

Communicating Across Generations

Chances are good that you are working with people who represent at least two, if not three different generations other than yourself. While it may be easy to accept that each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and motivational traits, it is less easy to understand how these differences contribute to miscommunication and reduced productivity in the workplace. In fact, research suggests that 75% of all workplace communication has some level of misunderstanding associated with it (Wiio, 1985). Here are two examples that illustrate my point. Traditionalists (1922 – 1945) and Boomers (1946 – 1964) are likely to respond to praise for a job well done with, *“Thanks, but I was just doing my job.”* On the other hand, Xers (1965 – 1980) and Millenials (1981 – 2000), are probably feeling a bit miffed because you waited so long to acknowledge their work. Xers and Millenials, are likely to respond positively if you praise them publicly with messages like, *“You made a great first impression with our new client, keep up the good work.”* Traditionalists and Boomers may consider your feedback unnecessary and even inappropriate.

The following chart further illustrates how different generations view the workplace:

	Traditionalists	Boomers	Xers	Millenials
Work Ethic	Dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Determined
Communication Style	One on one Write a memo	Touch tone phone Call me anytime	Cell phones Call me only at work	Internet Picture phones
Relationship to Feedback	No news is good news.	Feedback is given once a year with lots of documentation.	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing?	I want feedback whenever I want at a push of a button.

These profiles are not absolutes and certainly not meant to describe every member of a particular generation. That said, considering the generational status of the people you are working with can improve your communication effectiveness. Let’s say you need to motivate someone take on a new assignment. Your message would be very different depending the age of the person you are recruiting. In each case your opening line might be:

Traditionalists	Boomers	Xers	Millenials
<i>Your experience is an important asset in order for the team to succeed....</i>	<i>I value our work and I need you to.....</i>	<i>Forget the rules, do it your way</i>	<i>You will be working with other bright creative people....</i>

Above all, remember to listen first and **ask one more question** than you usually do if want to become a better communicator and work more effectively with the difference generations in your workplace.

Source: Business Beat, Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, August 2006