Seriously, Leaders, We Have to Be Generationally-Savvy

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"People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents."
Arab proverb

When they were adolescents, how did your employees listen to the music of their era: radio, records, 8-tracks, audio cassettes, iPods, or streamed on-line? Is a turning point in their personal history the tragedy at Chernobyl, the end of Apartheid, or planes crashing into the World Trade Center? Do they prefer to work alone or on teams? Is their best work delivered at a quiet desk or in a bustling coffee house? Do they to wear suits, hoodies and jeans, or muscle shirts?

If your company is like many these days, you probably are answering "all of the above." And, if you're like most of us, you probably think you understand and work fairly well with colleagues who share a similar history to yours. But perhaps you're more than a little confused about how to make a connection, communicate effectively, and work alongside staff members who, at times, seem to have grown up on a different planet!

Not that long ago, people from different generations were separated at work by rank and status. In more traditional organizations, the oldest employees filled executive positions, the middle-aged held mid-management jobs, and the youngest worked on the front lines. Because of the nature of work, we weren't all that likely to work on a daily basis with those in other age groups. My, how times have changed!

For the first time in modern history, workplace demographics now span four generations. Twenty-five-year-old new hires today find themselves working side-by-side with colleagues who forty years older than they are. And**, today's twenty-five-year-olds aren't like twenty-five-year-olds just twenty years ago.** Sure, they are experiencing the same season of life, but their generational thumbprints are radically different. Generational research shows us that attitudinal distinctions emerged from all four of the generations we'll explore in this chapter. Each generation has a mood and values all its own.

A few years ago, our founder, Claire Raines, took her 40 plus years of research and created a tool to help people figure out which generational values resonate most with them. Statistical analysis of our Values & Influence Assessment™ ([http://www.generationsatwork.com/values-assessment)](http://www.generationsatwork.com/values-assessment) shows that not everyone is squarely representative of the generation they were born into. Other factors—such as ethnicity, regional influences, religion and education—may have weighed more heavily than the generation they were born into. Our research shows that a **staggering 40% of the population was born in one generation, but has the values and beliefs consistent with the way another has traditionally been described.** When we make

assumptions about age and use that assumption to guide the way we work and communicate with colleagues and customers, we will likely be right only about 60% of the time. Not such great odds, right?

To be clear, assessing a person's generation is a good starting point. But be prepared to adjust when you pick up on cues that the person doesn't necessarily fit the profile for the generation they were born into. This is why we explore all four generations in this chapter. You may not have WWII-aged talent in your organization anymore, but you definitely have people with WWII values. And that's a really good thing.

While the mix of generations working side-by-side has potential to create challenges, navigating those challenges is pivotal. Hiring a generationally diverse mix—and making the mix really work for you—has fantastic ramifications. A 2018 study by Cloverpop shows that **decision-making teams that include a wide range of younger and older employees significantly outperform more narrowly young or old teams. These multi-generation teams are more likely to identify better choices and deliver results that meet or exceed expectation.**

Generations Match – All Around the Globe

Regardless of who we are and where we grew up, the common features within generations cut across racial, ethnic, cultural and economic differences. **As unique as people's individual experiences may be, they share a place in history with all members of their generation.** All members of a generation have been influenced by the world events, music, technology, heroes and catastrophes that occurred during their most formative years.

So when – and where — were you born? Broadly speaking, a generation covers approximately two decades. A person's birthplace influences the generational timeframe.

In the US, many consider those people born between 1940 and 1960 Baby Boomers, even though the post-World War II boom in births began in 1946 and continued through 1964.

Since different countries have experienced similar influences at slightly different times, birth years for the generations vary somewhat, depending on country-specific political and economic events. For example, South African researcher Graeme Codrington extends the birth years for the Baby Boomers into the early 1970s based on the date of the National Party's assent to power. He says the South African Boomers made abolishing Apartheid a cause in much the way the U.S. Boomers embraced the civil rights movement.

The generations also tend to overlap. Most people who are born in the early or late years of each generation actually identify with a couple of generations, sharing some characteristics and similarities in how they view their world.

Around the world, we're different, yet very much alike! Regardless of birth country, a generation is a group of people who are "programmed" at the same time in history. For each of us, during our first, most

formative years, we've been coded with data about what's right and wrong, good and bad, stylish and unstylish. Individuals in our own generation share knowledge about a common set of events and trends, headlines and heroes, music and mood, parenting style and education system.

In our digitally connected world today, much of that coding crosses political and geographic boundaries. Whether you were a Baby Boomer growing up in the 1960s in what was then the Soviet Union or in the United States, you were influenced significantly by the dawn of the space age. If you were a Generation Xer, you were likely impacted by the Challenger and Chernobyl disasters in 1986. If you're a Millennial, whether the Asian tsunami in 2004 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005 hit closest to your home, both influenced your relationship with your world.

