



Book Managing the Older Employee

Overcoming the Generation Gap to Get the Most Out of Your Workplace

Casey Hawley
Adams Media , 2009
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Recommendation

Many people mistakenly assume that workplaces where Generation Xers and Yers bump up against baby boomers are bubbling cauldrons of resentment and angst. After all, aging boomers (the old guard) are on their way out. Gen XYers (the young whippersnappers) are taking over. However, leadership coach Casey Hawley’s extensive research indicates otherwise. Hawley reports that Gen XYers genuinely like boomers and vice versa. At the same time, the two generations are considerably different in their attitudes, work styles and tactics. Hawley explains how Gen XYers can close the generation gap to promote workplace efficiency and harmony. *BooksInShort* recommends Hawley’s intelligent precepts and savvy advice to Gen XY managers who supervise a workforce of baby boomers.

Take-Aways

- Baby boomers, those born between 1947 and 1965 are leaving the workplace, while Generation Xers (1966-1977) and Generation Yers (1978-1995) are taking over.
- Gen XYers and boomers have different values and work styles, but they can learn to cooperate.
- Boomers can teach Gen XY managers many valuable lessons.
- Boomers take more time to accomplish tasks than younger workers.
- Gen XYers love new technology, while boomers do not adapt to it well.
- Gen XYers think boomers’ communication style is long-winded and overly formal, while boomers think Gen XYers are rude and disrespectful.
- Gen XYers can motivate boomers through competition, rewards and recognition.
- However, Gen XYers will quickly demotivate boomers if they do not treat them with respect.
- Boomers helped usher diversity into the workplace, yet many of them must try hard to acclimate themselves to it. Diversity comes naturally to Gen XYers.
- Gen XYers are risk takers, while boomers are risk evaders.

Summary

The Changing of the Guard

The highly publicized business reign of the baby boomers is coming to an end as the boomers reach retirement age. More and more Generation X (those born between 1966 and 1977) and early Generation Y (those born between 1978 and 1995) executives now manage boomers, and this demographic trend will only increase. Young managers must tap the valuable expertise and institutional memories of the boomers before they are gone. Unfortunately, when it comes to their relationships with boomers, some younger managers are burnt out. They find boomers inflexible and resistant to change. Advanced technology often flummoxes them, which frustrates

tech-savvy younger managers. Additionally, boomers' values and behaviors are different from those of younger managers. Still, Gen XY managers value boomers because of their high standards, consistency, loyalty and hard work, as well as the vast store of knowledge they possess and are eager to share.

Boomer Values

Boomers possess an admirable work ethic. Most are punctual to a fault; they often show up early for meetings. This gets under the skin of younger managers who would rather see their employees busy with projects than sitting around a conference room.

“Is there something about a boomer employee that is driving you crazy?”

Boomers take a long-range view of things. They do not like change. They avoid risk. They abhor waste. To boomers, personal accomplishment means everything. They expect much from themselves and others. They believe strongly in personal accountability. Unlike younger employees, boomers prefer to work by themselves instead of as part of a team. They are more formal than younger workers. Because they often focus strictly on the project at hand, they may come across as insensitive to others' needs and concerns. Of course, these all are general tendencies. Some boomers exhibit exactly the opposite characteristics.

Seven Differences Between Boomers and Gen XYers

A 2008 XYBoom survey of 557 Generation X and Generation Y managers found that Gen XYers hold their boomer employees in high regard. In fact, it's a real lovefest: Boomers also like Gen XYers. Indeed, many Gen XYers wish they could find additional boomers to hire. About one-third of respondents claim that boomers are versatile when it comes to “thinking about projects.” By an overwhelming majority, 69% of respondents say that the best and most meaningful way to communicate with boomers is face to face.

“The baby boomer generation is all about accomplishment.”

