current social trends with your great grandmother. Now imagine you're the great grandmother discussing history with your great grandson. *Now* imagine you are unrelated employees working together. Welcome to the new workplace!

For the first time in human history we have four generations working side by side. These four generations are listed below by birth year.

1922-1945: Veterans

1946-1964: Baby Boomers

1965-1980: Generation X

1981-2000: Millennials

This diversity creates leadership challenges because of divergent core values and communication preferences, to name just two issues. Success managing a mixed-generation group requires discovering a common purpose around which people can unite.

The generational values spectrum ranges from the Veterans' respect for authority and discipline to the Millennials' insistence on realism, extreme fun, and social connectivity. Then consider communication preferences. We know Millennials love texting, but consider *their* kids. I'm not alone in my amazement at watching a 2-year old navigate around an iPhone, and this generation doesn't even have a name yet!

The communication preferences alone cause problems. It's hard enough to organize employees of a single generation to all row in the same direction. Different attitudes towards work magnify the problem. Here's a great description of a non-functional team by Greg Hammill, who worked at HR for AT&T and then went on to academia.

"The Veterans on the team are looking for handwritten notes and direct, specific requests for work to be done. The Boomers do not like to work independently, and they expect to have meetings any time, any place — and it is fine if they are called day or night. Xers do not want to hear about the project outside of work, and don't dare call them at home. And the [Millennials] don't want any meetings at all, they only communicate via voice mail and e-mail."

Overcoming big differences in values and communication styles requires concessions to work habits and a common purpose around which all generations can unite. The foundation to achieving this is mutual respect. Respect begins with an acknowledgement that each person's intentions are good, even though values and behavioral styles vary. This requires meaningful dialog among the group members, moderated by a leader's deft hand.

Mutual respect often flows from a common purpose, which may be a shared vision or a common adversary (tried and true, this gambit is used frequently in business and government). Another cornerstone upon which to build respect is identifying what unique contributions each generation brings to the table. This leads to discovering concessions to work habits that can accommodate generational norms without sacrificing results.

The secret to all of this is “core.” That is, areas of overlap that are agreed to by everyone as essential and common to all. Once the workgroup has identified those areas upon which they agree, other differences become less of a problem.

So, truth or dare: Do you remember the first moon landing? Rotary dial phones? VE Day? Just text me your answer.

Tom Wagner

A leader should constantly clarify and communicate strategic goals

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