



Baby Boomer Leaders Face Challenges Communicating Across Generations

By Christine W. Zust, M.A.

When I skipped off to elementary school in the late 1950s, I had no idea that in the years ahead my fellow classmates and I, along with the other 77 million Baby Boomers, would create radical change in American business, education and health care. I didn't realize then that swapping my sandwich for someone else's at lunchtime was a new way of thinking, something my parents never considered. I was, after all, part of the generation of choice.

Yet as I look at my fellow Boomers today, I realize that the changes we put into motion in that lunchroom decades ago have placed us in today's board room in a new position. We are the "sandwich leaders," the first generation squeezed between managing and leading people older than us (Traditionalists) and those following in our footsteps (Generations X and Y).

Along the way, we Boomers have met the ultimate challenge -- communicating across generations (now spanning up to four generations in the same workplace), each with different values, beliefs and attitudes.

How are we keeping a diverse workplace population interested, motivated and committed to business? This is a question all leaders facing these generational issues must address. They are doing it through communication.

Psychologist Dr. Paula Butterfield of Columbus, Ohio, says that working across generations is hard for many managers. "It can challenge beliefs and values they've always accepted, and squeeze them between the twin rocks of change and conflict." The tools they use, especially communication skills, says Butterfield, can make or break their level of success. "Leaders who understand the conditions that shaped each generation and the values and beliefs that flowed from those conditions will have a handy set of tools in creating strong relationships and teams for getting things done."

As Boomers in leadership roles hone their communication skills, the generational challenges are many. Here are tips on how they can communicate more effectively.

For Leaders Communicating with Traditionalists. It was uncomfortable for us Boomers to manage others who were our seniors. It was like telling our parents what to do (not that Boomers didn't have a secret desire to do that anyway)! Boomers worked on issues of mutual respect, trust and sharing, because Traditionalists by nature are the private, "silent generation" in the workplace, who work hard and "put in their time." Traditionalists were born between 1922 and 1945 and represent 44.2 million individuals. The smart Boomer leader seeks the hard-won wisdom and advice from Traditionalists.

Communication tips:

- Build trust through inclusive language (we, us)
- A leader's word is his/her bond, so focus more on words, not body language
- Face to face or written communication is received best
- Use more formal language
- Don't waste their time; they have a job to do
- Don't expect them to share their innermost thoughts immediately

Leaders Who Communicate with Baby Boomers. Author Howard Smead says that Boomers are "The most egocentric generation in the history of mankind." Because of their sheer volume (76.8 million born between 1946 and 1964), Baby Boomers have reshaped the workplace environment. Sharing information with fellow Boomers can be difficult at times, because peer competition and egos often get in the way of progress. With Boomers, possibilities abound. It is hard to demand a reality check, because

they demand constant change. They are hard to please, ready to move on to a new position if something better comes along. Boomers started the workaholic trend. Their work is their life, because they are committed to climbing the ladder of success.

Communication tips:

- Boomers are the “show me” generation, so use body language to communicate
- Speak in an open, direct style
- Answer questions thoroughly, and expect to be pressed for details
- Avoid controlling, manipulative language
- Present options to show flexibility in your thinking
- Use face to face or electronic communication to reach out to them

Leaders Communicating with Generation X. Gen Xers have looked to Boomers for training, support and guidance, and now they’re crowding Boomers for prime leadership positions. Gen Xers were born between 1965 and 1978, and represent 52.4 million people. Gen Xers abhor office politics and policies in general. They are independent, entrepreneurial thinkers, ready to move on in a heartbeat. Unlike Boomers, Gen Xers are more interested in quality of life than work, so they will use technology to short-cut their way to success, produce more work in less time and strive to lead a more balanced life. The marketplace will see a huge shift, as Boomers begin retiring in the next decade, leaving too large of a void for Gen Xers to fill (the difference between Boomer and Gen X generational growth is an astounding 25 million), so Gen Xers will be expected to do more, and Gen Y’s will move up the ladder faster to fill that gap.

Corporate headhunter Lee Ann Howard, with TMP Worldwide - Executive Search Division - whose flagship brand is Monster.com, says that Boomer leaders must create excitement for Gen Xers to step into leadership roles. “Gen Xers are multi-task masters. They are used to a lot of stimuli,” Howard says. She adds that Boomers must provide three things to Gen Xers to keep them motivated -- a challenging environment, individual growth and development, and assignments that stimulate them.

Communication tips:

- Learn their language and speak it
- Use e-mail as your primary communication tool
- Talk in short sound bytes to keep their attention
- Present the facts, use straight talk
- Ask them for their feedback
- Share information with them immediately and often
- Use an informal communication style
- Listen! You just might learn something

Leaders Communicating with Generation Y. This generation, born between 1979 to 1994, and numbering 77.6 million strong, represents the new college graduates coming into the workplace today. Generation “Why” guru Eric Chester defines this group as “youth who continually question the standards and expectations imposed by society.” (Check out Eric’s website at www.GenerationWhy.com.) With this group, take everything about Generation X and turn it up a notch. These young people know no limits. They define the workplace environment as they go along, and feel entitled to everything. They are highly creative, well educated and technologically advanced. The Internet is their playground, and that playground has no boundaries. They crave challenge. A national education initiative targeting today’s Gen Y’s, uses billboards as a primary media vehicle with the headline “Challenge me.” If there is a faster way to do it, Gen Y’s will find it.

Communication tips:

- Let your language paint visual pictures
- Use action verbs to challenge them
- Don’t talk down to them; they will resent it

- Show respect through your language, and they will respect you
- Use e-mail and voicemail as primary communication tools
- Use visual communication to motivate them and keep them focused
- Constantly seek their feedback
- Use humor. Reassure them that you don't take yourself too seriously
- Encourage them to break the rules and explore new paths or options

As a strong demographic group, Boomers have already set the pace for modern day management. We are the ones who started developing choice. We fought for personal freedom. We coined the phrases, "Think outside the box" and "Push the envelope." The same old way of doing things in the past has never been good enough for our generation. And today, American business operates differently because of it.

Boomers had an appetite for change, challenge and choice when they entered the workplace a quarter century ago. Now that they have assumed the new role as sandwich leaders, what can they learn from philosophical and cultural differences in the workplace? Plenty. As Boomer leaders continue managing an ever-changing work environment, they must continue to adapt their communication style to each generation so their message is heard effectively, and they will continue to inspire and motivate the next generation of leaders.

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