How to engage each generation in the workplace by Leza Chryssovergis

Over the last ten years we experienced significant changes to the workforce. The Traditionalists, who we thought would retire, are still in the workforce and are joined by the Millennials, who approach working and learning differently. As a program manager we know when we are coaching that one size doesn't fit all and the addition of a generation means our coaching style may have to be revised when engaging with Millennials. "Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons" (Hammill, 2005, n.p.). In this article I hope to highlight some of the values of each generation which are currently in our workforce as well as provide suggestions for how to coach or be coached by each generation.

Generational values

Traditionalists are those born between 1900 and 1945. People from this generation are shaped by a series of cataclysmic events including WWI and WWII, the worldwide outbreak of Spanish Influenza, the stock market crash, and the Great Depression. The Traditionalists brought these experiences to the workplace: working together for a common good, doing one's duty, thriftiness and responsibility, hard work, loyalty, and respect for rules. Those Traditionalists who are still in the workplace likely hold these values.

Baby Boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964. This generation, the largest in American history, grew up with a sense of its own autonomy; maturing during the prosperity of the postwar, the Cold War and possible nuclear annihilation. They then entered college in the mid-1960s during the civil rights movement, the introduction of the birth control pill and women's liberation, the assassinations of Kennedy and other leaders, and the Vietnam War (Haneberg, 2010). The impact of all these trends and events, coupled with the changes in technology and communication contributed to a generation's sense of itself as unique and different from others, especially from their Traditionalist parents.

Baby Boomers will be calling the shots between now and 2030. But, as they head toward retirement, Boomers are now confronted with worries about the overall economy, inflation, health care, and their finances. As with some of the Traditionalists, many are opting to stay in the workforce longer and find themselves managing, or being managed by, Generation Xers and Millennials.

Generation Xers are those born between 1965 and 1980. They are the latchkey kids, whose parents both worked. Gen Xers are exceedingly protective of their family time which can probably be attributed to the fact that 40% of the parents of Gen Xers were divorced or lost their jobs during the 80s and 90s (Wolfe, 2010). They are media savvy and well educated, Generation Xers might seem to have advantages generations before did not have. Although they are now entering their peak earning and spending years, many suffer from economic anxiety about their own future. Some wonder when the Baby Boomers will begin to step aside for them, and they worry that they will be the first generation in American history to be significantly less established than the one before (Haneberg, 2010).

In terms of technology, the members of Generation X share one overriding commonality: computers. Although they are not digital natives, most are technologically savvy. Though many Traditionalists and Baby Boomers have learned to make good use of computers, Gen Xers are the first to incorporate them fully as a normal part of daily life. Print versus electronic communication set up a technological generation gap which differentiates

this generation from the previous generations and Gen Xers find themselves in the middle. Their values and communication styles set them apart from other generations.

Millennials are those born between 1981 and 1999. As the youngest of the four demographic groups, information about Millennials is still evolving. They face intense competition from their peers for colleges, jobs, and houses; however, this generation shows little sign of a generation gap. They are the children of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, for the most part, and share their parents' values and interests. The most significant differences that set the Millennials apart relate to the incredible explosion of technology that has surrounded them since birth. Millennials see things from a global perspective, invoking the connecting power of the World Wide Web.

The Millennials not only embrace greater tolerance of racial and ethnic diversity; they are also themselves more diverse than the generations before: By 2010, more than half the U.S. population under 18 were minorities relative to the population as a whole, one in ten have a parent who is not a U.S. citizen, and 25 percent are raised by a single parent (Haneberg, 2010).

They are the first of the generations who are fully connected. Whether sharing music, instant messages, videos, or tweets, the members of this generation are building virtual communities that exceed their physical network. To an even greater degree than the members of the Gen Xers, the Millennials have not simply embraced technology—they have embraced technological change itself.

Coaching and being coached by the different generations

Having a basic understanding of the values and beliefs that have shaped each generation makes it easier to understand how to approach and coach them. Coaching is a complex skill that requires us to constantly make and remake judgments about how we can best help each performer. To be an agile coach, one needs to: Be the one to bend; Believe in others; Be real; and Take the initiative to seek coaching from diverse performers (Haneberg, 2010).

Interestingly, coaching preferences for the generations do not differ significantly. Team members of all generations want to be respected and coached by people who are pleasant and likable. They don't want to feel manipulated. They don't want you to take over the conversation. Team members from all four generations emphasized that they want to be approached at a mutually convenient time for both themselves and the would-be coach and many have said they preferred a direct approach when receiving feedback. That being said, just because we want the same open and flexible treatment from coaches does not mean that we are giving team members what they need.

Traditionalists do not need the constant praise because they are from "no news is good news" school of thought. They feel strongly that there is a time and place for praise – so praise, when appropriate. If you are coached by a Traditionalist, you may be put off by their formal praise, which is a sign of the workplace in which Traditionalists grew up; instead of being put off, be grateful for the coaching.

Boomers are optimistic by nature and believe that any worthy goal can be achieved. They are competitive but not in the traditional sense. They want to put their stamp on things – looking to do a good job for their personal gratification because they want what they do to make a difference.

If you coach a Boomer, they will be put off by skepticism, so be open to their ideas. They tend to give themselves over to their jobs, believe in paying their dues, playing by the rules, and building careers. If you are coached by a Baby Boomer, their feedback and guidance are indirect and they are considerate of people's feelings.

Gen Xers value teamwork and seek a fun and informal workplace. They expect employees at all levels and ages to be equally valued. They don't want to be micromanaged; help Gen Xers and then let them go off and work on it. They will likely come back to you with an update and will appreciate your positive reinforcement. Gen Xers value a work/life balance and coaching that can help them become a well-rounded success. If you coach Gen Xers, be prepared to tell them the WIIFM – what's in it for me, to gain their buy-in. If you are coached by a Gen Xer, understand that if you need assistance with your work, you will have to ask for it, because it is not in the Gen Xers nature to look over your shoulder while you are working.

Finally, because **Millennials** tend to be well educated and technologically advanced, they are less likely to be loyal to any one company or industry. They are adept at building global virtual relationships, and many have a "solopreneur" mentality (Haneberg, 2010, n.p.).

Millennials are natural-born multitaskers who may intimidate or irritate the other generations because of their need to be "always connected." If you want to connect to a Millennial, do so using their preferred technology tools (texting or tweeting versus weekly one-on-one meetings). If you coach Millennials, keep in mind that they can work anywhere and reinvent their approach very quickly. In fact, they prefer flexibility in scheduling whenever possible (Nikravan, 2013). Coaches that seem change-resistant will find it tough to connect with this generation. This generation is used to giving and getting feedback in real time; therefore expect constant feedback from managers and coaches, which older professionals may find uncomfortable or undesirable. If you are coached by a Millennials, express your desire for a more methodical coaching approach (a set weekly meeting schedule, for example).

Look for ways to connect with those at your workplace. Understanding the points of views of your team members will allow you to create a more positive and coachable environment. Lead the way and seeking coaching from professionals who are both older and younger than you will create a more coachable environment.

Please view the following for more information about Millennials in our workplace:
http://www.imcomacademy.com/glshared/millennials/

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