

Ascend

Where your work meets your life.

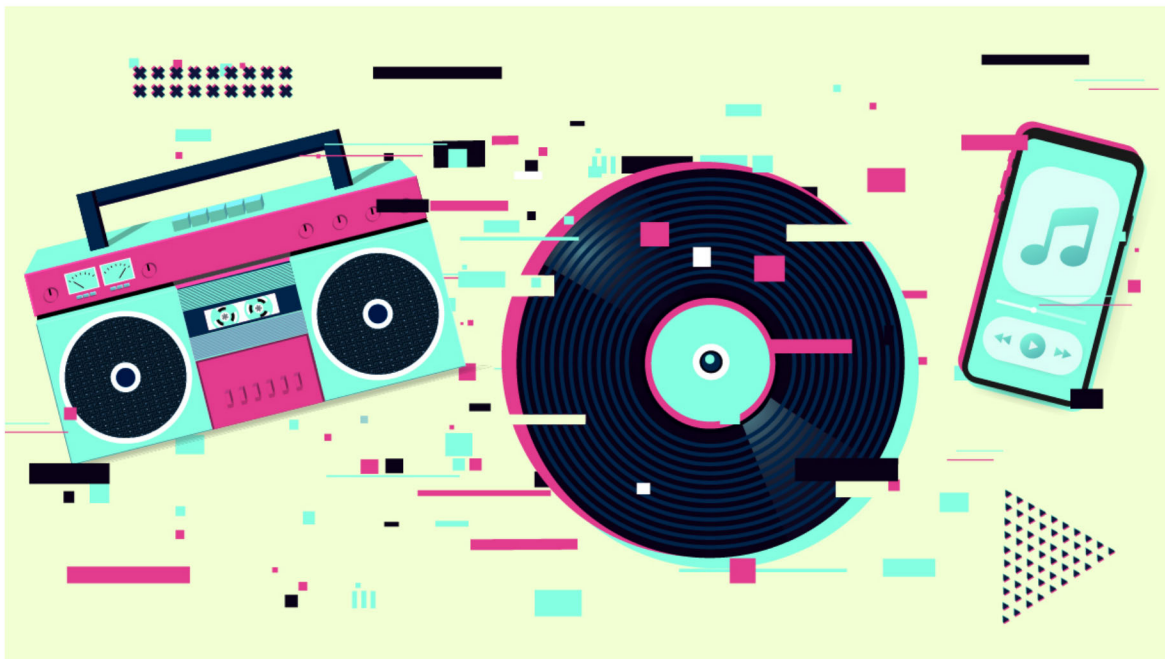
**Harvard
Business
Review**

Age And Generational Issues

How to Manage a Multi-Generational Team

by Emma Waldman

August 31, 2021



HBR Staff/Getty Images/Oleksandr Hruts/Aleksandra Sokolovskaja

Summary. Today's workforce includes members of five different generations. This presents managers leading multigenerational teams with many opportunities —

and even more challenges. When we fundamentally can't relate to someone because they are so much... [more](#)

Ascend

Where your work meets your life. See more from Ascend here.

A few weeks ago, my dad and I had a discussion about respect in the workplace. We talked about how difficult it is to manage across generations when you are much older or younger than your team.

My dad didn't understand why his direct reports responded to his voicemails with emails instead of calling him back, whereas I didn't understand his preference for phone calls when the same information could be communicated via text.

Our disagreement shed light on a challenge that is common in today's workforce: learning how to collaborate with and appreciate the unique preferences, habits, and behaviors of colleagues who grew up in different times than ourselves.

The sad truth is that age gaps between managers (like my dad) and their team members (like me) can hinder our mutual respect for one another.

When we fundamentally can't relate to someone due to generational gaps, we often resort to using harmful stereotypes and blame solvable problems on each other instead of working to understand — and value — the differences that distance us. Our job performance and productivity are negatively impacted as a result.

To get guidance around how we can move past this and realize the many benefits of cross-generational work, I spoke with Professor Megan Gerhardt, director of leadership development at Miami University's Farmer School of Business and author of *Gentelligence*.

1) Challenge harmful stereotypes.

For the first time in modern history, there are five generations in the workforce. Apparently, we each exhibit unique personality traits and values.

