

The Key to Preventing Generational Tension Is Remembering That Everyone Wants to Feel Valued

by Liane Davey

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Summary. Generational differences are real, but we tend to make too much of them. If the way you are managing the older or younger members of your team is overtly or subliminally signaling that you don't value them, you will surely see the

symptoms of hurt feelings: resistance,... [more](#)

I remember the first time I felt old as a manager — more than 10 years ago now. It was at a lunch with my new team when I mentioned the first “45” I bought with my own money as a kid. One of my direct reports, who was 10 years younger than me, looked at me blank-faced and asked, “What is a 45?” She had never seen the single-song vinyl record format. We came from different worlds. On the same team, I had another direct report who was 30 years older than me. She was quick to answer my question about her first 45, but I had never heard of the song or the artist. Over the next couple of years I had what I perceived as serious “generational issues” on my team. I learned a few lessons about managing across the generational divide.

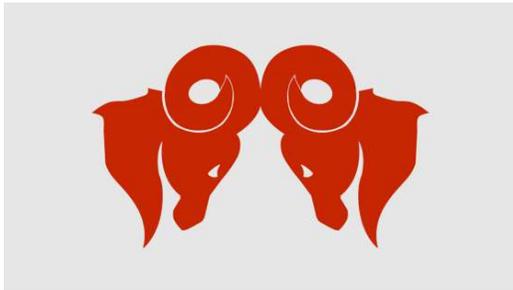
The most important lesson is to see past the stereotypes. Generational differences are real, but we tend to make too much of them. Some of the behaviors or attitudes you might attribute to a generational difference are simply the product of an employee being at a different age and stage of life than you. The 23-year-old employee might act much more like the 63-year-old once she’s worked for 40 years.

Age and stage don’t explain everything, either. If you have multiple Millennials on your team, you’ll realize that neither generation nor age can explain how different the Millennials are from one another. The majority of differences among employees are driven not by generation, or by age, but by their unique personalities. The individual differences within a generation are much greater than the differences across the generations. Take some time to consider each of your direct reports as a whole

person — a function of their generation, their age and stage, and their personality. Don't make the mistake of pigeonholing someone because of the year they were born.

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Next, look beyond the simple stereotypes for clues as to why the person might be challenging your leadership. If you feel resistance from them, instead of getting frustrated, try empathizing. If you're managing someone much older than you, they might have legitimate concerns about your leadership because your style is countercultural or just different from how things used to be done. It's also possible that their resistance isn't about your leadership at all. Instead, they might be reacting to your youth

because it reminds them that they have been passed on the career track. That's not easy to accept.

If you're managing someone much younger than you, the challenge to your leadership might be completely different. Maybe they experience your management style as slow and cautious, or even rigid. Don't be surprised if they think your job looks easy and they're frustrated that it is taking so long to get more opportunity. Regardless of the direction of the generation gap, ask thoughtful questions and listen carefully to learn from the answers. How is the employee feeling? What do they value? The more of these conversations you have, the more you will

understand about how your team members are judging you and what your leadership is causing them to confront about themselves.

Judgment is a two-way street. Just as your employees are judging you, you are likely judging them. It's critical to confront your own stereotypes about the generations. Until you shed these misconceptions, judgment will get in the way of building strong relationships with your team members. For example, do you naturally assume that older workers are less tech-savvy? My mom is 84 now, but at 65 she studied digital publishing so that she could make her charity the first in the community to have a website. I left the "old hapless technophobe" stereotype behind long ago.

Take a moment to list all the generalizations and caricatures of older and younger workers you've developed over the years. Now go through each one and think of everyone on your team. Upon further inspection, you'll see that those stereotypes don't fit all that well. You need to manage each person based on their unique strengths and weaknesses.

One thing you can count on is that regardless of age, everyone wants to be valued. If the way you are managing the older or younger members of your team is overtly or subliminally signaling that you don't value them, you will see the symptoms of hurt feelings: resistance, disengagement, anger, or insubordination. Start by engaging each person in a conversation that demonstrates that you're interested in their thoughts. For an older worker, try these options: "How have you seen the organization evolve during your time here?" "You know the

culture well — what do you think will be the secret of success in this transformation?” “What worries you most about the new approach?” Then listen carefully to what you learn.

For a younger employee, capitalize on their youth and fresh perspective: “What was most exciting to you about joining the company?” “Where have you seen great ideas that we could apply here?” “What can you teach me that would help me keep up with the digital age?” If you listen openly, you’ll hear insights you can act on.

The point of these open conversations is not to suggest that your organization’s way of doing things is optional; it’s not. Instead, the point is to understand the potential resistance you might face and to tap into any source of strength and support that you can get. “Given what you’ve just told me, and what you know of the team, what advice would you give me to make this work?” “What do you see as the strengths you bring to the team, given your perspective?” “What role can you play in supporting this change?” Each of these questions will give a resistant person a chance to contribute constructively. For most people, young or old, seeing their ideas in action will reduce their resistance and start to bridge the divide.

A small percentage of employees might choose not to engage. No matter what you try, they will resist your leadership. Deal with it like any other performance management issue, whether the person is a Millennial, a Gen-Xer, or a Baby Boomer.

It’s time to stop thinking about problems as “generational issues.” If you have a problem with an entire generation, that’s *your* problem and *your* prejudice. If you have a problem with one employee who happens to be of a different generation than you,

then you have a problem with one employee, period. It's time to stop using the generations as an excuse for the distance among us and start really communicating to bring us all closer together.

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