

A kinder, gentler workplace, part 3: The generation gap



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“We shall a new rule of life make: a little kinder than is necessary be.” Yoda-speak for a famous quote from Peter Pan creator J.M. Barrie

PROBLEMS CAN ARISE from the differing mindsets and communication styles of workers born in different eras. “Managing a multigenerational workforce is an art,” leadership strategist Eric J. McNulty wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*. “Young workers want to make a quick impact, the middle generation needs to believe in the mission, and older employees don’t like ambivalence.”

Frictions may be aggravated by new technology and work patterns that mix workers of different ages in ever-changing teams. In today’s workforce, the most prevalent generations are:

- Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), who are competitive and think workers should pay their dues
- Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1977), who tend to be skeptical and independent-minded
- Gen Yers (born in 1978 or later), who favor teamwork, feedback, and technology.

As Boomers retire, they’ll be replaced by Gen Xers and Gen Yers; many in the latter group are multitasking, technology-dependent individuals who create their own media and ways of interacting.

Both employees and managers need to understand the work values, communication preferences, and motivational differences of each generation—and must avoid confusing generational traits with such character flaws as immaturity, laziness, and intractability. Many Boomers may consider a 60-hour work week a prerequisite to achieving success, whereas many hard-working Gen Xers may prefer a more balanced life with reasonable working hours and weekends off (with occasional overtime).

Gen Yers, on the other hand, hate meetings, prefer digital communication, and value freedom and flexibility over work-life balance. They may voluntarily choose to work on weekends and evenings—sometimes in unorthodox places, like Starbucks, where you might find them on their computers, staying in touch through wearable technologies.

Among healthcare workers, the top causes of inter-generational conflict are:

- an aging workforce that doesn’t tolerate fools gladly (typical of Baby Boomers)
- continuation of historically embedded power inequities (the Mature or Silent Generation)
- lack of conflict-management training (Gen Xers)

- intolerance for the values and prejudices of older generations (Gen Yers).

Social changes in the culture at large exacerbate rather than ameliorate matters. These changes include increased incivility, pressures on families due to policies and societal expectations, anxieties related to increased global tensions and diversity, vulnerabilities in a terror-filled world, and individuals’ unmet expectations.

Conflict is a normal response in healthcare settings, which are marked by life-and-death situations, high fatigue levels, and a system that may seem unresponsive to legitimate complaints. But conflict needn’t be inevitable. Rarely do we look at the world through another’s eyes. Instead, we decide what’s to be done based on our interests, feelings, and values.

Inability to recognize others’ perspectives is a prescription for conflict. But we can change that. What might work? A good starting place is to “a little kinder than is necessary be” (as Yoda implored). Conflict management and resolution training for all would help, too. At meetings and other interactions:

- be aware that you’re dealing with diverse persons of varying ages, education levels, and ethnicity
- develop a nonconfrontational strategy and act accordingly
- be aware of the issues you bring up and when you bring them up; your timing can help or hinder conflict resolution
- be clear about your real concerns and don’t get distracted by other issues
- choose your words carefully without dithering or sugar-coating
- when someone complains, listen instead of making suggestions.

Actually, it’s amazing healthcare professionals get along as well as we do—and it’s most likely because of our single, universal shared value: a belief in the importance of the work we do.

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