



MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Communication Between Generation - Conflict Prevention and Management

Ballyhoura Development CLG



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Introduction

This chapter introduces the three key themes that emerged as the most insightful findings from our cross-generational research on Intergenerational Communication and Conflict in the workplace across five European countries. Drawing on the diverse perspectives of four generations in the workforce, our study revealed that workplace communication and conflict are shaped by three interrelated themes: Communication Channel Confusion and Response Expectations, Identity and Value-Based Conflict, and The Role of Open Dialogue and Social Interaction in Conflict Prevention.

Firstly, **Communication Channel Confusion and Response Expectations** reflect the growing complexity of workplace communication in hybrid and digital environments. Employees often face uncertainty about which platforms to use, how quickly to respond, and how to interpret tone and urgency—issues that are further complicated by generational differences in communication preferences.

Secondly, **Identity and Value-Based Conflict** arises when individuals experience tension due to differences in personal beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or social identities. These conflicts are particularly pronounced in diverse and multi-generational teams, where varying ethical standards, cultural norms, and lived experiences can lead to misunderstanding or exclusion.

Finally, our research highlights the importance of **Open Dialogue and Social Interaction** as a proactive strategy for conflict prevention. Opportunities for informal connection, active listening, and inclusive conversation were consistently identified as key to building trust, fostering empathy, and reducing the likelihood of interpersonal conflict.

Each of the three sections below each offer deeper analysis, practical insights, and evidence-based recommendations for improving workplace relationships.



Communication Channel Confusion and Response Expectations in the Workplace

Introduction

Due to different communication channels used by different generations miscommunication can occur in the workplace. These misunderstandings can lead to problems for team dynamics which manifest as frustration and tension between generations, reduced trust in colleagues' reliability, demotivation and breakdown in collaborations.

Operational Consequences arising from missed communication include missed deadlines due to overlooked or delayed responses, duplicated work where task updates aren't seen and project delays from misaligned time expectations.

In general, Gen Z & Millennials expect fast replies, often using instant messaging, however older colleagues may not perceive chat-based messages as urgent or official. Younger workers interpret delays as lack of engagement or respect. This presents a challenge to workplaces where colleagues from different generations work together.

Issues and Opportunities arising from Communication Channel Preferences

Our research shows many commonalities across the five participating countries in relation to generational preferences for different modes of communication.

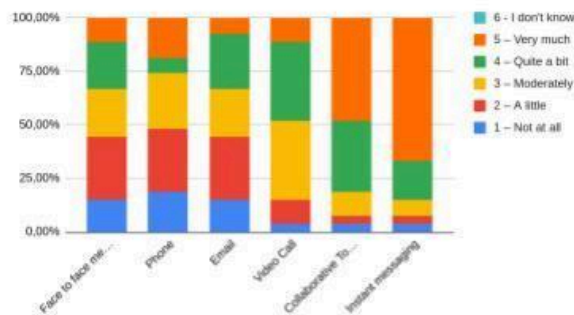
Millennials & Gen Z prefer instant messaging, texts, and social media and they gravitate toward visual platforms. However, they often lack confidence in face-to-face professional communication. Conversely Boomers & Gen X prefer to communicate face-to-face, by phone, and by email and are less likely to use instant messaging or social media.

The following charts illustrate how each generation ranks each of the following five modes of communication in importance

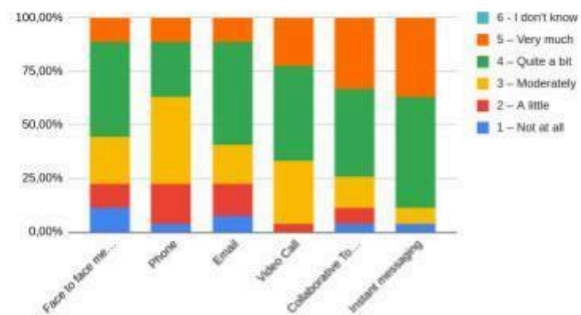
- Face to Face Meeting
- Phone
- Email
- Video Call
- Collaborative Tools
- Instant Messaging

