



# PROVEN STRATEGIES

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***Business Behavior and Development Series***

## **Generations at Work: Boomers, GenXers & Nexters**

Mike Nordbye is principal of Proven Strategies, a business and management development firm. Recognizing that companies and situations are unique, Mike adapts the best management and leadership strategies to produce measurable results quickly for his clients. Being sensitive to individual situations, Mike skillfully adapts the philosophy and theory of validated growth strategies into practical, easy to implement solutions that have both immediate and sustainable positive impact on the bottom line. His goal always is to see ideas and systems translated into realities.

Mike holds a Ph.D. in Adult Learning Strategies, an MBA and a Masters Degree in Organizational Behavior and Development. For the past 15 years Mike has been working one-on-one and with groups to create meaningful results over a broad range of industries. Clients describe him as being direct with a sense of humor that provides for a light touch combined with an innate ability to inspire and create confidence.

Never before in the history of the workplace are so many different age groups working together in such close quarters. Veterans, Baby Boomers, GenXers and now the Nexters are working shoulder-to-shoulder, cubicle-to-cubicle. Not only is workspace reduced, but as organizations flatten out, there is less separation by job description.

Never have so many different generations with such diversity in worldviews and work philosophies been asked to team up and work together.

There have been multiple generations working in organizations before, but they were usually separated from each other by virtue of their job descriptions and a system of hierarchy. Senior employees were mostly male, white, and were in command positions. Middle-aged employees tended to be in middle management. And the younger workers were everywhere else. Their contacts were mostly with their peers, or one level up, with their supervisor.

Generational mixing was rare, or significantly structured by formality and protocol. When senior employees made decisions, they were “handed down” and communicated to the younger workers through the line supervisor. There was no sharing of how the decisions were made, the strategy behind the order, or for that matter, any requests for input or feedback.

### **A New Diversity Issue: Generational Differences**

Today social and physical separations are minimized as barriers to generational mixing. Sometimes the person in charge may be younger than those he or she manages. As younger workers bring technological skills that some seniors may not possess, they may find themselves supervising older employees.

As profitable businesses strive to run leaner and meaner, diversity issues of people under stress can slow down productivity, affect customer relations, increase employee turnover, and cause retention of good employees to be a costly problem.

Merit is overcoming longevity in the deciding factors that contribute to promotion. This is not a bad thing, after all. But as younger employees compete for the same jobs – and often get them – as older senior employees, there is often strife in the workplace.

There are three very distinct generations vying for positions in a workplace of shrinking upward opportunity. There is soon to be a fourth generation joining them. The Veterans, the Baby Boomers, the Generation X, will soon be encountering the youngest sector of the job force: the Nexters, or Generation Net.

In a recent web poll taken by *Fast Company* magazine, 69% of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “Does your workplace suffer from a generation rift?”

One respondent said, “At 19, I am part of the younger crowd in my workplace. I, nonetheless, take my job and professional development very seriously. I am upset at the treatment I receive from many of my older co-workers ... No matter how hard we try; we will always be the 'girls' or 'young ones' to them. It is demoralizing to be so disrespected when I put so much of myself into my work.”

On the other hand, another responded “no,” representing 31% of respondents, and said, “Our shared hunger for knowledge and the thrill of pooling our intellectual resources and discoveries creates a climate where age has become irrelevant. Personally, I find a work environment where I can learn from the 'seniors' and be pushed by the idealism and energy of the 'young ones' to be the ideal place to grow and create.”

One outcome of this generational blending can be creativity. People who come together from different perspectives always have the

potential to bring different thoughts and ideas to problem solving. The potential for positive creative synergy is immense.

Unfortunately, another outcome of this generational mixing is intergenerational conflict— differences in values, worldviews, ways of working, ways of talking, thinking, even dressing, which can set people in opposition to one another.

