Leading Multi-Generational Teams
Who’s Leading Whom?

While it is challenging to find a balance between the diverse needs and expectations of today’s workforce, the savvy leader can also find endless opportunities to increase productivity, foster innovation, and improve the overall work experience. Each generation, and every person, has unique qualities.

Amanda Holland, Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
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Introduction: Who’s Leading Whom?

As the work community faces institutional brain drain, a graying workforce, and an unusual and somewhat mystifying new generation of workers, effective leadership in the workplace is more essential than ever. Leadership training resources seem nearly endless and yet, the cry for help from seasoned managers on how to lead today’s workforce is swelling to epic proportions. What has changed?

Today’s workforce is unique in that, for the first time, four generations are in the workplace at the same time. A quick refresher on the four generations in the workforce today may help us address this situation. While experts do not agree on exact demarcations for the generations, the dates and ages in the table below are within the accepted range:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Millennial (Gen Y)</th>
<th>Generation X (Gen X)</th>
<th>Baby Boomer (Boomers)</th>
<th>Traditionalist (Veterans)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>16 – 28 years old</td>
<td>29 – 48 years old</td>
<td>49 – 65 years old</td>
<td>66 – 87 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate Population</td>
<td>73 million</td>
<td>58 million</td>
<td>80 million</td>
<td>52 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of US Workforce(^1)</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views on the Workplace</td>
<td>Insist on a work-life balance. More skeptical and unimpressed by authority, more self-reliant, and less willing to sacrifice for work.</td>
<td>“Work to live.” Expect work to be fun – and if it’s not fun, it better have significant, tangible rewards.</td>
<td>Value individuality, creativity, and personal fulfillment. Desire to “make a difference.”</td>
<td>Prefer conformity over individuality in the workplace. Used to strict, vertical lines of authority.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional information in table format is provided on page 11.

\(^1\) Data source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment status of the civilian non-institutional population by age, sex, and race, 2009 annual average
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Historically, the Baby Boomer generation has been a powerhouse in the workplace. Significantly larger than the Traditionalist and X generations, Boomers have held the majority in determining the shape of their workplace. Throughout the Baby Boomers’ careers, they have wielded a lot of influence and control over their work environment and work rules.

As a large generation, Millennials have grown up with control over their environment similar in scope to Boomers. In addition, they have been raised during the Self-Esteem Movement, which has provided a lifetime focus on what’s best for them as individuals. When Millennials, also referred to as “Mini Baby Boomers,” entered the workforce, existing management expected them to mirror the Boomers when it came to workplace protocol.

This expectation was not unreasonable. According to a 2008 study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), Millennials and Boomers share significant similarities, including a desire to work hard and the understanding that tradeoffs for the job may be necessary. The NACE study results beg the question: If these similarities exist, why aren’t managers' proven leadership skills working like they used to?
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NACE offers the following in explanation,

"Where we see differences between the generations are in the attributes they seek in employers. Today's graduates are focused on security and stability. They are looking for an employer who offers opportunity for advancement, job security, and a good benefits package. Those who graduated in the early '80s were more focused on self-actualization. They looked for organizations to provide them with the opportunity to use their skills, the opportunity for personal development, and recognition."²

![Image of people standing on rocks](image)

**Caption:** DOT staff at St. George Harbor, **Credit:** ©Richard Sewell, Alaska DOT&PF

As more Millennials enter the workforce, generational differences appear to be outweighing the similarities. One such result seems to be an increasing disconnect between Baby Boomer managers and Millennial workers. The immediate influence of Millennials in the workplace can be seen in the focus given to accommodating their wants and needs. This leads us to the question of who is leading whom?

² Gen Y and Late Baby Boomers Share Attitudes About Work; IPMA-HR HR Bulletin, [www.ipma-hr.org](http://www.ipma-hr.org) Oct 24, 2008
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Leadership Basics: For Every Generation

The good news is that four leadership principles appear to hold true across all of the generations in today’s workplace. Adhering to these alone can increase a leader’s success.

Set the Direction. Successful leaders develop a vision of where they see themselves, the team, and the organization in two, five, ten years. This vision often ties to the agency’s mission statement and is easily communicated to others. Leaders can involve others in defining the vision. They absolutely must ensure the team knows and understands the direction they’ve set. People like to know where they are going, why, and how they fit into the big picture.

Know Your Team. Leaders who take the time to understand the individuality of each person on their team get greater results. Identifying strengths, weaknesses, personal goals and interests, and each team member’s unique skills or needs allows a leader to achieve a higher level of teamwork and cooperation. Teamwork aligns individual mindsets toward a specific business purpose or goal and can encourage teams to reach their maximum potential.

Communicate. Leaders see their teams reach goals more effectively when the team members understand the where, what, when, why, who, and how of a project or objective. Leaders have a responsibility to clearly communicate their expectations and any consequences related to meeting or not meeting those expectations. People are more motivated and successful when they have a map to their destination and receive course corrections along the way.

