



Ten Truths for Working Across Generations

“You can work with – or manage – people from all generations effectively without selling your soul on eBay or pulling your hair out on a daily basis,” says Jennifer Deal from the Center for Creative Leadership in her new book entitled “Retiring the Generation Gap.” Look past the stereotypes and learn these 10 truths about generational conflicts at work, gleaned from a seven-year CCL study.

1. All generations have similar values.

Many people talk about enormous differences in values between older and younger people as if these differences were an established fact. The most striking result from CCL’s research is how similar the generations are in their values priorities. Family is the value chosen most frequently by people of all generations. Other values named to the top 10 by all generations included integrity, achievement,

love, competence, happiness, self respect, wisdom, balance and responsibility. So why do people at work think the values of different generations are so different? Because even though the values are the same, the behaviors that go along with those values may be very different.

2. Everyone wants respect.

We often hear that younger people are disrespectful of older employees and people in authority. We also hear complaints that older people show no respect for younger talent and ideas. The reality is that everyone wants respect – they just don’t define it the same way. Older people primarily talked about respect in terms of “give my opinions the weight I believe they deserve” and “do what I tell you to do.” Younger respondents characterized

“Pay attention to what I have to say.”

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This article was provided by the Center for Creative Leadership – a nonprofit, educational institution with international reach. Ranked among the world’s top institutions for executive education by the *Financial Times*, the Center annually serves leaders from more than 2,000 organizations – both public and private, including two-thirds of the Fortune 500.

RETIRING THE GENERATION GAP

GENERATIONAL CONFLICT: A MATTER OF CLOUT

Friction, discomfort and outright conflict make for a tough – and ineffective – work environment. With five generations mixing it up in the workplace, many leaders and human resource pros assume the generation gap is a key cause of trouble. In fact, conflict has less to do with age or generational differences than it does with clout: who has it and who wants it.

Clout includes control, power, authority and position.

“The generation gap is blamed for conflicts that really have nothing to do with fundamental generational differences,” says CCL’s Jennifer Deal in her new book entitled “Retiring the Generation Gap.” “Most conflicts have everything to do with the natural desire of older people to maintain their clout and the desire of younger people to increase their clout.”

Conflict often stems from one group’s notion that it gets to make the rules and that the other group has to follow these rules. If the rules are being challenged, so too is the superior position and stature of the people who believe they are the rule makers. In most organizations, older people have set the standard; as long as the younger generation complies, no gap or conflict exists! But of course, younger people bring their own views and experiences to the job and, therefore, challenge the status quo.

“Positional authority assigned by the organization only sets the groundwork for who has clout and who doesn’t,” Deal notes. “People then use other attributes – age, political acumen, organizational tenure – to increase their clout within the organization.”

As organizations increasingly promote younger people over older people, older people naturally work to maintain the balance of power – in their favor – by using their greater age and experience. Fear of potential loss of clout shows itself in many ways: complaints about lack of respect, dismissing the ideas of younger people, over-valuing experience, and so on.

In an effort to increase their clout, younger generations may complain about not being taken seriously or may criticize older ones for being resistant to new ideas or unwilling to embrace technology. Others claim that older people are “out of touch” and therefore less attuned to the client.

Experience Isn't Everything

Experience is perceived by both people and by organizations as valuable because it is believed to be synonymous with knowledge. But experience itself isn’t critically important. “The value of experience is based on what people do with it,” says Deal. What is important is how one processes an experience and what knowledge one gains from it. Just having lived through experiences doesn’t necessarily make someone more knowledgeable or more successful.



This article is adapted from *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground* by Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D. (Jossey-Bass/CCL, 2006). Hear Dr. Deal speak on generational issues at the Solutions Summit on May 8.

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respect more as “listen to me” and “pay attention to what I have to say.”

3. Trust matters.

The different generations have similar levels of trust in their organization and in upper management – they don't trust them much. People of all generations and at all levels trust the people they work with directly (bosses, peers and direct reports) more than they trust their organizations. And people trust their organization more than they trust upper management.

4. People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy.

What do different generations expect from their leaders? It turns out that age does not appear to matter much. People of all generations want their leaders to be credible, to be trusted, to listen well, to be farsighted and to be encouraging.

5. Organizational politics is a problem – no matter how old or young you are.

Everyone who isn't winning at the political game dislikes it. People from all generations are concerned about the effects of organizational politics on their careers, on being recognized for the work they are doing and for getting access to the resources they need to do their job. Even if they don't like it, employees know that political skills are a critical component in being able to move up and be effective at higher levels of management.

6. No one really likes change.

The stereotype is that older people dislike anything about their workplace being changed and that younger people love change. These assumptions are not true. In general, people from all generations are uncomfortable with change. Only 12 people in the study said they actually liked change! Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it is all about how much one has to gain or lose with the change.

7. Loyalty depends on the context, not on the generation.

It's often said that young people are no longer loyal to their organizations in the way that young people were in the past. Our research shows that younger generations are not more likely to job-hop than older generations were at the same age. In addition, people of all generations don't necessarily think that being loyal in the old sense is good for their careers. The perception that older people are more loyal is, in fact, associated with context, not age. For example, people who are closer to retirement are more likely to want to stay with the same organization for the rest of their working life, and people higher in an organization work more hours than do people lower in the organization.

8. It's as easy to retain a young person as it is to retain an older one – if you do the right things.

Just about everyone feels overworked and underpaid. People of all

generations have the same ideas about what their organization can do to retain them. They want:

- » Opportunities to advance within their organization
- » Learning and development
- » Respect and recognition
- » Better quality of life
- » Better compensation

9. Everyone wants to learn – more than just about anything else.

Learning and development were among the issues brought up the most frequently by people of all generations. Everyone wants to learn – people of all generations want to make sure they have the training necessary to do their current job well. They are also interested in what they need to be learning to get to the next level in their organization. Five developmental areas have made it onto every generation's list: leadership, skills training in their field of expertise, problem solving and decision making, team building and communication skills.

10. Almost everyone wants a coach.

We've heard that younger people are constantly asking for feedback and can't get enough of it. We've also heard that older people don't want any feedback at all. According to our research, everyone wants to know how he or she is doing and wants to learn how to do better. Feedback can come in many forms, and people of all generations would love to receive it from a coach.

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- » Are, as a result of the three factors above, challenged by ambiguity and how to figure out on their own how things fit together.

All the above further underscores the need for those of us with life experience to really coach and mentor Millennials to help them contend with a world that operates very differently from the educational environment with which they are so familiar. Fortunately Millennials

want to be coached and mentored by experts.

Accepting the validity of the four unchanging things does not mean lowering expectations. What it does mean is that we realize that Millennials cannot be younger versions of us nor do we have to

become older versions of them. We are all products of our upbringing.

Therefore we will work most effectively together if we acknowledge our differences and similarities and partner together to make the present and the future a place where we all want to be.



W. Stanton Smith is the author of the new book, “Decoding Generational Differences: Fact, Fiction ... or Should We Just Get Back to Work.” Don't miss his sessions on mentoring and reverse mentoring and mass career customization on May 8 at the Solutions Summit.