- The Silent Generation (born 1925 to 1945; loyal but traditional)
- Baby boomers (1946 to 1964; collaborative but averse to change)
- Generation X (1965 to 1980; independent but bleak)
- Millennials (1981 to 2000; driven but entitled)
- Generation Z (2001 to 2020; progressive but disloyal)

These generalizations are, for the most part, problematic. Gerhardt told me the first step to overcoming age bias, and developing a mutual respect for one another, is to debunk them.

“Many of the generational conversations in the news today rely on false stereotypes and clickbait headlines, rather than taking the time to understand the important differences that are a part of our generational identities,” Gerhardt said. When we assign negative or overarching characteristics to each group, we imply that their values, beliefs, and goals are fundamentally flawed.

There is value in educating ourselves on the realities different generations have faced throughout their careers.

In reality, what we value as individuals is often influenced by events completely out of our control, dictated by our experiences at the beginnings of our lives and our careers. Each generation entered the workforce under certain conditions, which ultimately helped to shape our sense of purpose, our preferences, and our drivers for success.

For example, a recent college graduate, who started their first job during the pandemic and is accustomed to a remote setup, might put a high value on flexible work and prefer to communicate digitally. On the other hand, someone who entered the workforce in 2008, during the Great Recession, might value job security and routine, and prefer to work a predictable nine-to-five schedule, five days a week.

The problem is that age stereotypes go a step too far in assuming that every person has reacted to the milestones of their generation in the same ways. They are assumptions, often false, and can make workers feel siloed and judged before they even step into the office. This, in turn, affects performance. A 2017 study published by the NIH found that, “employees threatened by age-based stereotypes concerning work performance are less able to commit to their current job, less oriented toward long-term professional goals, and are ultimately less adjusted psychologically.”

While Gerhardt said that we should avoid making assumptions about people based solely on their age, there is value in educating ourselves on the realities different generations have faced throughout their careers. Understanding these nuances is essential to accepting one another — and is even more important for those in managerial roles (like my dad) and those who strive to be leaders one day (like me).

2) Communicate your preferences openly.

“Just as we wouldn’t expect our actions to be accurately understood or universally agreed with when we travel to other places,” Gerhardt said, “we shouldn’t expect our reasons for approaching our work in particular ways to be clear to people who have grown up and started their professional lives at different points in time.”

Instead, we should be talking openly to one another about our preferences, particularly when it comes to methods of communication. Managers of multiple generations can set the example by helping their team members find ways to clearly communicate with each other. If you have direct reports who are both older and younger than you, ask your employees what kind of interactions feel most comfortable to them.

Take me and my dad: He has decades of work experience under his belt and understands that talking to customers and colleagues on the phone and meeting with them in-person is important when building personable, long-lasting relationships. I, however, spent my formative years communicating through text messages and emails. I find the format quicker and more efficient (similar to 65% of Generation Z).

Just as there is no right or wrong work style, there is no right or wrong method of communication. Show your direct reports that you are willing to step out of your comfort zone and meet them halfway. Compromise is key to finding a non-judgmental middle ground, so try to think of your differences as learning opportunities.

For example, you might switch between methods of communication depending on the goal of the conversation. Exchange emails for a faster, more efficient approach, but meet face-to-face when the conversation calls for added intimacy and relationship-building.



Sign Up

3) Respect boundaries.

A wider representation of age groups at work has introduced new beliefs and values into the office. Taboo topics of the past, like diversity and inclusion, mental health, and gender roles, are becoming widely discussed in professional settings.

Just like an individual's race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, dis/ability, class, personality, and educational background will impact how comfortable they are talking about these topics at work, so will their age and their upbringing.

Gerhardt explained that research has shown “younger generations tend to be more progressive about social issues, as well as more comfortable talking about topics that were previously considered taboo in the workplace.” She told me, “The willingness of younger employees to accept and normalize the discussion of these important topics is resulting in a decrease in the stigma that has traditionally surrounded talking about them at work.”

It's also important to keep in mind that how your employees *feel* about these topics is going to vary.

It's not necessary for every person to agree, but it is important for them to understand why the organization places a high value on the issues being discussed.

