

## Communication: What's the Best Way?

*As a 55 year old seasoned manager of marketing for a highly successful advertising company walks into work, he strolls by the office of a younger account representative who is already in her office. He says, "Good morning, Chelsea." But, as she does each morning, Chelsea barely lifts her head from her computer to say hello. However, when the manager gets to his desk, he finds the typical email from her filled with questions and comments that she has managed to type all in the time it took him to walk from her office to his.*

This is the type of communication challenges that our workforce is experiencing everyday given the different communication styles of each of the generations in the workplace. Is one generation's style more correct than another? Is there one communication style that is better than another? It depends...on the people you work with, the clients you interact with and the culture of your company.

As part of our research for Bridging the Generation Gap, Linda Gravett, PhD, SPHR, CEQC and I asked 500 individuals in each of the generations what their preferred communication method was in order to learn more about the different communication styles. We quickly learned there were definitely preferences based on the generations:

- **Radio Babies (Born 1930 – 1945)**  
Radio Babies grew up with the least amount of technology, which makes it no surprise that they reported that they prefer to communicate face-to-face about problems, concerns and suggestions. Their second option for communication might be a phone call; however, they get very frustrated when they call someone and continually get a recording – or worse yet, no return phone call.
- **Baby Boomers (Born 1946 – 1964)**  
Baby Boomers are the largest generation, which means they are use to having lots of people around. Their preferred mode of communication is to have meetings – lots of meetings – to tackle problems and concerns. Consensus building is important for many Boomers, and face-to-face discussion is their preferred way to make this happen. A conference phone call is a second option, as long as everyone has an opportunity to participate.
- **Gen Xers (Born 1965 – 1976)**  
Gen Xers tend to value time and have grown up with more technology than the previous two generations. As such, they reported that they tend to prefer to communicate via email because it's efficient and in-the-moment; they don't like to waste time or energy. Meetings are for rare occasions when no other option is available, and you may even find them checking their email or sending emails to others while sitting in a meeting.

- **Gen Ys (Born 1977 – 1990)**

Gen Y's have always been surrounded by technology, that's all they know, and are always plugged in with lots of options. They don't really see a need to answer the phone because it is much quicker and easier to shoot off an email or better yet a text message. They're accustomed to multitasking, so Instant Messaging them is fine too.

- **Millennials (Born 1991 – Present)**

The Millennials are the newest generation to enter the workforce; so we have the least amount of research available about them. In fact, some sociologists actually group the Gen Ys and Millennials together as one generation; however, we feel there is a huge enough difference between the older Gen Ys and even the older Millennials that they need to be separated.

From the initial research that we've done, we've found the Millennial generation definitely has a strong preference for communicating via text messaging and Instant Messaging. However, if that doesn't work, they prefer face-to-face. We've even witnessed conversations via texting (perhaps an argument) that are taking place almost as though they are in another world and then the follow-up face-to-face conversations (where all is fine) are completely different as though the text conversations never happened.

As you can imagine, with these different preferences, many conflicts can erupt if someone doesn't take the initiative to address them and accommodate the other individual. As common sense would suggest, your best solution for dealing with a co-worker, boss, or subordinate would be to approach them and ask what their preferred mode of communication would be and share your preferred style. If you find they are different, discuss how you can find ways to accommodate each other. Perhaps you can determine certain situations when your way works and other scenarios when their preferred way will work. You may even learn from each other that in some situations it is easier to use the other individual's preferred communication style with ease.

Finally, there are some basic common courtesies to keep in mind that will help your communications with other generations to flow more smoothly:

- 1) **Engage in Active Listening**

Be sure you are actively listening whether in a group or one-on-one session. Too many times, I've observed individuals, especially from different generations, disengaged in conversations. Their eyes are wondering and their non-verbals clearly show they are not paying attention to the person talking. I've seen this from both older and younger workers. Active listening is not only a sign of respect, but it will help you improve your communication, understanding, and ultimately minimize your conflict.

## **2) Utilize the Experiences of Everyone**

Engage everyone in the conversation. Someone younger has a great deal to offer, including fresh new perspectives that you may not have even thought about. And someone older has typically “been there” and “done that” and you can benefit from the expertise and experience they bring. You need diverse perspectives in conversations to help round them out. Use this diversity and don’t discount anyone’s ideas.

## **3) Focus on Job-Related Common Ground**

Keep your conversations focused so you don’t drift off and make a mistaken comment such as “you probably don’t understand because you are too old/too young”, “you may not know about this because it is before your time...”, or, “I have grandkids older than you...” These types of comments only create friction and don’t foster cooperation, and certainly not “love”.

## **4) Share Opportunities to Lead**

Don’t always assume that the most senior person should lead the discussion or project. If you are working on a team, don’t hesitate to let a younger team member take the lead. The older team member may not want to be the leader...again; been there and done that. And, the younger team member may want the leadership experience and appreciate some mentoring.

Overall, the biggest key we’ve found to solving generational issues comes down to RESPECT. And, respect applies to communication issues as well. Remember to respect that others may communicate differently than you; that doesn’t mean that your way is no longer the best or right way – neither is best or right. The “right” communication method is the one that is most effective for all the groups involved – and it may mean using multiple methods of communicating. Learn from each other and help each grow from the experiences you can share with one another.

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