

Mentoring the Gap

Tips on Closing the Generation Gaps That Hamper Effective Mentoring Relationships

By Diane Thielfoldt and Devon Scheef

The Learning Café

How modern is your mentoring? Like every other business practice you employ, mentoring should continually evolve and grow to match your organization's shifting workforce, needs and environment. And that includes improving how different generations of participants in your mentoring program work together. It's time to take a look at cross-generational mentoring partnerships and see how well they're working.

One simple way to maximize mentoring is to give all participants the tools they need to bridge generation gaps in their mentoring relationships. Those tools aren't girders and ropes, but rather awareness, appreciation and a basic understanding of the common differences that the four generations in today's workplace have—differences in perspective, behavior and approach that can cause mentors and partners to miss the mark on important messages.

their partner's differences, and can cause learning to shut down.

Those in a cross-generational mentoring relationship must navigate six gaps – one for each of their different generational views on key workplace issues. Participants should consider each of these as an opportunity to learn about other people, to discover new ways to communicate and work, and to be better prepared for working in a multi-generational environment.

The Generations Defined

***Silent Generation* – born 1933-1945**

***Baby Boomers* – born 1946-1964**

***Generation X* – born 1965-1976**

***Millennials* – born 1977-1998**

Cross-Generational Mentoring: Challenges and Opportunities

Recent research conducted by The Learning Café indicates that most of today's mentoring involves cross-generational relationships. This is good news, because we know that when the participants are different from one another, a higher degree of reciprocal learning can take place. So if you have mentoring pairs or teams that are not cross-generational, you might want to mix things up.

However, the cross-generational component does reveal some gaps – or as we like to phrase it, some different perspectives, work styles, behaviors and expectations. These differences can feel like generation chasms to those who don't understand

1. Expectations

Members of different generations have very different expectations of their job, their employer, and thus their mentoring. For example, while the oldest generation is accustomed to putting their heads down and getting things done (and expects the same of coworkers of all ages), Gen X's expectations were formed when they saw their parents laid off or face job insecurity in the 1980s. They have redefined loyalty, and are interested in what their employer can do for them in terms of new skills and opportunities. And Millennials, the youngest generation in the workplace, bring with them an "I want it all now!" attitude.

What happens when a Silent Generation manager mentors a Millennial, and expects that person to take a suggestion without questions or negotiation? The answer is, nothing happens – the mentoring moment can be a failure. But if that mentor has learned a bit about how Millennials think, what they value and why they are the way they are, she can subtly change the way she presents information, suggestions and direction so that her protégé blossoms.

2. Career

Each generation has a different idea of how their job progression should happen. Millennials, for example, often look for quick movement to the next thing. This trait may be seen as an unrealistic expectation of promotion, when in fact it is a hunger for new knowledge and skills – an ideal trait in a mentoring participant! On the other side of the career spectrum are the Boomers, who enjoy a long stay in a position that allows them to attain mastery. Because mentors commonly give career advice, and naturally do so from their own mindset, a Boomer who expects a younger worker to share his expectations will be tuned out. The take-away lesson here is, find out what your mentoring partner expects and values in her career and tailor your advice to her perspective.

3. Communication

This is an area of generational differences that everyone has noticed. Millennials like to communicate quickly and briefly – texting or tweeting – while Gen X is more about e-mail. Boomers consider meetings (ideally, in person) the best way to communicate, and Silents prefer written communication. All of these methods are fine, and often appropriate.

A best practice for beginning (or re-examining) a mentoring partnership is to discuss how you'll communicate with each other. If preferences are wide apart – texting vs. weekly one-hour meetings, for example, find a middle ground or acceptable combination of methods.

4. Management style

The generational view of effective management style ranges widely from military commander (Silents) to a friendly coach (Millennials). Whether the mentor views herself as managing her mentoring partner or is simply instilling lessons in leadership, it's important to overcome this difference. Know that Boomers prefer a collaborative manager and Gen X likes an entrepreneurial one. You may not be able to change your style, but don't reject their preferences.