Gen Z

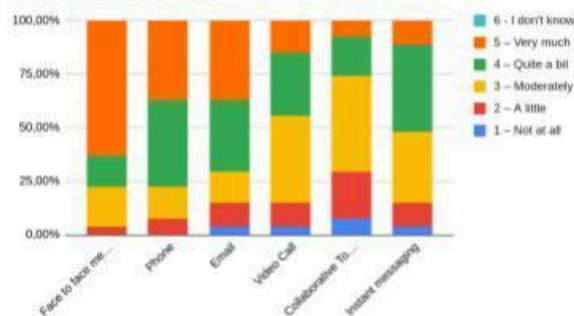
GEN Z ABOUT GEN Z



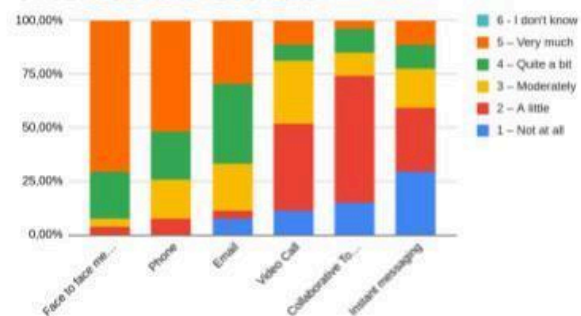
GEN Z ABOUT MILLENNIALS



GEN Z ABOUT GEN X



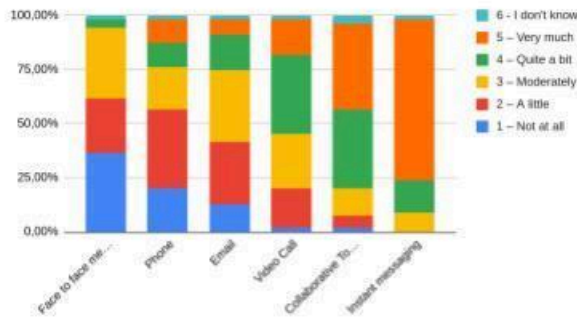
GEN Z ABOUT BABY BOOMERS



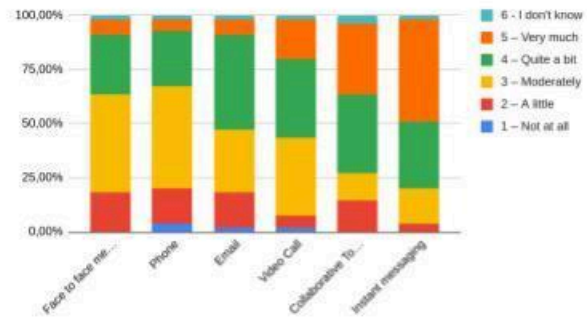
Gen Z places great importance on instant messaging and digital collaboration tools followed by video calls, with less importance attributed to traditional modes like meetings, email and telephone. They see Boomers as reliant on face to face meetings and telephone calls and see Millennials and Gen X having a balanced use of all modes of communication. Instances of misunderstanding reported include Gen Z sending instant messages and not getting a response from older workers, and older workers being uncomfortable with Gen z attending online meetings without the use of a camera.

