



March 2012

**It's a Millennial Thing:
That star Millennial is moving up the ladder so you better
learn how to adapt to your new, younger boss's style**

By Steve Gavatora

(Original source: T+D, Issue March 2012)

One of the common issues I experience when working with clients, who are primarily Baby Boomers or generation X'ers, involves Generation Y entering the workplace. When I meet with them to discuss organizational challenges, it almost always begins with a roll of the eyes regarding their Gen Y colleagues. The usual complaints are about their constant use of technology to communicate, their sense of entitlement, and their work ethic – all of which is enough to drive their bosses and peers crazy. It is apparent that Gen Y'ers in the workforce is a hot-button topic across all industries today.

The relationship between Gen Y'ers and their colleagues could potentially get more stained in the next few years if companies do not manage relationships carefully. Not only have Gen Y'ers entered the workplace in full force; many of them are now being moved into managerial roles over seasoned veterans. You think there was angst before? This dynamic adds significant fuel to the fire.

Gen Y workers' rise to the top

As Gen Y workers continue to rise in management, many are surpassing experienced personnel from other generations. Now many of those veteran employees are being supervised by people with less work and life experience. This situation has proved difficult for both sides of the workforce—younger managers as well as their older charges.

Because of the Internet, the most transformative development since the automobile, the current generations in the workforce grew up in vastly different times. Their backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and approaches vary immensely, shaping different work styles that create certain barriers to effective communication. The key for more seasoned folks is to take the initiative and help bridge the various gaps between them and their "greener" managers. The bottom line is that they should take a proactive approach rather than a reactive one.

There are ways to diffuse the backlash from other employees resulting from Gen Y's approach to work. Sure, there are distinct differences that naturally create issues, but there are ways these valuable employees can be added into the workplace seamlessly. They offer many fresh ideas that can create competitive advantages for the company. Why not leverage these potential "diamonds in the rough" to provide a point of differentiation? Before you can do that, however, it is important to review some facts about, and basic characteristics of, the three generations now working side-by-side in today's workforce.

The evolution of today's worker

As part of trying to comprehend the reason for the differences between each generation, you must understand some core characteristics about them.

- Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) tend to have a strong work ethic and be independent, goal oriented, and highly competitive. Population: 80 million.
- Generation X'ers (born between 1965 and 1980) have been characterized as individualistic and technologically adept, as well as valuing a work-life balance. Population: 44 million to 50 million.
- Generation Y'ers (born after 1980) are purported to be tech savvy, family-centric, team oriented, and attention craving. Population: 70 million.

When you look at the characteristics of each group, it is quite easy to see why there are potential issues, especially concerning the technological side of things. With Generations X and Y, who grew up in technologically advanced times, there is a huge gap between their comfort with, and reliance on, technology and that of Boomers. They developed skills in the use of digital communication at an early age, whereas Boomers had to learn these skills at a later stage in life.

A great way to bridge generational gaps is to create a common language to help people connect and communicate with one another, particularly by focusing on their behaviors.

In fact, the Gen Y'ers are accustomed to using digital and mobile devices as their primary means of communication. This is where I see the biggest gap between the generations: effective direct communication skills—that is, old-fashioned, one-on-one, face-to-face human interaction rather than heavy reliance on email, texting, and phone calls. In other words, many Gen Y'ers have to improve how they effectively connect, interact, engage, and communicate with other people *in person*.

The good news is that Gen Y'ers do value a coaching-based, collaborative, and open environment. For individuals working for Gen Y'ers, it is imperative to be open to, and set the stage for, that type of approach. You must take the initiative to build a trusting, close relationship with younger managers, one in which you will be recognized as providing experience and wisdom. In other words, you can indeed break through the communication barriers with Gen Y'ers but, first and foremost, you need to be proactive with them.

Establishing workplace harmony

Here are seven tried-and-true tips to workplace harmony adapted to help seasoned personnel from other generations learn how to connect, interact, and communicate effectively with their Gen Y managers.

Avoid generalizations. There are differences in the generations, but the fact that each generation has different experiences should come as no surprise. Do you remember your elders saying how different your generation was from theirs? I'm sure they heard the same from their parents and bosses as well.

Generalizations create more barriers—thus, they need to be eliminated. When we focus on the potential differences of other people, we tend to prejudge them. We must realize that they are simply other human beings and focus on similarities that could serve as an entry point to making

connections. Just because someone was born within a specific generational period does not mean he will exhibit the generalities associated with that generation.

Create a common language. Most relationships, regardless of generation, struggle due to a lack of effective communication. Don't you think Boomers have trouble communicating with other Boomers at times, too? A great way to bridge generational gaps is to create a common language to help people connect and communicate with one another, particularly by focusing on their behaviors. The key is to understand those behaviors and recognize the various styles both you and others use. This allows you not only to build an understanding of others without prejudging them, but also to create an action plan to better connect and communicate with them as well. Personality preference models such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment can help sustain this connection.

