

Cross-Generational Relationship Building

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Here we highlight what we think are the best ways to push past generational barriers and build strong intergenerational relationships. We've divided the strategies into mindset tips (how to approach cross-generational differences) and practical tips (the small things you can do during a conversation to improve your communication).

Mindset Strategies

Approach with Interest. Approach generational differences with interest, not fear or negativity. Take interest in the interests of others. You can learn fascinating things about other people if you choose to do so.

Take a Learning Orientation. The value of difference is that you can learn from each other. If someone from another generation has specific skills that you don't (say, an appreciation for looking at history and tradition, or the ability to use email effectively), consider setting up a skill exchange. These type of self-development opportunities translate into more opportunities for career advancement as well as more fulfilling and successful workplace environments.

Be Mindful of how your assumptions are influencing your interactions.

Narrow your categories. In your mind, how long do people stay categorized by their generation: "one of the old guys" or "part of that young group"? At what point do they become individuals: Antoine, the man who likes motorcycles, fought in World War II, and thinks Elvis is still the King; Janelle, the woman who runs marathons, loves the city, and is allergic to peanuts? Categorizing people is a natural process that allows us to make sense of the world around us. You'd have a hard time describing an apple without using categories like a type of fruit, sweet or tangy, green or red, Granny Smith or Braeburn. Life is richer and your observations and reflections of people more accurate if you can move away from simple classification and allow for individual variations.

Put yourself in their shoes. Do you know what their day-to-day is like? Do you know what motivates them, excites them, gets them down--or how they want to be treated? Empathize with their situation, needs, and values. You can do this sometimes directly by asking questions and taking an interest in their interests and indirectly by getting involved in some of the traditions and pastimes of another generation. Watch a TV show geared for another generation. Look at a website that focuses on the issues of other generations. Get familiar with music that spans generations like jazz, blues, rock and roll, classic, hip hop, and world music from cultures you are not familiar with. Understanding each others music can help build perspective.

Behavioral Strategies

Be flexible as to the means of your communication (face-to-face, email, etc.)

Avoid generational jargon. Speak in plain terms and avoid idioms that are not widely understood.

Be attentive. Look for signs that you may be misunderstanding each other, whether it is a confused look, an unclear response, or an unintended reaction.

Practice active listening. Turn up your listening dial across generational differences. Listen for clear expressions of different values or outlooks than you have. Seek to understand the individual better by listening carefully to what they say (or don't say).

Show Respect. Most generations have felt they don't get the respect they deserve. Using the strategies above, you can show coworkers that you do respect them, their background, and their outlook on life--and build powerful relationships as a result.