Millennials

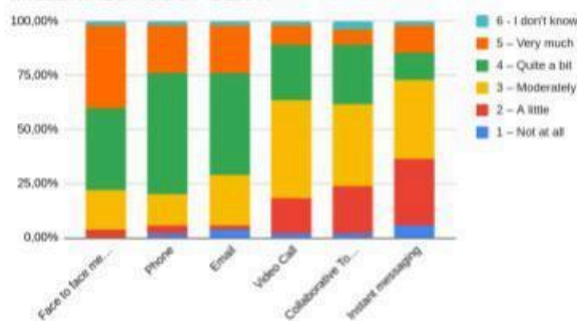
MILLENNIALS ABOUT GEN Z



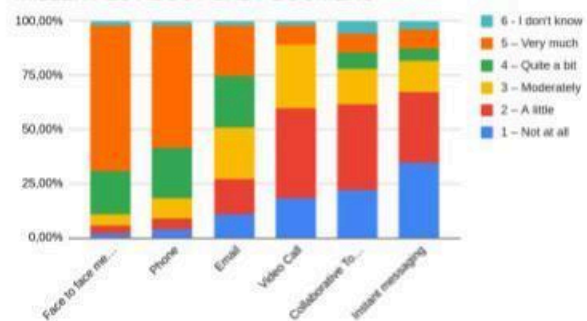
MILLENNIALS ABOUT MILLENNIALS



MILLENNIALS ABOUT GEN X



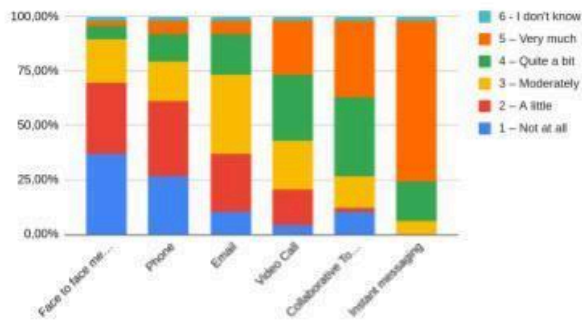
MILLENNIALS ABOUT BABY BOOMERS



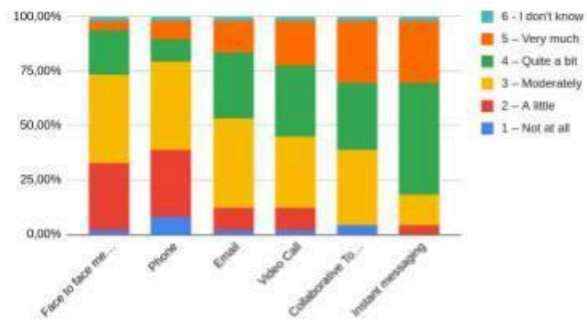
Millennials occupy a middle ground in the area of communication with a balanced use of digital and traditional communication tools. They see Gen Z as highly digital and visually oriented, Gen X as more traditional and Boomers as very attached to traditional communication in the form of meetings and phone calls. Millennials reported instances where Boomers did not act on plans agreed during a phone call and insisted on having an in-person meeting on the same issue.

