

Managing Conflict Across Generations

by Linda Gravett, Ph.D., SPHR

In a recent survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 40% of human resource professionals have observed conflict among employees as a result of generational differences! In organizations with 500 or more employees, 58% of HR professionals reported conflict between younger and older workers, largely due to differing perspectives on work ethic and work-life balance. This data tells me that there's a huge potential for miscommunication, low morale and poor productivity unless the generations learn to handle conflict successfully.

I hear the debate about work ethic in the workplace almost every day. The Radio Baby generation worked hard out of necessity because of The Great Depression and men being away fighting WWII, leaving women to fill demanding factory positions. This generation taught its children, the Baby Boomers, the meaning of sacrifice and "climbing the ladder" to success by paying your dues. Small wonder, then, that members of these two generations aren't totally receptive to the suggestion by younger employees that work hours, work rules, and work methods should be open to discussion. In the minds of many older employees, there **is** no discussion.

The recommendation I constantly make to the over 40 managers I consult with is to consider the *results* or objectives *rather than the process* of reaching those results. If a job lends itself to telecommuting, why not expand the pool of employees who may be interested in that job by providing that option? Technology allows Internet and phone communication between customers and employees to appear seamless, and the customers want answers and assistance, not the knowledge that the person helping them is sitting behind a desk in a downtown office.

I'm not suggesting, however, that work quality be compromised in any way. If most customers of an organization have made it clear that they want to have "live" access to staff – in person – as early as 8:00 a.m., then employees need to be accessible at 8:00 a.m. and provide a quality service. The Gen Y'ers, however, will want to know why this is necessary instead of an abrupt, "this is the way it is." I think that's fair.

If an organization has options and benefits available to all employees that help make their balance between work and family life amenable, I think we'll see less conflict over this issue. If work-family balance options only provide balance for young parents between 25-30, certainly other segments of the workforce will be frustrated and conflict will be a result.

Responses to Conflict

My mother worked as a nurse for the local hospital in my home town for almost 30 years. There were many times when she, or her peers, disagreed with nurse supervisors or hospital administrators. She would express her frustration to me, and in turn I'd always suggest that she respectfully bring these concerns to the attention of those in leadership positions. Her reply? "Oh no.....they're the bosses. I couldn't do that!" I've heard similar stories from other members of the Radio Baby generation. They tend to respect authority (even if they don't necessarily agree with or respect the individual in the position). Confronting a person in a supervisory position is not the method of choice among Radio Babies for dealing with conflict.

Baby Boomers are more likely to respond to potential conflict by saying, "Let's bring the team together and we'll resolve this." Perhaps the person in the top leadership role will make a

decision on the final disposition of an issue, but there's probably going to be some input from everyone involved.

So, along come the Gen X'ers: independent, individualistic, clear on what they want to achieve in the workplace. They will largely ignore older coworkers' efforts to "tell them what to do" or parent them. They will tell their coworkers in a straightforward way if there's something they disagree with or don't like. And according to the Gen Y'ers in the workplace, there's a lot the X'ers don't like!

Generation Y likes to take a more casual, relaxed approach to the workplace. They enjoy a friendly atmosphere and calling coworkers, and customers for that matter, by their first names. This is a generation that doesn't cope well with "in your face" conflict, such as unhappy customers complaining curtly about service. Coaching on confronting issues, and people, in a positive and assertive way is definitely needed for many in this generation.

Providing Constructive Feedback

There are certainly some generally accepted, effective ways for giving constructive criticism and feedback that will minimize conflict. I'll mention a few. Additionally, some approaches work best for older employees and some for younger generations. This is another one of those cases where "one size does not fit all."

In all cases, I recommend that you remember these key points for offering constructive criticism:

- Focus on the issue
Stay away from personalities and peripheral issues and simply hone in on the problem or concern under discussion. Don't jump all over the place yourself or let the other person distract you from the subject. And the subject should be work-focused, not personal.
- Emphasize key points
There are probably two or three key points that are critical to the discussion. Be clear and precise with those points so they're not buried under less important details.
- Be specific about what you think or want
Lead with your concern or main point, then let the other person know exactly what needs to change and why (consequences of the status quo).
- Acknowledge the others' point of view
Whether or not you agree with another's point of view, they have a right to say why they believe or act as they do. You're more likely to change their mind, or their behaviors, if you understand what compels that behavior.
- Avoid "hot button" language
Stay away from name-calling or using demeaning words. Maintain your dignity and help preserve the other person's dignity.

Based on my interviews with members of each generation, as well as life experiences, I have some suggestions for providing constructive feedback across generations.

Radio Babies. Express appreciation for their efforts. Acknowledge that they have the interests of their department/organization at heart. Let them know how changes in their behavior will increase their value to the organization.

Baby Boomers. Emphasize the need for their input into team success. Discuss an action plan together for improving their skills or changing behaviors.

Gen X'ers. Be straightforward. Be honest. Focus on results expected and offer tools and techniques to help them acquire knowledge or skills. Don't start any conversation with, "Back in my day....."

Gen Y'ers. Emphasize business reasons for changes you ask them to make. Explain how what they do, or don't do, affects the company's viability. Let them know you're there to help and will touch base with them on how they're doing...soon.

Turning Conflict Into Collaboration – Tactics that Provide Positive Results

The most successful tactic I've ever used or observed for getting positive results from initial conflict is to help identify what the business problem is and call on people involved to attack the problem, not each other. I'll share an example that I think illustrates this point.

A male, 40-year-old department head in an organization I've consulted with was frustrated because one of his direct reports, a 25-year-old woman, seemed to ignore his orders and "do things her own way." The department head didn't like having his authority undermined because he'd worked for 15 years to get to his position. The woman who was his direct report joined the company within the previous year and had experience with other work methods that she felt provided results that were just as effective. If she disagreed with her boss (or anyone else), she'd say so. They were at an impasse and the young woman was ready to quit when they called me in.

Instead of starting off by asking them, "what's your problem?" I asked them about the mission of the company and the objectives of their department. Interestingly, this conversation surfaced one important fact. They both agreed on the mission and vision of the organization, as well as the primary objectives of the department! And, they were clearly surprised that they were in agreement. Then I asked them both what their customers wanted and how they knew if customer needs were met. Again, they both had the same thoughts about what their customers wanted, and the level of quality necessary to satisfy customer demands. Again, they were both surprised. By this time, they were loosening up about the process for getting results. The department head could see that his employee had the interests of the company and their customers in mind when doing her work. The direct report could see the same with her boss. I left them both shortly afterwards, after I asked them to discuss suggestions they EACH had to enhance the product and services they provided. They were deeply involved in a constructive conversation when I left.

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