Throughout the world, dozens of books have been written about marketing to and managing the different generations. In the U.S., the study of generational differences has been going on for more than forty years. In 2000, demographer David Foot analyzed the generations in Canada and reported on his work in the best-selling Boom, Bust and Echo. That same year, the Japanese Ministry of Education funded a research project on Japan's changing generations. At about the same time, South African Codrington began studying the generations in New Zealand, Mauritius, England, Russia, and South Africa.

What all these demographers have found is that, no matter what country people live in, the characteristics of the generations are, in general, similar. This is especially true for those who grew up in urban areas, were educated, and were exposed to international media.

Who are these generations?

The largest percentage of today's workforce, **Millennials**, were born between approximately 1980 and 2000. They are the first generation to grow up fully immersed in the pool of digital technology. They are connected 24/7 to friends, parents, information and entertainment. They tend to have high expectations, clear goals, are willing to work hard and expect to have the support they need to achieve. As our fastest growing cohort, it's predicted that Millennials will make up 75% of the workforce within a decade.

Generation Xers were born between 1960 and 1980. They grew up during a time when the worldwide energy crisis sent global economies on a roller coaster ride. Many of their parents worked while they were growing up and they learned to be independent. They bring self-reliance into the workplace. They are willing to work hard, but they want a life beyond work.

Baby Boomers, born between 1940 and 1960, were taught to get along with others. They have been the primary force behind workplace practices like participative management, quality circles and teambuilding. And many Boomers are choosing to continue working during what have traditionally been considered retirement years.

Born before 1940, **World War II Generation** workers grew up in the wake of a worldwide economic depression. They excelled at making things last and recycling. They have a strong commitment to their families, their communities and their country. Their values and work ethic still influence policies and practices in the workplace.

MILLENNIALS

Strengths:

- Optimistic
- Propensity to multi-task
- Technologically savvy
- A global world view
- Goal- and achievement-oriented
- Believe in volunteerism and serving their communities
- People focus

Challenges for employees and managers:

- Need supervision and structure
- Need frequent feedback and check-ins
- Not as comfortable with losing
- Inexperienced – particularly in handling challenging "people issues" in the workplace
- View changing jobs as a natural process and part of their daily schedules
- Craft a sense of play and fun in the work atmosphere.

What attracts, motivates and retains them?

- Managers who connect their actions to their personal and career goals
- The promise of working with other bright, creative people
- Having adequate time and flexibility to live the life they want
- Driven by Work-Life Blending [integrated]
- Approachable leaders who mentor them
- Regular opportunities to learn new things
- Making a difference in the world, and world of work
- Creating a positive work arena

GENERATION XERS

Strengths:

- Adaptable
- Technologically literate
- Independent
- Creative
- Expect to contribute
- Willing to buck the system
- Driven for efficiency
- Task focus

Challenges for employees and managers:

- Skeptical
- Distrust authority
- Less attracted to leadership positions
- Flexibility isn't a wish, it's a demand
- Don't play on teams organically well
- Morale issues if you don't have too many or purposeless meetings

What attracts, motivates and retains them?

- Give them accountability for results, but flexibility in the delivery
- Having very few rules
- Having the newest technology
- Being more informal than "corporate"
- Driven by Work-Life Balance [separation]
- Working smarter, not harder

BABY BOOMERS

Strengths:

- Committed to customer service
- Dedicated and willing to work long hours

- Good team members

- Optimistic

- Future-oriented

- A wealth of experience and knowledge

- People focus

Challenges for employees and managers:

- Uncomfortable with conflict

- Sometimes put process ahead of results

- Viewed as hypocritical, *do what I say, not what I do*

- Keeping things democratic and consensual

What attracts, motivates and retains them?

- Leaders who get them involved and show them how they can make a difference.

- Managers who value their opinion and recognize their contributions

- Being part of a productive team

- Recognition and vertical growth

- Personal growth

WORLD WAR II GENERATION

Strengths:

- Strong work ethic, willing to work long hours

- A wealth of experience

- Discipline

- Loyalty defined by tenure

- Believe in the "greater good"

- Focus and perseverance

- Stability

- See work as a privilege

- Task focus

Challenges for employees and managers:

- Reluctant to buck the system and speak up when they disagree

- Uncomfortable with conflict
- Not concerned with political-correctness
- Change resistance
- Quick to net things out, abrasive communication style

What attracts, motivates and retains them?

