

# Winning with Cross-Generational Teams

*EA professionals who understand the characteristics common to all generations of workers can use their “soft skills” to coach employees and inspire them to make the most of their abilities.*

*by Mickey Parsons, MCC, M.Ed., CEAP*

**T**here's a lot of talk in business circles about the different frames of reference that each generation brings to the workplace. These different frames of reference affect work behaviors, communication styles, and career goals and can, if not managed properly, result in a “culture clash” between workers of different generations.

Understanding these frames of reference is critical to unlocking employees' potential and making the most of their unique qualities. One way to inspire employees, both as individual workers and as members of a multi-generational workforce, is to take a coaching approach to managing. Leaders who apply a five-step coaching process can facilitate trust, dialogue, and mutual respect among workers and leverage their strengths to create positive results.

## THE FOUR GENERATIONS

Before we discuss how the different frames of reference manifest themselves in the workplace, let's identify the four generations:

**Traditionalists** or World War II veterans (born during the years 1900-1945) represent only a small percentage of the workforce. Many began working under command-and-control war heroes

who had returned to civilian life following WWII. People in this generation look to appointed leaders to make decisions. They respect age and seniority, honor hard work, demonstrate loyalty, and expect to work for the same company their entire career.

**Baby Boomers** (born 1946-1964) grew up in the post-war era of uncertainty and chose to work long hours to ensure prosperity. On their way up the corporate ladder, they learned political skills and how to “read” their bosses. Still, they're optimists at heart and want to make the world a better place. Like their parents, they tend to be loyal, but they change jobs three to five times over their careers.

**Generation Xers** (born 1965-1980) are resourceful and independent. Often born into dual-career families, many of them also ended up being raised in one-parent households—a consequence of rising divorce rates. Gen Xers were the first generation to see large numbers of people laid off after working all their lives for one employer and thus tend to disdain traditional career paths, though they may model themselves after business pioneers such as Bill Gates.

Gen Xers tend to invest more in relationships than institutions and therefore seek bosses who lead by persuasion instead of control. They are adept at marketing their skills and talents to achieve personal and career goals. “Work smarter, not harder” is a phrase that characterizes many Gen Xers.

**Generation Yers or Millennials** (born 1981-1999) are tech-savvy workers who grew up in an era when sports, business, and media icons encouraged people to strive for individual accom-

plishments. Also known as the “Net Generation” (Net Gen), these workers expect to have input in all decisions affecting their work and personal lives and want to be challenged and receive regular feedback.

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Though they tend to have a short attention span, Gen Yers easily make connections with people of different cultures and lifestyles. Many of them maintain strong ties with their parents, who are not above calling employers to ask why their child did not receive a certain promotion or job opportunity.

## COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

How can a manager inspire and lead these diverse groups of workers? The first step is to look beyond their differences to discover what they have in common. The following characteristics apply to all generations of workers:

**Desire for respect.** Everyone wants to be respected, but not everyone defines respect the same way. Older generations want their opinions to be given weight



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based on their experience, while younger people expect their ideas to be valued because of their special skills and expertise. When you think about it, it's really the same thing.

**Need for credible leaders.** People of all generations want credible leaders who encourage and listen to them. Managers should devote some of their interactions with employees to mentoring and proving they follow up their words with actions.

**Resistance to change.** The prevailing wisdom is that older people dislike changes in their routines (both at work and in their personal lives) while younger people embrace or even thrive on change. In fact, resistance to change has nothing to do with age but with how much a worker has to gain or lose as a result of the change. When announcing changes, managers should remember to ask all employees for ideas and input, then promote the benefits as the changes are rolled out.

**Loyalty.** Loyalty and work ethic depend on the situation, not on the generation. People who are close to retirement will probably want to stay with the same organization for the rest of their working lives, and executives tend to work more hours than people who are starting out. But two words of advice come to mind here: *Never assume*. Ask a lot of questions as you get to know your team members.

**Desire to learn.** People want to receive the education and training necessary to do their jobs well. They are also interested in learning more to help them get to the next level in their organization. Make sure educational opportunities are plentiful and that they support advancement within your company.

#### FIVE-STEP PROCESS

Now that you have a basic understanding of the distinctions between, and similarities among, the generations, you can apply the five-step process of the coaching exchange to reach the overall goal (such as improving morale or maximizing efficiency). This process will enhance employees' talents and also develop and

improve communication skills, such as listening and giving feedback.

First, IDENTIFY and agree upon the focus of the coaching—for example, acquiring a new skill, correcting a problem behavior, or supporting an employee through a transition.

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Next, DISCOVER possibilities by asking questions that challenge the employee's thinking or assumptions. You may also give feedback, provide support, offer a perspective, or celebrate successes. The goal is to guide the person and serve as a sounding board.

