

# ENGAGING GENERATIONS

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## Five Generational Things Every Office Should Know

### 1. People from different generations value different recognition.

Does your business recognize 30 years of service with a gold watch? Probably not; in fact, the “gold watch” has become a symbol of cynicism about corporate disloyalty rather than of longevity and a job well done. Moreover, how many companies even have an employee who has stayed long enough to receive a 30-year award?

Today’s organization more typically recognizes achievement through a companywide, and even a public, acknowledgment. If the person you’re recognizing is a Baby Boomer, you’re likely to score a hit. If she or he is younger, though, a well-intentioned announcement may be met with eye-rolling and a dismissive shoulder shrug.

Each generation has differing needs and desires in the workplace; do you know what they are?

### 2. People from different generations need different motivators.

Think about the last time you thought of or said these words: Pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Chances are it wasn’t all that long ago. If you or the person you spoke those words to was born before 1965, they might just have been a motivator to meet the challenge being faced. But ask yourself this question: do you even know what a bootstrap is? I’m betting you don’t; nor does that 20- or 30-something employee standing before you (unless it’s related to their computer and in that context, it makes even less sense).

Neither younger Gen X nor Gen Y employees hear that phrase as something to motivate; instead using old-fashioned phrases are sure to spark a thought like “(s)he just doesn’t get it.” And in the workplace, that line of thinking from your employees—that you don’t get it—is guaranteed to “uninspire” rather than to motivate, and uninspired employees can have a profound impact on customer service and the bottom line.

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### 3. People from different generations prioritize work differently.

Five o’clock hits: Your desk is a mess and papers are overflowing from your in-basket, but your screensaver scrolls “Just say no.” Still, you are likely to stay late to get organized so that when you return to work in the morning, the pesky details of the previous day are accomplished. So it annoys you to see your 30-something colleague pack up and head home. You find yourself thinking, “Why don’t these younger employees have the same work ethic as my parents and my peers?”

What has happened to the people of Generation X to make them seem like slackers next to you and your contemporaries? How do you change those who don’t seem to take work seriously enough? Or can you? Most importantly: should you?

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## 4. People from different generations consider different values important.

What has happened to the kids of today? (Only other people's children, of course!) Even some 40-somethings don't seem to value those things that have always been important in society, and their sense of right and wrong seems out of whack. Jeans in the office, cell phones in restaurants, text messages in meetings—all at the very least rude, if not completely disrespectful. What is the world coming to?

Then you realize you've heard these words before: "Geez, I sound just like my parents." Yes, you do. Core values have a transitory nature that is difficult to accept but is an unavoidable part of life. And yet each business also has its own culture and values that make the organization what it is. So just how does a business adjust, survive, and thrive when its values are at odds with those of some employees?

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## 5. People from different generations respond to different leadership.

Who were your heroes? What traits did you emulate when you became a leader in your workplace? And why are those behaviors not as successful today as they were 10 or even 5 years ago? Though credibility, trustworthiness, good listening, farsightedness, and encouragement are leadership qualities that transcend generations, what has changed—what always changes—is how those qualities are communicated and received.

Throughout most of the 20th century, position and title alone commanded respect. Everything—including employees—simply followed from there. In today's workforce, though, title and position are not nearly enough. But even transcendent leadership traits fall short if your style cloaks those qualities for the employees you want to lead. This issue is most significant among Generation X employees, for whom the strongest contributor to job satisfaction is their relationships with supervisors. For Gen Y, it's the big picture, and *knowing* where they fit into the company or project.

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## Reading Suggestions

*Generation Kill*, Evan Wright 2004

The story of a Marine unit in the first days of the Iraqi War as related by embedded journalist, Evan Wright is neither for the squeamish nor those who are offended by profanity. Certainly, the title was first what caught my eye, encouraged by an interview on NPR commemorating the HBO miniseries made from the book. I found exactly what I'd hoped in the Preface to the book which compares WWII veterans—many of whom reached Omaha Beach and were unable to actually fire their weapons—to the "suicide squad" in Iraq Wright brings to us in a way that almost transplants us from our armchair right to the battlefield.

Being an Army veteran, I found this Marine unit is not all that dissimilar to my combat experience of decades ago but there is something just a bit different about this generation of military. Wright makes no attempt to explain why this generation might be dissimilar, he just tells it like it was in a way that is gripping if not often exceedingly uncomfortable. As you know more about generations and generational differences, I believe you will find this book fascinating and a useful departure from the plethora of "how to" generational materials out there.