The survey also revealed seven gaps between Gen XYers and boomers. Managing boomers effectively requires closing these gaps:

1. **“The Time Warp”** – Boomers and Gen XYers view time differently. Boomers are sticklers about it. They are seldom tardy for meetings, while younger employees seem to run late. Boomers often take more time to accomplish tasks and finish projects than younger workers. To impress a slow – or perhaps the correct term is “methodical” – boomer with the importance of efficiency, use a visual that compares his or her performance with that of other employees. Because boomers show up early for everything, give them jobs such as greeting customers when your doors open for business.
2. **“The Great Divide: Technology”** – Young workers grew up with advanced technology. Most are completely comfortable with even the latest high-tech innovations. Not boomers. They need time to acclimate themselves. Get their buy-in by explaining in advance the benefits that the new technology provides. You may need to train them one on one. To get them up to speed, have them teach others about new devices or software. This may sound counterintuitive, but boomers are big on personal responsibility. Many will jump at the chance to handle this high-profile task.
3. **“Communication”** – Older workers communicate differently from younger workers. Gen XYers take advantage of social networking sites, instant messaging and text messaging, and they are comfortable with asynchronous communication. They may e-mail someone at 12 p.m. and receive a reply several hours later. This drives boomers nuts. To communicate well with boomers, plan one-on-one meetings in which you can have in-depth conversations. Be prompt. Explain yourself fully. Look boomers directly in the eyes when you speak with them. Be courteous, respectful and formal. Whatever you do, don't cut them off when they are speaking. Some boomers feel that Gen XYers are too abrupt and employ a “machine-gun style” when they ask questions. To avoid a negative reaction, explain in advance that you greatly value the solid information he or she can provide, and thus may ask a lot of questions. Take the time to communicate clearly with boomers, and indeed, with everyone who works for you.
4. **“Managing, Developing and Motivating Older Workers”** – Boomers are intensely competitive. Many are workaholics. (In effect, they patented the term.) For them, getting ahead is crucial. They value recognition. Leverage these traits to motivate boomers. For example, put boomers on the prestigious accounts. Ask them to be the main speakers at important meetings. Bonuses and perks work well with boomers. Present work activities to boomers as more than mere tasks. Tie them into valued, long-term goals. Boomers began their careers when command-and-control was the default management style. Therefore, be explicit in your directions to boomers. Explain expectations and goals. Some older workers may resent having a manager who is younger than they are. Help them develop career plans. If they are close to retirement and have no need for such plans, work to keep them engaged and productive.
5. **“Trust, Respect, Etiquette and Office Politics”** – Boomers believe that their seniority should earn them respect. Fail to show this respect and you will turn them off. Boomers often resent it when younger managers make suggestions on how to handle things. Acknowledge boomers' longevity when you correct them; for example, say, “In your 20 years of experience here at Acme, has anyone ever tried it this alternative way?” Gen XYers grew up comfortable with showcasing their abilities, but boomers were taught never to do so. Therefore, be careful when you tell older workers about your personal assets and experience. It may come across as bragging. At the same time, show boomers how to market themselves. Your sense of humor is probably different from that of older workers, so be careful about making jokes at work. Also, limit profanity. Although you may be comfortable with it, boomers are not.
6. **“Managing Diversity”** – American Gen XYers grew up in a remarkably diverse society, with immigrants flooding into the country from Mexico, Eastern Europe, the Pacific rim and other parts of the world. They learned about the value of diversity starting in kindergarten. Thus, they are generally comfortable with people of various races and ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, most boomers grew up in homogeneous neighborhoods. Their first experience with diversity at work may have been with someone who was hired as a token. Thus, diversity is “not in [boomers'] corporate DNA.” Expect them to have to make a mental adjustment when they encounter a truly diverse workplace. For example, most subconsciously expect the company CEO to be a white man who looks like Harrison Ford, not a 45-year-old Asian woman. However, boomers adjust quickly. After all, they were the ones who fought hard for diversity in the first place.
7. **“Creativity, Innovation, Change and Risk”** – Younger workers value gut feelings. If something feels right, they're willing to give it a go. In contrast, boomers are not risk takers. They are less interested in gut feelings than in established track records. Only if something worked out well in the past are they inclined to try it again. Gen XYers are also big on innovation. They grew up in a world of radical technological advancement and improvement. Boomers, meanwhile, are traditionalists. To help them overcome their anxieties about nontraditional approaches, get them involved in idea-generation sessions. When they contribute an idea about a new approach, positively affirm their contribution. Assign boomers the task of scanning the competition to spot improvements in their products or operations. Send them to risk-taking seminars. If they have hiring responsibilities, make sure they do not automatically filter out innovative risk-takers.

