

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Building Language Bridges

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Have you ever heard the saying, “It’s not what you say, but how you say it?” Communication is far more than the words that are used, and takes tonality, body language and even various communication platforms into consideration. Furthermore, communication across generations can become even more challenging with all the above being heavily misconstrued.

With technology and cultural norms being significant factors in this, these miscommunications can lead to a decline in collaboration with one another, conflict and an overall lack of harmony, which doesn’t lend well to workplace culture and productivity. This happens more often than you may think, even between generations.

For example, my youngest brother and I are nine years apart, both considered Gen Z, yet despite this, his vernacular feels like a foreign language at times. Just for kicks, any idea what the sentence, “Bro, you’re goated, straight up ate that presentation; so much rizz, no cap” means?

Or, on the other hand, how about the phrase, “Not to be a square, but I’ve got to peace out; I’m jonesing to catch some Zs so I don’t get aggro.” From what I read in history books, this was a sentence among the Boomer generation (just kidding, I found it on Google in typical Gen-Z/Millennial fashion). My point being, sometimes it can feel like we’re speaking a different language to one another—and that’s only in terms of words used.

Luckily, a lot of these misunderstandings and the friction that can arise from them aren’t inevitable, so let’s talk about how to talk!

Communication by generation

As a quick refresher, Baby Boomers are those born from 1946-1964, Gen X is 1965-1980, Millennials are 1981-1996 and Gen Z is 1997-2010, comprising the four most prominent generations in today’s workforce. Each generation brings a unique set of skills, experiences, values, expectations and communication styles, with the level of generational diversity in the current workplace bringing more challenges than ever before. Mitigating these differences begins with understanding where each group is coming from, allowing for these variances to be addressed properly, and everyone to be truly heard and understood.

Baby Boomers were heavily influenced by conversations around the dinner table, radio and black-and-white television, so in-person and auditory interactions hold special resonances for them. There's just something about the nuance of an actual voice that creates a personal connection and conveys a different level of sincerity that still holds value to this group.

Gen X grew up with magazines, color television and the first video games, playing a role in their preference for visual communication. They appreciate clear and concise information that allows them to learn quickly, which reflects their pragmatic and adaptive approach to work.

Millennials experienced a more digitally connected world, with technology advancing rapidly and heavily influencing their communication preferences. Email, texting and instant messaging enable quick, convenient and collaborative communication, which they tend to prefer.

Gen Z was the first to be fully immersed in the digital age, lending to their preference for all things brief, quick and fast, with digital platforms that allow for shorter bursts of thought. This is certainly the era for instantaneous and micro-information, and the attention spans of people nowadays have evolved—aka shortened—because of it.

It's important to note that these generational traits are generalities and not necessarily the case for everyone, as outliers certainly exist. I know Boomers who love texting and social media, and as a Millennial/Gen Z myself (I think my age category is a weird subgroup called "Zillennials"), I hugely prefer in-person conversations and am not the most tech-savvy. But, ultimately, it's important in any capacity to know and understand each other's backgrounds, values and expectations to foster a healthy, satisfying work environment.

Understanding where they're coming from

So why exactly does this matter? Unless you thrive in chaos and conflict (if so, please read my previous writings on the importance of emotional intelligence), it goes without saying that harmonious workplaces are ideal and proven to positively impact productivity, collaboration and morale. When it comes to communication styles and expectations, diversity isn't inherently problematic; it's when these differences clash with no level of adaptation or understanding that issues arise. This looks like friction in feedback styles, confusion due to misaligned expectations on communication platforms, approaches with customers and even expectations when it comes to response timing.

There are various solutions to this problem, such as effectively demonstrating empathy and seeking to understand the other person, adapting your communication to a style that better resonates with the other person, creating space for regular and constructive feedback, celebrating one another's successes and discussing what one another's ideas of success look like, and being open to giving and receiving mentorship from each other. We all have something to learn from each other, regardless of age and career stage.

Additional adaptation strategies to avoid conflict could involve setting clear, mutual communication expectations, such as response-time windows, agreed-upon availability, preferred communication platforms and so on. Familiarizing yourself with your peers will also allow you to engage in resonant forms of communication, and you may need to adjust your approach here and there depending on the person you're interacting with. Embrace the adaptation and compromise, push yourself even when it feels uncomfortable at times (as the unknown and unfamiliar often does) and be willing to step outside of your comfort zone.

Various industry leaders have asked me how to effectively manage Gen Z more than any other group, voicing unanimous frustration over their shyness, their inability to make eye contact and their sensitivity to direction or

feedback. Unfortunately, the older generations, especially leaders, are going to need to make an extra effort to meet the younger generations where they are and establish that level of trust and connection. Keep in mind that the younger generations, particularly Gen Z, are an incredibly anxious group of professionals and a true product of the digital era; they don't yet have many of the skill sets that the older generations were both born into and have had ample time to develop throughout their lives and careers. I assure you, when you make it a point to extend that olive branch, you'll see a difference in how you're received by your younger employees and team members.

Communication and embracing generational diversity aren't just a strategy for success, they will unlock a whole new level of potential that will allow your organization's collective growth, harmony and performance to flourish. Each generation has a unique perspective and an abundance of knowledge and talent to share; they just need to give each other the space to be heard. When you look beyond your differences, you reveal the power of shared wisdom.

Remember: Your goal is to build a bridge, not a wall, between one another. **GT**

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