Gen X

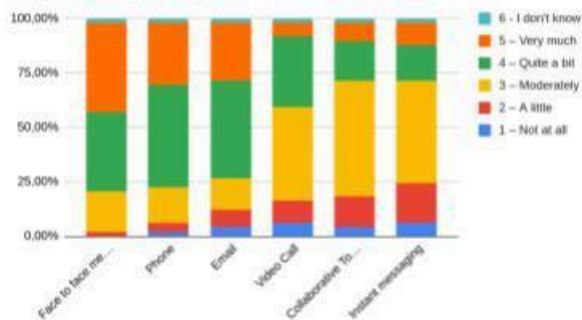
GEN X ABOUT GEN Z



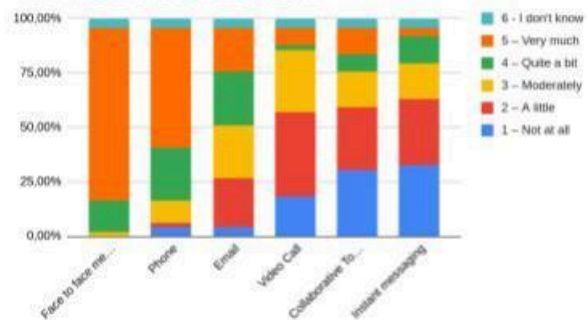
GEN X ABOUT MILLENNIALS



GEN X ABOUT GEN X



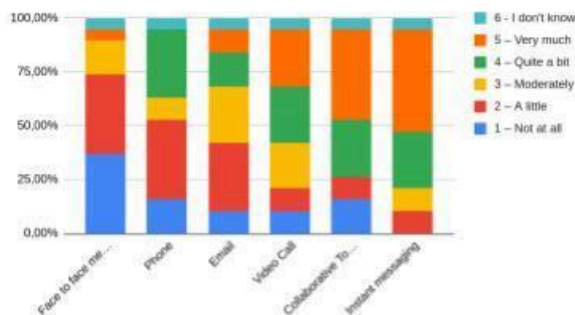
GEN X ABOUT BABY BOOMERS



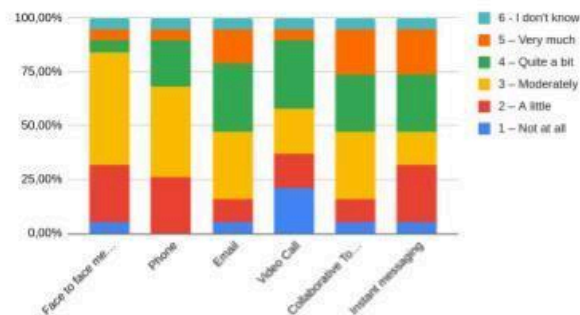
Gen X have an overall preference for email, phone and face to face communication, while also relying on video calls and collaborative tools for remote work. They perceive younger generations as more digitally dependent and Boomers as traditional communicators. Gen X survey participants have reported missed messages on collaborative platforms resulting in inadvertent delays in their work.

Baby Boomers

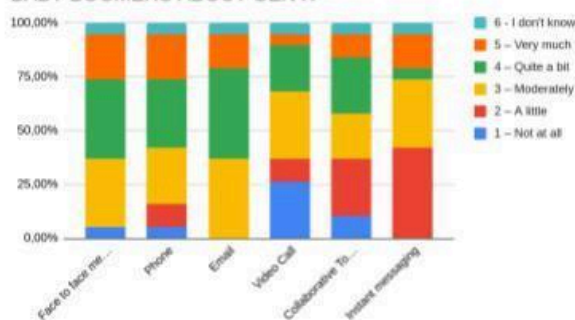
BABY BOOMERS ABOUT GEN Z



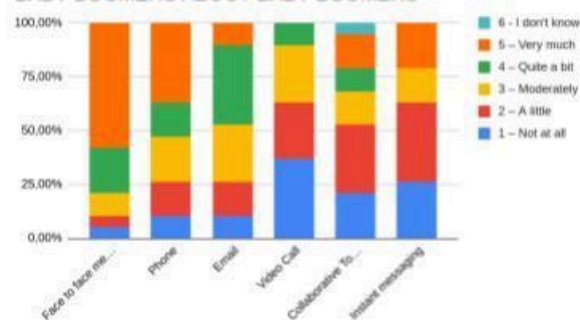
BABY BOOMERS ABOUT MILLENNIALS



BABY BOOMERS ABOUT GEN X



BABY BOOMERS ABOUT BABY BOOMERS



Baby Boomers assign high importance to face to face meetings and phone calls and less importance to digital communication. They acknowledge a stronger predisposition to digital communication among younger co-workers. Survey respondents reported issues where younger workers use informal instant messaging where they feel more formal communication is needed.

The aggregated results of our survey highlight a mismatch in digital tool usage between generations. This can be a barrier to effective communication and hinder cross generational collaboration. However, in organisations where there is a culture of openness this digital communication gap can provide an opportunity for cross generational collaboration. Younger workers frequently encourage older colleagues to familiarise themselves with instant messaging, social media and collaborative platforms.

