

Gen Y and Professionalism: 5 Tips for Traversing the Generation Gap in the Workplace

We've read about it, we've seen it on 60 Minutes and maybe we've even directly experienced it. Generation Y workers have a sense of entitlement, they lack respect for authority and they have the nerve to demand evenings and weekends off. They are shaking things up and we aren't sure we like it.

The implications for our economy and global competitiveness are dire. Except when you remember that we head for hell in a handbasket about every twenty years, each time a new generation reaches maturity and starts exerting its influence on the world as we know it. Generation after generation laments the rise of the youth and the youth absolutely delight in providing something to lament about.

So how do we bridge the gap and create common ground where we all win? We provide a common language of professionalism that engages workers of all generations.

Here are five tips for connecting with the next wave of employees.

Tip 1: Look for What We Have in Common—Are we really that different? On the surface, it appears so. We've grown up with different social norms and values, parenting styles and world events, not to mention huge differences in available technology. Of course this leads to divergent expectations and views of how the world works. However, at the core of what makes us tick as humans, we are the same. We want to build lives for ourselves and to achieve our personal version of success. When you are working with a 20-something, remember he's not an alien life form, he has hopes and dreams like everyone else. Connect at that level

Tip 2: Don't Homogenize Gen Y—The moment we start lumping entire groups of people into a certain set of expected behaviors and stereotypes we have marginalized and underestimated them. The labels we give and characteristics we assign to historically significant generational groups are a simplification device. They are for the convenience of social commentators, historians, economists and advertisers who are motivated to identify patterns to use to draw conclusions. While there are definitely some patterns of behavior and attitudes in groups of age cohorts, don't assume that they define every 25-year-old you encounter. Approach each young worker as an individual. Get to know her and find out what motivates and inspires her.

Tip 3: Reframe Issues as Opportunities—What you focus on expands. You have a choice of whether you are going to give your energy and attention to all the perceived shortcomings of Gen Y or the gifts they bring to the established workforce. They bring all of the energy of youthful enthusiasm, creativity and a sense that they can't possibly fail. Let's not be in such a rush to tell them why they are all wrong. Let's take advantage of the fact that they believe anything is possible and channel it toward the common goal.

Tip 4: Share and Learn—Undoubtedly, those of us with years in the corporate world have a lot of experiences and learnings to share. And, at the same time, let's not get caught in the "this is the way we've always done it" trap or the "you should listen to me because I'm older and wiser" mindset. Gen Y employees are much more likely to engage and learn when they feel they can also contribute. You never know what fresh ideas may come forward from a bright, young mind. And, remember the old adage, show them, don't tell them. The more you model what you want to teach versus lecture about it, the less likely it is that you will be subject to "knee-jerk" resistance to anyone older and more experienced.

Tip 5: Give Them the Tools—Most people have never been trained on what it means to be "professional" and that includes Gen Y. Appeal to their self interest: Don't make learning about professionalism into something you impose on them because you want to change them. Instead, make it an invitation to be intentional about their impact on the world, with room for personal expression. Include professionalism and business etiquette as part of your corporate curriculum for all employees, not just Gen Y. In this way you will create a common language and a starting point from which to build collaborative, cooperative and successful working relationships across generations.

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About Deb Dominguez : As a professional coach, consultant, writer and workshop leader, Deb Dominguez, president and CEO of TrainManagers.com.

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