

FOUR GENERATIONS...ONE WORKPLACE.
Can it really work? What we NEED to know and understand!

*By Debra Dupree, MA
ACR Advanced Practitioner*

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Anyone with teenage children recognizes the challenges of generational differences whether it's language, music, dress, or attitude. But in today's work world, many, even those not yet parents, are confronting the challenges of generational differences. For the first time ever, our work world now employs a workforce that spans four generations. These generations range from those who grew up with the effects of the Great Depression to those who have never known anything but cell phones, text messaging, and instant photos!

This range of experience adds new meaning and a level of complexity to the concept of "age" and the implications for diversity and respectful workplaces. Generational diversity presents a new frontier for workplace diversity as managers, supervisors, and employees grapple with cross-generational teams, traditional age-based hierarchies turned upside down, and employee rewards and motivational incentives falling far short of meaningful value. The reasons include the fact that generational influences shape employee values and needs, and that communication, working relationships, and delivery of services suffer when understanding is lacking around those values and needs.

What is the greatest generational challenge facing the nation in the next decade? Getting work done by cross-generational teams holding different beliefs, values and expectations, AND effectively resolving the challenges created by those differences.

Let's take a look at a few facts behind the four generations:

- **Traditionalists** (Matures): 61+ (born before '46)
10% of today's workforce yet 27 million people – shaped by the Great Depression
- **Baby Boomers**: 43-61 (born '46-'64)
46% of today's workforce and 76 million people – products of the 60's & 70's
- **Generation X**: 29-42 (born '65-78)
29% of today's workforce still 60 million people – impacted by corporate down-sizing
- **Generation Y** (Millennials): 20-28 (born '79-87)
15% of today's workforce and 74 million people – born into a life of technology and convenience

Source: <http://gentrends.com/> and <http://generationsatwork.com/>

So where's the rub (or conflict) when it comes to workplace differences? The issues stem from differences in perception around authority and hierarchy, money and advancement, technology, work / life balance, employee loyalty, and communications styles. Each generation has a distinct set of values, attitudes, behaviors, habits and motivational buttons. Each generational era profoundly influences one's communication style, viewpoints on work habits, and how one contributes in team settings. However, managing "generational diversity" is only partly about knowledge and mostly about communication! Once we know, we can look at how we communicate. Let's first identify some of the differences in values to recognize the potential for hot buttons.

- **Matures**: Recognition of respect for their experience, value placed on history & tradition, job security and stability, and clearly defined rules and policies
- **Boomers**: Ability to "shine" and "be a star", make a contribution, fit in with company vision and mission, and team approach

- **Generation X:** Dynamic young leaders, cutting edge systems and technology, forward-thinking company, flexibility in scheduling, and input valued on merit, not age or seniority
- **Generation Y:** Want to be challenged, strong, ethical leaders and mentors, treated with respect in spite of their age, and social network

The biggest differences and challenges lie between the traditionals/boomers and the Gen Xers. The reasons come from how they've been influenced.

Boomers, springing from the post WWII boom that saw the world change forever in terms of opportunity, development, increased mechanization and technology, embraced an optimism that anything is possible with hard work, dedication and commitment. While growth and creativity have been greatly encouraged in the last fifty years, the displays of dedication and hard work were often not rewarded in times of corporate downsizing and fluctuating markets. Gen Xers quickly learned that the long hours and competitive rise to the top demonstrated by their parents did not yield the kind of stability and flexibility desired. Instead, they learned to be self-reliant, putting themselves first in terms of education, opportunity, and loyalty as well as balance between work and life. Gen Yers (Millennials) now embrace a drive to the top similar to the boomers but with much higher expectations for diversity in the workplace along with access to fair and respectful work environments, balanced with meaningful and self-fulfilling work AND fun.

What are the options available to today's workplace leaders given these generational differences? Today's leaders, human resource professionals, and conflict management specialists have the opportunity to enhance workplace effectiveness by employing the following strategies:

- allow choices
- openly explore ideas
- raise others' awareness of generational diversity
- choose language that recognizes unique perspectives
- balance between traditional procedures and opportunities that support flexibility and creativity

The existence of effective relationships is the essence of organizational achievement of real power, success, and creative energy. Relationships, their patterns and the capacity to form them, are critically more important in today's work world than tasks, functions, roles, and positions (Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*). Today's cross-generational manager needs to spend more time talking with individuals to find out their needs, wants, and preferred communication styles. Exceptional listening skills, flexible styles, change and conflict management (not avoidance) and openness to continual learning are the hallmark features of today's leadership.

Meeting each generation with what its members value most is accomplishable through communication strategies that recognize and acknowledge the contributions they bring forth:

Matures

- Your experience is respected
- It is valuable to hear what has worked in the past

Boomers

- You are valuable, worthy
- Your contribution is unique and important

Gen Xers

- Let's explore some options outside of the box
- Your technical expertise is a big asset

Millennials

- You will be collaborating with other bright, creative people
- You have really rescued this situation with your commitment

The bottom line: responding to generational differences and conflicts requires the same skills needed to deal with other types of diversity issues. These skills involve:

- Awareness

- Communication
- Ability to manage conflict productively

Loyalty is essential to all generations but in different ways. Build in meaningful opportunities, both internal and external, that bring out the best in individuals. So can it REALLY work? Four Generations...one workplace...The First Time EVER! The answer is a resounding **YES!**

About the Author:

Debra Dupree is a mediator, conflict coach, trainer and therapist. She has long been involved in conflict resolution strategies to workplace disability management issues and Title VII protections, employment law, and employee relations. As founder of her own firm, [Relationships That Matter](#), LLC, she is also strategically aligned with [The Champion Services Group](#) as a Sr. Consultant and as an Adjunct Professor with National University's certificate programs in alternative dispute resolution.

Debra served as a **Tri-Chair** (2005-2007) for ACR's [WORKPLACE Section](#), is currently on the Section's Advisory Council, and a member in good standing with ACR's Family Section. She presently serves as **President** (2008) for [ADR-San Diego](#) and was recognized in 2004 by the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board for her contributions as a Senior Mediator in the Shared Neutral Program.