

Shifting Years

Leverage the Power of Generations

by Laura Goodrich

Look around—there's been a shift in the workplace, and for the first time in history, four different generations are on the job together.

They go by many names: Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and they've all had different life experiences.

In my youth, well, I remember when CDs happened.

Tapes as opposed to records.

Probably Google.

Landing on the moon.

Caller ID.

It was an Apple, when it first came out, everything was on DOS and we started playing Oregon Trail.

Our life experiences create who we are, and they also impact our expectations about work.

Sometimes these differences can create tension that's hard to ignore; but they can also be leveraged as a source of great potential.

Hi, I'm Laura Goodrich, and I've been studying workplace dynamics and change for over 15 years, and generations at work have got my attention.

Specifically, how our life experiences shape our behaviors.

Here's what I've learned:

It's no secret there are differences between generations. There are.

The secret is that successful teams don't treat those differences as problems. Instead, they utilize them as opportunities.

It's how we choose to work together that determines our success.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to make assumptions about other people?

Older people have a better sense of work ethic.

I feel like they're more set in their ways, less into innovation.

Not even close to as efficient regarding technology as we are.

They're definitely more traditional.

I'm not sure the generation coming up is steeped in the values of the older folks.

They don't communicate face to face, it's always via text.

That 20 to 30 age group is, well, 'I know it's there, I want it, and I should get it.'

Okay—I know that working with people from other generations can be frustrating, but keep in mind, those people probably feel the same way about you! Whether at home or work, the generational gap is present. But regardless of these differences in every workplace, people from multiple generations are brought together to achieve a common goal.

And we struggle, because it's natural to focus on what separates us, and make assumptions at a glance. But often times, our assumptions are deceiving, and concentrating on our differences moves us even further apart.

We're all individuals, not stereotypes. We need to be intentional about creating positive relationships—but how do we do it?

What if we shift our perspective to a new point of view? What if we choose to see what we have in common? Imagine what we might see if we look just a little harder.

When we do that, a funny thing happens. We realize we're more alike than different.

What I want in my work life is relationships with the people that I work with.

I also look to work with people who are great and care about each other.

A work-life balance.

Balance of work and play.

Feeling that you're making a contribution.

To feel like at the end of the day, you did something that made any sort of contribution is,

I think, the best thing that you can do.

If you look around your workplace, you'll find that people of all generations want to do meaningful work. They want to make a difference. And they want to be appreciated.

For any group to succeed, its members need to understand what they have in common. That's the basis for trust.

Think about your friends. Most of you have some kind of shared interest or history that brought you together.

Take my group of foodie friends. We couldn't be more different. But when it comes to cooking, it doesn't matter.

We get together to make meals, and we're so passionate about learning new recipes, swapping techniques, and tasting different flavors, that we forget about everything else.

Take a moment to think about a colleague who has different interests, and comes from a totally different generation.

How do you interact with them? Maybe you have a great relationship. But it's also possible that tension exists. If so, how do you take action to overcome this?

If you want to find common ground, you need to have empathy for their life experiences, and respect their point of view.

Next time you interact with this person, make an effort. Be curious, ask questions, and discover what you have in common, or what you have to learn. Make a small shift in your perspective. Chances are, if you make an effort to understand them, they'll find a way to understand you better, too.

Everyone wants to be respected. Building a base of respect and trust is the foundation that makes it easier to see our differences as strengths.

I think the baby boomer generation is one that instilled a lot of work ethic in everything they did. Basically use them as a sound board, or a bouncing off of ideas, because they have been in all these situations.

And they know what it takes and what it costs to achieve.

How the younger generation operates in the workplace really has to do with a collaborative approach. They are able to reach globally; they are able to connect anytime they want.

A positiveness of personality, a caring.

So as we collaborate, we all learn from one another and have the ability to look at things from a different perspective.

Differences give us more options, they offer more ways of looking at a problem, and better methods for accomplishing a task. The generational difference isn't the problem—it's the solution!

Let me tell you a story.

A few years back, Eric Swanson was having a great day. Actually, a bad day. Well, a great/bad day.

You see, Eric was a senior at Adrian College, a small school in Adrian, Michigan. Like many other music majors, he sang in the schools' choir. The college choir was good. So good, in fact, that they were invited to sing at Carnegie Hall. And this is why he was having a great day.

The choir was asked to sing Faure's Requiem. This very challenging piece requires a wide range of voices. So wide, in fact, that the choir director decided that they needed more voices, and asked the community choir to join in their efforts.

And this is why Eric was having a bad day. He was worried about the community choir; this choir was comprised not of music majors, but of people from the community—doctors, mechanics, you name it. And some of the people were old, really old. Eric couldn't see how these people could help them achieve the high standards that they needed.

Eric's fears lingered even when they started singing. But they quickly changed to appreciation when he realized they were equally passionate about music. What they lacked in formal training, they more than made up for in experience.

Once he understood that, the differences started to disappear, and the common bond of music started to grow. He began to appreciate what everyone had to offer, and he learned new ideas and techniques. When their voices came together, something incredible happened.

They held their own at Carnegie Hall. They worked together to create music they couldn't do individually, and received a standing ovation.

Today, the Adrian College and community choir often perform together to standing ovations all over the world. And Eric, he went on to a career in music, and even formed his own intergenerational choir.

By finding a common ground, by respecting and leveraging differences, and by letting go of assumptions, Eric found he had something to learn, and something to teach. Imagine that happening on your team.

When we look past our assumptions we see a person. When we have empathy we can discover what we have in common, and we build trust. When we build trust, we can see our differences as strengths. And when we use our strengths together, great things happen.

Four generations in the workplace means that right now we have more power and more possibility than ever before. It's your rare chance, and your choice, to make history.