There is also evidence of older generations taking on mentorship roles, teaching soft skills and encouraging verbal communication among younger colleagues. Gen Z and Millennial workers often seek guidance on workplace etiquette and frequently wait for older colleagues to set the tone of meetings. Younger generations can also mentor older colleagues in the area of politically correct communication.



In addition to communication channel preferences, other factors such as level of formality, cultural differences, the nuances of indirect communication, nonverbal cues, speed of response and the perceived tone of verbal and written communication are significant across all countries. It is evident that there is no “one size fits all” approach to aligning expectations around response times and employers have to take a multi-faceted approach.



Identity and Value based conflict in the workplace

Introduction

In order to pre-empt conflict, employers need to be aware of the issues most likely to cause conflict and the relevant strategies and tools to resolve conflict when it arises. The results of our survey show that workers across all generations were in broad agreement around the most frequent causes of conflict in the workplace, ranking potential sources of discord as below

1. Identity based conflict
2. Value Based Conflict
3. Behaviour Based Conflict
4. Organisational Culture

Identity Based Conflicts

As workplaces become more diverse in ethnicity, culture and age the risk of identity and value-based conflict increases. Our survey shows that these two factors are rated by each of the four generations as the most likely causes of disagreement in the workplace. Examples from our survey include:

Cultural Identity Conflict

In multicultural European workplaces, employees from minority backgrounds may experience alienation or exclusion due to differing cultural norms or communication styles. For instance, a worker from a minority ethnic group may struggle to connect with colleagues who share different cultural references, leading to feelings of isolation and reduced participation

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conflict

Conflicts can arise when employees face intolerance or discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. In some European contexts, despite legal protections, LGBTQ+ employees may encounter microaggressions, exclusion from informal networks, or inappropriate jokes, creating a hostile work environment

Generational Identity Conflict

Workplaces with diverse age groups often experience tension due to differing values and work styles. For example, younger employees may prioritize flexibility and digital communication, while older colleagues may value traditional hierarchies and face-to-face interaction. These differences can lead to misunderstandings and reduced collaboration

Professional vs. Personal Identity Conflict



Employees may feel pressured to conform to organizational norms that conflict with their personal values. For example, someone who values ethical transparency may feel conflicted working in a sales-driven culture that emphasizes aggressive tactics

Value Based Conflicts

Ethical disagreements – For example, one employee may believe in strict adherence to rules, while another prioritizes flexibility or personal judgment, leading to conflict over decision-making.

Work-life balance vs. productivity – A team member who values personal time may clash with a colleague who prioritizes long hours and constant availability.

Diversity and inclusion perspectives – Differences in views on cultural sensitivity, gender roles, or inclusion practices can lead to tension, especially if one person feels their values are being dismissed or undermined.

Approach to leadership or teamwork – Some employees may value hierarchical structures and clear authority, while others prefer collaborative or flat team dynamics.

Environmental or social responsibility – Conflicts may arise when employees disagree on the importance of sustainability or corporate social responsibility in business decisions.

Innovation vs. tradition – A younger employee may push for new technologies or methods, while a more experienced colleague may value established practices and caution.

Research shows that open communication channels enable individuals to express concerns constructively and listen actively, which helps de-escalate the tensions described before they evolve into deeper conflicts. This correlates with our research outlined above where open dialogue was rated as the most important tool for conflict prevention and management. Moreover, communication strategies such as active listening, feedback mechanisms, and mediation contribute to stronger interpersonal relationships and team cohesion, ultimately enhancing organizational performance. When organizations prioritize these tools and strategies as a cornerstone of their conflict resolution framework, they not only mitigate identify and value- based clashes but also cultivate a more harmonious and productive work environment.



The Role of Open Dialogue and Social Interaction in Conflict Prevention in the Workplace

Introduction

Our research results show that each generation rates itself as competent in various conflict prevention and management tools. The consensus across all generations was that “A Culture of Open Dialogue” is the most important factor in preventing conflict and in managing and addressing conflict when it does arise in the workplace. Regular Social Interaction was also highly rated as a tool for managing conflict in the workplace. All generations rated “Formal Policies” as being ineffective in the area of conflict management, reflecting a propensity to exhaust all other options before instigating formal procedures. Where respondents described being involved in conflict in the workplace they felt equally supported by colleagues of all generations.