Here are some of the complaints overheard in the workplace:

- *“They have no work ethic. They’re just slackers.”*
- *“I have a rule: I don’t attend meetings after 5. I have a life.”*
- *“He’s been here 6 months and he wants a promotion!”*
- *“If the company isn’t loyal to me, I’m not loyal to them.”*
- *“You can’t tell them what to do. They have no idea about strategy.”*
- *“Just tell me what needs to be done. I want to run my own show.”*

Not understanding others’ perspectives on the world can be stressful, confusing and frustrating. It is fertile ground for conflict in the workplace, leading to an “us vs. them” mentality. In a workplace that is meant to do more with less, the demands for collaboration and compromise intensifies. The interdependent nature of work today cannot succeed with the underlying tension of intergenerational conflict. The need for understanding our differences and overcoming them is increased in order to create positive and fruitful working conditions.

Social demographers, the scientists who study the effects of population on society, use the term “cohort” to refer to people born in the same general time span who share key life experiences. Members of cohorts who come of age in lean times or war years tend to think and act differently than those born and raised in peace and abundance.



## How the Generations are Defined

When we look at the four generations that are working together, there are:

1. **Veterans**, those born between 1922 and 1943 (52 million people). This cohort was born before or during World War II and their earliest experiences are associated with that world event. Some also remember the Great Depression.
2. **The Baby Boomers**, 1943-1960 (73.2 million people). These people were born during or after World War II and raised in an era of extreme optimism, opportunity, and progress. Boomers, for the most part, grew up in two-parent households, safe schools, job security and post-war prosperity. They represent about two-thirds of all U.S. workers. On the job, they value loyalty, respect the organizational hierarchy, and generally wait their turn for advancement.
3. **Generation Xers**, 1960-1980 (70.1 million people). They were born after the Boomers into a rapidly changing social climate and economic recession, including Asian competition. They grew up in two-career families with rising divorce rates, downsizing, the dawning of the high-tech age, and the information age. On the job, they can be fiercely independent, like to be in control, and want fast feedback.
4. **Generation Nexters**, 1980-2000 (69.7 million people to date). Those born of Boomer parents and early Xers into our current high-tech, neo-optimistic times. Although the youngest workers, they represent the most technologically adept. They are fast learners and tend to be impatient.

( cf. Zemke, Raines and Filipczak, *Generations at Work*, 2000.)

We all want to be seen as individuals, and we avoid stereotyping ourselves. Research has

shown that most of us underestimate how much we have in common with fellow members of our cohort.

Perhaps the biggest differences in the worldviews of these generational cohorts are their differing attitudes toward authority. In the workplace, this shows up in either accepting or questioning, or even rebelling, against traditional viewpoints and orders handed down from above.

Boomers have traditionally been brought up in a work environment that respected authority and hierarchy. Loyalty to the company was rewarded through promotions based on seniority. However, things have been changing and along with them, Boomers have too. Because of a rapidly shifting work force and corporate restructuring, many Boomers have changed jobs much more frequently than their parents.

This has meant that they are more often than not looking at their own career loyalty, rather than company loyalty. They have learned to question their superiors on the job, rather than blindly accepting that what's good for the company should also be good for them. Boomers who were brought up in an era of self-help movements are now turning to coaching for their own personal and professional development.

In contrast to the Boomers, the GenXers tend to want a more collaborative work environment, with an opportunity to share in developing goals and even in strategic planning. They want opportunity, flexibility and training. They expect immediate recognition through title, praise, promotions and pay. And they want a life outside of work – they won't sacrifice theirs for the corporation.

Boomers have adopted a team-based approach to business, because they have been eager to shed the command-and-control style of veterans. However the Nexters, the children of Boomers and older GenXers, may well thrive in a workplace that resembles what has been rejected. Some researchers



speculate that Nexters will resemble the veterans in many ways. They tend toward a belief in collective action, optimism about the future, and a trust in centralized authority. Although they haven't been in the workplace for long, they are already showing a strong will to get things done with great spirit.

Learning to accept and appreciate another's perspective means knowing and understanding what that person is all about. Often, exploring the seminal events that have helped to shape a person's worldviews, and in particular, their attitudes toward work, authority and teaming, can help further each other's understanding.

### Helping to Bridge the Generational Gap

Nothing distills conflict faster than sitting down and talking, asking questions, and inquiring with an open mind. Here are some suggestions when working with younger workers in order to bridge the generational gap.