5. Feedback

Any good mentoring relationship involves a great deal of feedback. How that feedback is delivered plays a part

5 Signs *That Your Mentoring Program Needs a Refresh*

- 1 Participants have stopped meeting or talking regularly.
- 2 You hear comments like “it’s not real,” “not connecting” and “doesn’t understand me.”
- 3 Discussions stay at a superficial level, instead of candid dialogue.
- 4 Mentors seem frustrated and are concerned about wasting their time.
- 5 Mentoring relationships seem hierarchical, rather than co-equal with reciprocal teaching and learning.

in its effectiveness, and delivery should vary for each generation. Withhold feedback from a member of the Silent generation, and he'll figure that “no news is good news,” so he must be doing everything well. Similarly, Boomers equate pay raises with positive feedback and may look no further for improvement. Gen X on the other hand is eager for feedback, and feels no fear when hearing “come into my office for some feedback.” Millennials are also fine with feedback, as long as it's delivered with a positive spin. One challenge with this much-coached generation is that you may be the first person to point out that they have something to improve upon! So use a coaching tone when you give feedback; they're used to that.

6. Change

Some generations, such as the Silents and Boomers, are more leery of organizational change than others. Silents need to know how a change is going to personally impact them, while Boomers may be more reluctant to abandon how things are currently done. Understand these reservations and you'll be able to address them and make a change more palatable. Also know that Millennials are not just confident during change, they may well be willing to add to it with boundary-pushing ideas of their own.

Mentoring Tips for Each Generation

Now that you're aware of the six most common gaps that cross-generational mentoring relationships must bridge, here are a few "dos and don'ts" from The Learning Café for getting mentoring relationships in sync.

Millennials – 140 Characters of Mentoring

The "Life Style, Work Style" generation is the most coached and mentored generation to enter the workplace. Because of their structured childhoods, they are familiar with and appreciate what mentoring can do for them. And when called upon to be mentors, they return the favor.

DO provide structure and support in any work environment, including mentoring.

DO use a "zoom in, zoom out" approach to explaining processes. Millennials don't yet have the experience to know the big picture, and they always benefit from detail.

DON'T ignore their high expectations. What may sound like an expectation of promotion may be a desire for new knowledge and skills.

DON'T create a mentoring process that's too slow or too long. While 24 month rotation programs were once the vogue, most Millennials are looking for a faster-paced, high-impact mentoring experience.

Gen X – "Hands-off" Mentoring

No longer the new kids on the block and solidly mid-career, the "Work to Live" generation is sharing and seeking mentoring partnerships as they look for the straight-up scoop on how their career is playing out.

DO be aware of their use of the career lattice. Gen X still finds lateral moves useful, rather than seeking higher positions.

DO understand the power of casual connections. Mentoring doesn't have to be structured or formal; Gen X is comfortable seeking out mentoring when they need it.

DON'T give them step-by-step instructions. These mature workers have moved beyond this.

DON'T play the authority card. As experienced workers, Gen X is looking for equal, reciprocal mentoring partnerships.

Boomers – Casual, Conversational Mentoring

Once known as the "Live to Work" generation, time and maturity have mellowed this generation's workaholic ethic as they address life issues related to aging parents and growing children or grandchildren.

DO help them stay relevant. They don't want to retire – they want to redefine their work, revitalize and rewire.

DO encourage their natural quest for self-improvement. Boomers know they can always improve, and they like to "play to their strengths."

DON'T provide too many rules or too much structure. With their wealth of experience, Boomers understand that the partnership is the key to effective mentoring, not the structure.

DON'T forget to express appreciation. Boomers have done the 'heavy lifting' in organizations for the better part of three decades. They are sensitive about being cast aside for incoming generations.

Silents – Give & Take Mentoring

Long known for "Work First" then play, this generation has much to give as mentors. And they are still willing to learn, too.

DO encourage their contribution and collaboration. Silents place value on their ability to contribute, and they take it seriously.

DO ask them to share their knowledge legacy. Help them pass along their implicit and explicit job knowledge.

DON'T think they're too old to learn. Silents have adapted admirably to many changes – including a tremendous technological explosion during their careers – and will continue to do so.

DON'T dismiss their technical expertise. As the generation that has seen the most positive technological impact on their lives, many Silents are extremely technically adept.

Conclusion

Modern mentoring relationships are becoming more reciprocal. The traditional teacher/student model is being replaced with a true partnership, where all parties teach and learn. In cross-generational mentoring, participants are certain to learn even more, as they discover new viewpoints and work styles. This undoubtedly leads to new valuable insights into colleagues and others, which in turn enriches the entire workplace.

For more information, contact:

Diane Thielfoldt
DianeT@thelearningcafe.net
(843) 471-2374

Devon Scheef
DevonS@thelearningcafe.net
(805) 494-0124



www.thelearningcafe.net