Conflict Prevention Tools

Each participant in our survey rated the effectiveness of five different Conflict Prevention and Management Strategies for their generation and for all other generations. This facilitated a comparative analysis of self-perception versus perception by others for all four generations in the context of conflict management.

Survey results show that preferences for each of the tools below to be broadly similar across generations, with a Culture of Open Dialogue being the preferred strategy across all generations and Formal Conflict Resolution Policies to be the least preferred option. The strategies and tools were rated 1 – 5 as below

1. Culture of Open Dialogue
2. Regular Social Interaction
3. Regular Customised Feedback
4. Intergenerational Teams
5. Formal Conflict Resolution Policies

Participants also related real life experience of involvement in conflict, either as an instigator or a mediator.

Self-Perception v Perception by others in Conflict Management

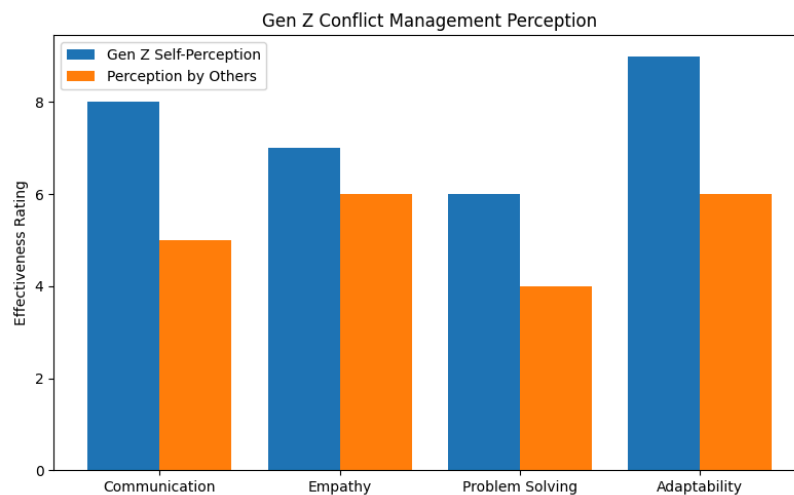
The results of our survey indicate that while members of a generation may believe that their strengths and weaknesses lie in one particular area of conflict management this opinion is not necessarily held by co-workers of a different generation.

Gen Z and Millennials rated their effectiveness at conflict management significantly higher than the score attributed to them by all other generations while Boomers scored themselves lower than the perception of them held by other generations. Gen Z's self-perception was mostly in line with expectations of the other generations.

Gen Z

Gen Z rated Open Dialogue, Regular Social Interaction and Customised Feedback as being the most effective means of conflict prevention and management for their generation while scoring Customised Feedback as moderately effective, intergenerational teams as somewhat useful and formal policies as the least effective. All other generations agreed that Open Dialogue and Social Interaction were most effective means of conflict prevention for this generation.

Gen Z self-assessed their skills in communication, empathy, problem solving and adaptability much higher than the rating given to them by other generations, most notably in the area of adaptability.



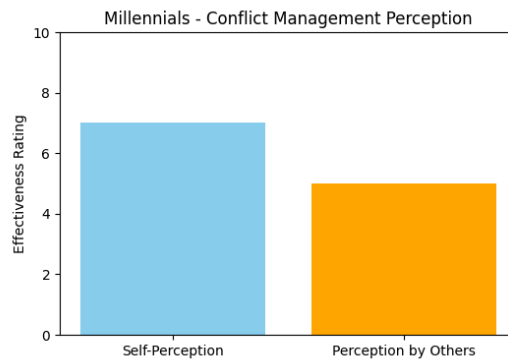
Millennials

Millennials rated the various conflict prevention and resolution tools in similar terms to Gen Z. Open Dialogue, Regular Social Interaction and Customised Feedback were considered the most effective means of conflict prevention and management for their generation while Customised Feedback was rated as moderately effective, intergenerational teams as somewhat useful and formal policies as the least effective.