1. Discuss expectations right way. "How do you see this project going?" "What are your expectations of yourself/ me/our team in this project?"
2. Inquire about immediate tasks, and then link them into strategic goals. "How does your doing this get you to where the company/the project/you personally want to be?" GenXers in particular tend to focus on immediate tasks rather than strategic goals.
3. Look for ways to cut bureaucracy and red tape. Younger workers have no patience for unessential delays. If you talk about barriers, come up with solutions already in hand.
4. Don't be put off by overt ambition. Younger workers don't believe that good work is automatically rewarded, and they are open about their career plans for advancement.
5. Keep up with technology. GenXers have little patience or respect for the ignorant or those unwilling to learn.

The companies that successfully deal with generational differences create a work culture that not only focuses on what needs to get done but also accommodates the various ways in which people approach work. They design workplaces that reflect the sensibilities of multiple generations, not just the preferences of top executives.

Smart companies that really care about their people are attuned to bridging the generation gap in the work environment. They believe that employees of all generations, and especially younger workers, see their work as something to be enjoyed and cultivated, not something to be endured.

Smart employers can hold on to their valuable human resources if they offer variety, stimulation, high learning and a chance to actually accomplish something – to make a positive difference in the world around them, including their work world. This most definitely includes offering coaching services to their valued employees.

### How Generationally Friendly is Your Workplace?

Please rate your workplace by answering according to these scores:

- 1 Completely false / Never
  - 2 Somewhat false / Rarely
  - 3 Somewhat true / Somewhat false / Occasionally
  - 4 Somewhat true / Usually
  - 5 Completely true / Always
1. Managers, leaders, and those chosen for desirable projects are usually a mix of ages, sexes and ethnicities.  
1      2      3      4      5
  2. Employees are treated like customers  
1      2      3      4      5
  3. We have discussions, sometimes with humor, about our differing viewpoints and perspectives.  
1      2      3      4      5



4. We discuss openly our different opinions about how we like to work, what makes work rewarding, and what motivates us and makes us productive.  
1      2      3      4      5
5. There is a minimum of office paper work and bureaucracy here.  
1      2      3      4      5
6. Decisions are usually discussed openly and strategic planning is explained before directives are handed down to be executed.  
1      2      3      4      5
7. There is opportunity for feedback and differing opinions and a means to communicate ideas and other perspectives to management.  
1      2      3      4      5
8. There is little back-stabbing, gossiping and political polarization because we have ample opportunity to discuss things openly and maturely.  
1      2      3      4      5
9. The work environment can be described as relaxed and comfortable, even when the pace may be intensified due to deadlines.  
1      2      3      4      5
10. There is an element of fun and enjoyment, along with a sense of challenge to learn and grow.  
1      2      3      4      5
11. Managers here adjust policies and procedures to fit the needs of individuals and the teams.  
1      2      3      4      5
12. Managers here are known for being straightforward.  
1      2      3      4      5
13. Managers here are willing to provide mentoring and access to coaching and training in order for employees to better themselves.  
1      2      3      4      5
14. Managers give those who report to them the big picture walong with specific goals and measures, then turn their people loose.  
1      2      3      4      5
15. Employees, from the newest recruit to seniors, are assumed to have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best.  
1      2      3      4      5
16. Work assignments are broad, providing variety and challenge and there is opportunity for lateral movement.  
1      2      3      4      5
17. This company markets internally, "selling" the company to employees and continually looking for ways to be the employer of choice.  
1      2      3      4      5

**Scoring:**

Under 50: Your organization is in danger of losing employees and incurring high costs of recruiting and training will seriously damage your bottom line.

50-59: Your organization is typical: Although you're doing some good things, you must make major improvements in your work environment if you are to thrive in today's competitive market.

60-69: Your turnover is probably lower than the industry average, but there's always room for improvement.

70-85: Congratulations: not only is your turnover lower than the average for your industry, and your work environment is so attractive to employees that recruiting takes care of itself.



## Resources for Generations at Work

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