By using such tools as the Myers-Briggs assessment with employees, you can focus on core elements to begin to build that common language. In Myers-Briggs terms, an INTP (introversion, intuition, thinking, perception) is still an INTP regardless of generation. With this knowledge, communication can be leveled across the organization despite the age disparities among the staff.

If you know that a Gen Y manager is an INTP, you can approach that person accordingly. In this case, that means opening the door by using a slower, more methodical approach—connecting and engaging with her in a more relaxed manner. Rather than immediately jumping to conclusions about your generational differences, focus on your similarities. That's not to say that all generational differences will go away, but by taking the approach of looking for that common ground, you can lay the foundation for open communication and begin to build trust. Using a model such as the Myers-Briggs tool is the first step in bridging communication gaps because it lays the groundwork for leveraging the following steps effectively.

I have a former client, Greg, who is a Boomer ISTJ (introversion, sensing, thinking, judgment) bank manager who recently had to report to a 29-year-old senior manager. Greg said his original concerns were eliminated when he thought about the work we did with the Myers-Briggs tool and then put it into practice with this new manager. His work style was quite different from the manager's, and in recognizing this he was able to adapt to her style to communicate effectively.

Greg communicates in a methodical, thoughtful, slower-paced way, which is common for someone with ISTJ preferences, whereas she is more fast-paced, expressive, and imaginative—with ENFP (extraversion, intuition, feeling, perception) preferences. Greg essentially adapted his approach to her by aligning his pace more closely with the pace with which she was more comfortable. He said they now communicate seamlessly. He obviously sees areas where generational differences could create roadblocks, but the fact that they now understand how to interact better with each other helps neutralize the other issues.

Establish and build trust. Another foundational element to any successful relationship must be trust, and because of their family-centric, team-oriented nature and desire for close relationships, this holds particularly true for Gen Y'ers. Transparency and follow through are critical in relating to the Millennial generation, which may not yet be adept at playing politics and still hold the ideal that their team members are working toward group goals.

Take the initiative and show empathy. For the trusting, family-centric Gen Y'ers, making an effort to walk in their shoes shows them that you value them. Quit focusing on what Gen Y is not

and start thinking about how to create the right atmosphere, one that capitalizes on their team building, trusting, tech-savvy nature. Then you'll understand why they do what they do, as well as set an example to be followed.

Embrace a coaching and collaborative approach. Despite the perception that Gen Y'ers want to communicate solely via technology, which is in many ways accurate, when interacting in the workplace they very much desire a coaching and collaborative environment. Be willing to allow for a coaching approach that creates dialogues rather than monologues. Gen Y'ers will not respond well to a "my way or the highway" attitude, nor should they. Again, Gen Y'ers are family-centric and team oriented. Thus, supporting this collaborative environment will work effectively. After all, you have a wealth of knowledge you can share with them. Be willing to make the first move toward collaboration so that they feel safe and ready to receive your wisdom.

Listen and ask questions. Asking a new boss thought-provoking questions and listening intently to her answers is a good way to ingratiate yourself with any manager, but this tactic works especially well with the collaborative Millennials, who may be wary of their charges not taking them seriously. Closed-ended questions not only prevent the team from examining its challenges in the necessary depth; they also are off-putting to the ambitious Gen Y'er who tends not to take the "safe" route of perpetuating the corporate world's status quo.

Be quiet and listen so that you can learn more from these out-of-the-box thinkers. In addition, don't be put off if they ask, "Why?" often. According to Austin, a Gen Y small business owner who leads many seasoned managers in projects, "We ask 'Why?' not to be difficult, but because we truly want to know *why*." Don't be offended; it's actually a good sign that they are engaged.

Observe and align your approach. As when working with any new boss, the team should observe and align its approach to that person accordingly. Like it or not, the new Gen Y'er steering the ship probably received the promotion for a reason. Likewise, older workers have built a career and have valuable experience. It is critical to depersonalize the differences based on generation and begin understanding the natural motivations and interests of the individual.

Common sense says that a personal approach will resonate better with both parties and help align the communication in their everyday interactions. For example, if you are an aggressive and fast-paced individual and your Gen Y manager is not, do not overwhelm him with your assertiveness. Be more open to the creative ideas and approaches if your Gen Y manager likes risk and change. Once again, you can be the voice of wisdom and reason. Try to be cognizant of your manager's work style and adapt accordingly.

A bridged gap. Using the above steps will help bridge potential communication gaps between battle-tested veterans and their newly drafted Gen Y managers. The key is to realize that in many ways Gen Y'ers are indeed different, but they also have many of the desires, motivations, and behaviors as do the rest of us.

Be proactive in removing the stigma attached to being a Gen Y'er and recognize the simple fact that you're dealing with other human beings who happen to have earned their move up the ladder. You'll develop the path for better relationships, greater sales, improved leadership, and overall improved results.