Gen Z perceived Millennials as especially effective at using Open Dialogue and Social Interaction to prevent conflict. Baby boomers saw Millennials as more competent than them

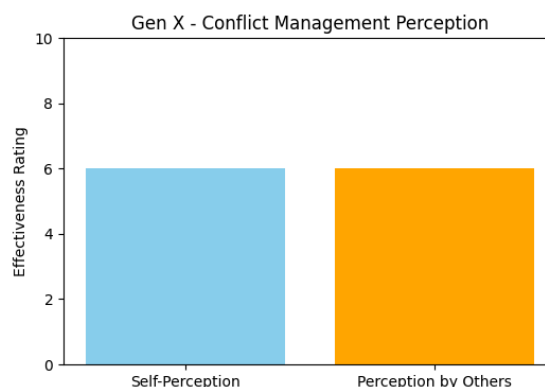
in Open Dialogue, Social Interaction and Feedback but less effective in participating in multi-generational teams and in the use of formal conflict resolution policies.

Millennials rated their overall conflict management skills at 7 out of 10, while the consensus among other generations was that millennials possessed average skills in this area at point 5 on the scale.



Gen X

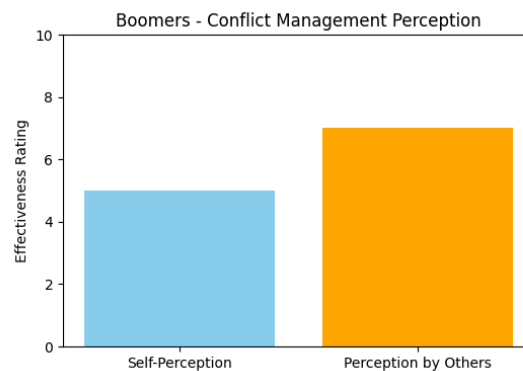
Gen x rated each conflict management tool in the same order of importance as Gen z and Millennials, once again rating A Culture of Open Dialogue as most important and formal policies as least important. Aggregated results show that Gen X's self-perception is in line with others perception. However, this masks a subtle difference where Gen Z and Millennials perceived Gen X as being slightly less effective in conflict management than themselves while Boomers rated Gen x as being more competent than their own generation.





Boomers

Boomers rated each conflict management tool in the same order of importance as the other three generations. A Culture of Open Dialogue was rated as most important with Regular Social Interaction and Regular Customised Feedback rated equally important and formal policies as least important. Gen Z perceived Boomers as being less effective at working in Intergenerational Teams and in implementing Formal Conflict Resolution Policies.





Key takeaways

Effective communication is a cornerstone of conflict prevention and resolution. Clear, respectful, and timely communication fosters mutual understanding, reduces misinterpretations, and promotes a culture of transparency and trust among employees.

Managing intergenerational workplace conflict involves

- providing clarity about appropriate communication channels
- agreeing appropriate response times
- identifying sources of conflict particularly identity and value-based conflict
- promoting open dialogue as a means of conflict prevention

Generational differences in preferred communication methods—such as Gen Z’s reliance on instant messaging versus Boomers’ preference for face-to-face interaction—can lead to misunderstandings, impact negatively on team dynamics and create operational inefficiencies.

Conflict stemming from cultural, generational, and ethical differences, are common in diverse teams and require proactive strategies to address. Across all generations, open dialogue and regular social interaction emerged as the most effective tools for conflict prevention, while formal policies were seen as less impactful. The research underscores the importance of fostering inclusive direct and indirect communication practices, encouraging mentorship across age groups, and promoting open dialogue.



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