Simple inquiries, such as asking about other possibilities or new ways to look at a situation, may open up potential strategies. A question such as “What has worked for you before?” might allow a person to feel more confident and build on past successes.

The third step is to STRATEGIZE to apply any new insights gained in the previous step and brainstorm ways of applying this knowledge. You may offer additional suggestions or ask questions to further clarify options. The goal of this step is to determine a course of action for the employee to implement, either individually or as part of a team.

Before you close the conversation and expect the person to leap into action, you will want to CLEAR THE WAY. In this fourth step, you ask individuals to identify any potential obstacles to taking the agreed-upon action(s) from

step #3. After identifying the obstacles, you work with the person to find ways to remove these barriers and move him or her closer to success.

The final step is to RECAP by asking the employee to review action items and approaches before the conversation ends. Asking for a timeline further commits the person to the action and establishes an accountability structure so you can both monitor progress.

#### A COACHING SCENARIO

A basic coaching exchange might involve someone like Ken, a sales manager with a local newspaper who is struggling to find ways of motivating his team. While the coaching process works well with all generations of employees, in this scenario we will posit that Ken is a Gen Xer with some Gen Y tendencies. He likes building relationships, prefers to be involved in making decisions, and enjoys regular feedback.

Ken has scheduled a meeting with his new general manager, Helen, to discuss the situation. Note how Helen engages Ken and allows him freedom to maneuver and stretch his perspective.

**Helen:** Hello, Ken. What would you like to get from our conversation today?

**Ken:** I feel pretty frustrated, Helen. I'd like to come up with a plan for supporting my sales staff and account managers. I don't feel like I'm doing a good job of leading or being a role model.

**Helen:** Is this a new situation for you, or have you experienced this sort of thing before?

**Ken:** It's new. We've undergone some major restructuring of our staff, and I'm now responsible for big sales quotas in addition to account management and administrative functions.

**Helen:** That must be frustrating; I can hear it in your voice. Tell me what's worked for you in the past and what you've observed working for others.

**Ken:** Well, I remember going to a sales seminar once and feeling energized by it. Some of my fellow supervisors also use a lot of positive thinking techniques with their staff—you know, the “what

you believe, you will achieve” stuff.

**Helen:** Interesting. Sounds like you're on the right track. Out of all the options you can think of, what seems to be the most compelling?

**Ken:** I'd like to try a sales contest, but one that brings everyone together for a common goal instead of being competitive and turf-conscious. Maybe we could kick off the contest with a sales rally to get everyone pumped up.

**Helen:** Keep going—what's your first step?

**Ken:** I'll need to get this cleared by my vice president, so I'll have to put together an overview of the contest—how it will work, what rewards will be used, what kind of budget we'll need.

**Helen:** Good. Who else will you need to talk to?

**Ken:** I'll ask around and interview a few sales coaches or speakers to see who would be a good fit for our staff mix and industry.

**Helen:** Excellent. I'd like you to write down your goals for the sales rally and contest. Then I want you to spend some time thinking about what's the best thing that could happen. How would that kind of success affect you and your work team?

**Ken:** Okay, I'll work on that today. I can tell you right away that it would energize us and help us focus, but there are probably many more benefits, too.

**Helen:** I think you're right. So, let's review: What are you going to do, and by when?

**Ken:** Today, I'm going to write down my goals and the benefits that a sales rally and contest could generate. I'll use this information to draft a one-page overview and budget to present to the leadership team by next Monday. Once I get their approval, I'll need a month to put everything in place.

**Helen:** What resources will you need?

**Ken:** I don't have the first clue about organizing such an event, so I'll have to talk to our meeting planner about the specifics. But there are only 26

of us, so logistics shouldn't be a big deal.

**Helen:** Great! Will you please e-mail me once your proposal is ready for submission? Then, at our next meeting, let me know if it's been approved.

**Ken:** Sure, I can do that.

As you can see, Helen approaches Ken's dilemma in a supportive, collaborative way that helps him develop strategies for solving his problems. This way, he's much more likely to be committed to the project than if Helen had simply prescribed a solution. Both parties were honest and open, and Ken quickly accepted responsibility for improving the situation. The trust and mutual respect were obvious.

#### CONNECTING AND MOTIVATING

Ultimately, our ability to connect and motivate will determine our success in leading multi-generational workforces and teams. Regardless of the difficulties that generation gaps may spur, all employees want a chance to learn, be challenged, be respected, and be heard.

Managers who can only “command and control” will struggle in today's workplace. In many cases, these types of managers are being replaced by leaders who are savvy in the “soft skills” that motivation demands. EA professionals are proficient in these skills, and it is my experience that EA professionals make excellent coaches.

EA professionals already coach informally during management consultations, workshops, and other organizational development projects. Once we understand the core coaching skills and guiding principles, we have powerful tools for change that complement our clinical and business skills. By combining those skills effectively, we can help reshape our client companies and provide them with unparalleled value. ■

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