Particularly when it comes to race and gender, one social trends report from Pew Research conducted in 2020 shows that there are some measurable patterns around the beliefs different generations hold in the U.S. “When it comes to race relations,” the report states, “Gen Zers and millennials are about equally likely to say that Blacks are treated less fairly than whites in this country. Roughly two-thirds of Gen Zers and millennials say this, compared with about half of Gen Xers and boomers and smaller shares among The Silent Generation.”

Additionally, according to the same report, “About six in 10 Gen Zers (59%) say forms or online profiles should include additional gender options, compared with half of millennials, about four in 10 Gen Xers and boomers (40% and 37%, respectively), and roughly a third of those in The Silent Generation (32%).”

The most challenging feat you may face as a manager of both older and younger employees will involve respecting the varied boundaries of each of your team members while upholding your own set of values, boundaries, and ground rules.

In order to create the kind of environment in which every person feels willing to ask for help, share their best ideas, and take risks, Gerhardt said you need to prioritize psychological safety. “People come to these conversations with different experiences and varying levels of willingness to engage,” she told me. “The role of the manager is to provide ongoing opportunities to have these discussions — not to force people to a particular point of view or to check a box.”

She added, “When navigating these kinds of challenging topics, it can be helpful for managers to ground the conversation in a discussion of how the issues are relevant to the organization’s values and overall mission.”

For example, when it comes to diversity and inclusion, there are important legal, moral, and strategic perspectives to consider. It's not necessary for every person in the organization to agree or share the same priorities, but it is important for them to understand why the organization places a high value on the issues being discussed.

Gerhardt suggested facilitating discussions about the shared norms that work best for your team — rather than defaulting to the way things have always been done or favoring the preferences of one age group over another. You can also try to create change at the organizational level by talking to your employer about developing initiatives that encourage both older and younger generations to connect and share their expertise, such as mutual mentoring programs.

4) Don't play favorites.

Finally, to create a culture in which people of all ages can be vulnerable and learn from one another, Gerhardt advised that managers create an inclusive decision-making process that encourages open dialogue.

During meetings, go the extra mile to make sure every voice is heard and considered. While this is typically a good practice, those leading multi-generational teams may face unique challenges. For instance, one study of more than 6,000 millennials revealed that 50% of participants questioned their capacity for success in the workplace, making them twice as worried about their skillsets than older generations.

In my experience, these fears can result in the desire to prove ourselves, especially in group settings. Myself and my peers often share our opinions and perspectives without necessarily being asked to. I have also seen our desire to be heard misinterpreted as arrogance by more seasoned workers and managers. Members of older generations are sometimes quick to overlook us, citing our lack of expertise.

Instead of perpetuating an “us versus them” dynamic at work, let’s change the narrative moving forward.

If you notice these patterns unfolding in your own meeting, or you notice yourself enacting these biases, change your approach. The next time you become frustrated with your younger employees for being outspoken, catch yourself. Rather than shutting them down, give them space to respectfully demonstrate their abilities by asking questions and encouraging them to weigh in. Likewise, if an older worker is quick to dismiss a younger team member, address it by suggesting the younger team member speak up in the moment. For example, you might say, “Michelle, did you have an idea you wanted to add?”

Follow up with the older team member privately and remind them that even if someone has less experience, their insights are welcome and valuable. This advice goes both ways. If you see a younger team member making assumptions about their more seasoned colleague, ask them to change their behavior. Remind your team that diversity of thought helps increase the scale of new insights and allows organizations to make better decisions and complete tasks more successfully.

“When we move away from the mindset that generational interactions are a win-lose proposition, the possibility emerges that intergenerational collaborations can result in greater learning and success for all involved,” Gerhardt said. “Every generation has something to teach and something to learn. We all have experiences and knowledge to share.”

Instead of perpetuating an “us versus them” dynamic at work, let’s change the narrative moving forward.

There are ways to bridge the generational gap. It begins with communication, humility, and a deeper curiosity about the strengths and limitations of our team members and ourselves. It begins with the acceptance that we are fundamentally different people with equally valuable insights to offer.

It ends with respect and understanding. It ends with progress.

EW

Emma Waldman is an Associate Editor at Harvard Business Review.

Recommended For You

Managing People from 5 Generations



Generational Differences At Work Are Small. Thinking They're Big Affects Our Behavior



Embracing Generational Differences: Our Favorite Reads



Is Generational Prejudice Seeping into Your Workplace?