- Seeing how their actions affect the overall good of the organization
- Respect for their knowledge, experience and insights
- Rewards and awards for their perseverance and work ethic
- Quiet space to work

The View from Each Generation's Window

	Millennial Generation	Generation X	Baby Boom Generation	WWII Generation
Outlook…	Hopeful	Skeptical	Optimistic	Practical
Work Ethic…	Ambitious	Balanced	Driven	Dedicated
View of Authority…	Relaxed, Polite	Unimpressed	Love/Hate	Respectful
Leadership By…	Achievement, Pulling together	Competence	Consensus	Hierarchy
Relationships…	Loyal, inclusive	Reluctant to Commit	Personal Gratification	Self-sacrifice
Perspective…	Civic-minded	Self-reliant	Team-oriented	Civic-minded
Turn-Offs…	Unfairness	Cliché, Hype	Political Incorrectness	Vulgarity

What the Generations Have in Common

Working across generations, it's easy to identify differences between and among groups. However, it's important to recognize their similarities as well.

If we use a one-size-fits-all approach to leading all of the generations, we're likely to only resonate well with one segment. It's only natural to "go on auto-pilot" and communicate, contribute, and lead in a way that makes perfect sense to us.

Successful organizations are ensuring that company leaders not only understand these similarities but create work environments that support them. According to recent research conducted by Randstad and the Center for Creative Leadership, employees across the generations agree that:

- Work is a vehicle for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, not just for a paycheck.
- Workplace culture is important.
- Being trusted to get the job done is the number one factor that defines job satisfaction.
- They need to feel valued by their employer to be happy in the job.
- They want flexibility in the workplace.
- Success is finding a company they can stay with for a long time.
- Career development is the most valued form of recognition, even more so than pay raises and enhanced titles.

Six Principles for Managing Generations

Creating a climate of respect for differences throughout your organization is a critical foundation for bringing out the best in employees from each generation. Building upon shared values, attitudes and behaviors while reaching out in ways that are appropriate to each group will be the key to a manager's success. Company leaders would do well to follow **The Titanium Rule** which guides us to **Do unto others, keeping their preferences in mind!**

Organizations succeed when they create a work culture that encourages people from all generations to contribute from their strengths. When people have to spend energy turning off their natural style to conform with the mainstream, they lag behind on the productivity curve. **In order to get the best out of our talent, we must create organizational cultures where everyone contributes out of their strengths MOST of the time.** Sure, everyone needs to adapt and flex their style once in a while. But, the organization really loses out when people flex their natural style all the time. At the end of the day, we don't get their best work either.

With generational strengths, think of this like you do your dominant hand. If you're naturally right-handed—but you realize everyone at the top of your organization, where you want to eventually be, is left-handed—you are likely to start using your left-hand. You're probably not very skillful with that left hand. It's likely that people could barely read what you might write. And you'd be fighting with your brain much of the day because it's wired for right-handedness. Dominant hand research says that people

with "true" ambidexterity only make up about one percent of the population. In order to get their best output, we need people to operate in ways that make sense to them.

Keys to Make Your Generational Tapestry Thrive

- **Know your company demographics—internally and externally.** Gather data about your current customers and target where you want to increase market share. Bather data and learn about your employees and consider how well your staff mirrors current and projected customers.

- **Be intentional about creating and responding to generational diversity.** Identify needed skill sets within the company and recruit new staff from across the generations. Seek out individuals from under-represented generations for work teams, boards and advisory groups.

- **Build on strengths.** The most effective mixed-generation work teams recognize the unique strengths of each individual. Successful companies find ways to bring out those strengths and help each individual develop his or her talents so they can reach their own potential and contribute in their own ways.

- **Offer options.** Recognize that people from a mix of generations have differing needs and preferences. Design your human resources strategies to meet varied employee needs. Offer a variety of benefits, flexible schedules, and an array of opportunities for professional growth and advancement.

- **Develop an understanding of and appreciation for generational differences and strengths.** Find ways to learn about your employees' needs, perspectives and interests and share that learning across the organization. Structure opportunities for less experienced employees from each generation to learn from their more experienced and knowledgeable colleagues, while tapping into the natural strengths that each brings.

- **Intentionally train people to communicate effectively across generations.** This just doesn't happen organically. Communication styles and levels of comfort with varied technologies differ from one generation to the next. Successful companies recognize those differences, employ an array of communication methods and teach employees how to reach out effectively to their colleagues and insure that their communication approaches are inclusive and welcoming.

About Tammy Hughes

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Tammy Hughes is a dynamic facilitator, presenter and business leader with over two decades experience in a broad spectrum of organizations and industries around the globe. She launched her career at Xerox Corporation. Participants' response to Tammy as a session leader is overwhelmingly positive. She is fascinated by and knowledgeable about generational and values differences—and her passion permeates her style. She paints the research with fun, real-life stories from the workplace and her life. By working

with participants to identify workable strategies, she facilitates dramatically increased business results. Tammy is the author of a White Paper, "Born in One Generation, Thinking Like Another." With Pat Heim, she is co-author of the third edition of *Hardball for Women* (Plume, 2015).