What Boomers Can Teach You

As a manager and business professional, you can learn much from baby boomers. They are seasoned, savvy workers who have “been there, done that.” With many boomers now closing in on retirement, make sure to pick their brains before they are gone. Boomers are especially strong in these six work areas:

1. **“Social skills”** – Business depends on relationships. Unfortunately, Gen XYers grew up relating to computer and cellphone screens. They may spend their time texting back and forth with their friends or visiting online social networks, but these are tangential relationships that are once-removed from reality. Boomers, however, learned early the importance of building solid relationships based on direct, face-to-face contact. They believe cellphone calls and text messages, primary communication modes for Gen XYers, only interfere with such important encounters. Gen XYers can learn much about social skills from boomers.
2. **“Negotiating skills”** – Boomers are negotiation experts. Many were the first in their families to attend college or to achieve high-level executive or professional positions. They had to be aggressive to reach these milestones – a necessary quality for negotiators. At the same time, they understand the importance of good manners, while Gen XYers are sometimes so harried with their endless text messages, cellphone calls and Internet surfing that they forget to be polite. They are more laid back and informal than boomers, which can come across as rudeness during a tricky negotiation.
3. **“Nonverbal communication”** – This is even more powerful than verbal communication. As masters of face-to-face encounters, boomers excel at nonverbal communication. Watch the way they speak, and copy their gestures. Develop a “Mona Lisa smile” that puts your face in “neutral” when you are not speaking or otherwise engaged. This will prevent you from inadvertently revealing negative emotions such as anger or peevishness. Use a mirror to practice your smile.
4. **“Critical and strategic thinking”** – Thanks to their strong Internet experience, younger managers react quickly. This is helpful when you must pivot on a dime and immediately strike out in a new business direction. However, Gen XYers are less skilled at strategizing and long-range planning. Boomers know how to step back and think through their decisions. They are strong evaluators. They know how to assimilate information in order to come up with the best solution. To develop these skills, ask boomers to show you how they plan and strategize, and take notes.
5. **“Career endurance and investment”** – Boomers had to work their way up the corporate ladder. They developed patience. Contrast this with Bill Gates, a Boomer who was ahead of his time. He went from obscurity to wealth and fame almost overnight, becoming a “poster boy” for Gen Xers who admired his untraditional route to success. Of course, Gates is a special case. Nevertheless, Gen XYers are not patient or willing to “pay their dues.” If this is your situation, use boomers as your sounding boards. Ask them to describe their career paths and to explain how they managed office politics. They’ve all been around the block a few times.

“A diverse workplace means no discrimination up or down the generational ladder.”

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6. **“Personal accountability”** – Boomers tend to be classic individualists while Gen XYers are team players. As such, boomers tend to accept responsibility for their actions, while Gen XYers become defensive. At the same time, boomers often insist – sometimes to the point of obsession – on high work standards for everyone. Their drive toward personal excellence may become a liability if they rise on the backs of their colleagues. Nevertheless, many Gen XYers, with their “it takes a village” attitude could learn a lesson from boomers about personal responsibility. Conduct a personal accountability inventory. Ask your colleagues for feedback. Churches and service organizations such as Kiwanis can help you become more responsible.

“Boomers have been taught that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Gen XYers have been taught that when the going gets tough, rely on the resources of the team.”

Gen XY managers can improve their performance if they focus on constructing a bridge between the generations rather than on the chasm below.

About the Author

Casey Hawley is a leadership development coach who specializes in young professionals. She often works with *Fortune* 500 companies and has written many books on management.