Remember Leaders are Chosen. It takes more than a job title or work assignment to be a successful and effective leader. An individual’s influence as a leader rests solely in the hands of those who choose to follow. When a team accepts a leader and his/her direction, achievements often surpass requirements and expectations.
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Millennials: Just How Different Can They Be?

The newest generation to enter the workforce brings a very different set of skills, experiences, and expectations to the leadership table. Millennials, also known as Gen Y, have been described as "...ambitious, confident, hopeful and goal-oriented twenty-something employees who are taking corporate America by storm." This can be seen through the steadily rising number of Millennials who are already in mid-level supervisory positions or on the fast track for their chosen profession. As the Millennials become more prominent in the workplace, we are seeing their unique influence on the work community as a whole.

As leaders,

Millennials are confident in their abilities and ready to assume responsibility for the biggest deals. They let their teams decide how to work and communicate, as long as the teams produce. Millennial leaders are comfortable with telecommuting, texting in meetings, keeping the Facebook page open while at work, and allowing flexible hours. Strict work hours and office protocols can be frustrating to Millennial supervisors and result in miscommunication between them and their counterparts or superiors from a different generation.

Give Millennials the best chance for success by getting them into supervisor and/or leadership training early in their tenure. Millennials have a desire to learn and develop; help them understand why the work rules are in place and why it is in their best interest to follow the rules. Then, work with them to identify which work rules can be changed and give them the support needed to effect those changes.

As followers,

Millennials set high value on socializing, communication, and having a supportive work environment. In general, Millennials believe they walk in the door with a significant skill set and therefore, they deserve immediate recognition and a fast-track to the corner office, with a healthy balance between work and their personal life along the way. When leading Millennials, the successful manager understands their perspective of the world.

One possible path to a better understanding of how to motivate Millennials is the Beloit College Mindset List, a common recruitment and retention tool for today's savvy manager. Each year, Beloit College produces a list to identify life experience factors that may influence the graduating class' perspectives and expectations.

3 Generations in the Workplace – Motivating Generation Y; [www.beyond.com](http://www.beyond.com) 2008
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An excerpt from the 2010 Beloit College Mindset List illustrates its potential for insight:

- The Soviet Union has never existed and therefore is as scary as the student union.
- "Google" has always been a verb.
- Being techno-savvy has always been inversely proportional to age.4

The key message successful leaders communicate to Millennials is that they are recognized and valued for their individual contributions as well as their teamwork and they deserve personal coaching and guidance for their professional growth.

Leading Millennials in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Millennial Motivator</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide Leadership and Feedback</td>
<td>Millennials want their leaders to be role models so they learn from them and grow. They expect honest, performance-focused feedback. Provide a clear career track linked to performance appraisal that lets them know how they are doing and encourages them to keep improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Teamwork</td>
<td>Millennials like working with people and look to co-workers for friendship. Create an environment that allows co-workers to share ideas and interact with each other. Consider regularly scheduled brainstorming sessions and knowledge transfer opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it OK to Have Fun</td>
<td>Millennials want to look forward to coming to work every day. They thrive in and expect a fun, friendly, creative environment that allows them to work and grow as individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure Growth Opportunities</td>
<td>Millennials want their current job to prepare them for the next job. They expect customization from managers to fit their personal needs. This generation wants to learn and be assigned to projects that will help them meet their personal growth goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Flexible</td>
<td>Millennials like to work hard and they desire and expect a life outside work. Work-life balance can be a deal maker or breaker.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Generation X: Leaders or Followers?

Many workplace generation discussions focus on the impact of Baby Boomers retiring and Millennials coming in and taking over. It can be difficult to find information that does more than mention Generation X in passing even though they account for 45.5% of the current workforce. In fact, "It has been said that Generation X is the most ignored, misunderstood, and disheartened generation our country has seen in a long time." Other experts have labeled this generation the middle child of today's workforce, a reliable backup singer but never in the spotlight. Interestingly enough, when questioned, many Gen Xers are ok with this description.

As leaders,

Generation X does not appear to be experiencing the angst of their Baby Boomer counterparts when it comes to managing Millennials. Gen X has experience in the workforce and is used to adapting to Traditionalist and Boomer expectations. Gen X supervisors are taking Millennial demands and desires in stride and working to create flexible, career progression-oriented work environments that emphasize good work and good times. In his article, "Five Reasons Gen X is Cool with Gen Y," Kris Dunn, Vice President of Human Resources for SourceMedical, offers this explanation of Generation X managers' view toward Millennials, a.k.a. Gen Y.⁶

1. We're young enough to remember how clueless we were. It seems the boss is concerned about each new generation to enter the workplace. Management training should include a reminder that Gen X and Boomers didn't have a clue "back in the day."

2. We like the strengths we see in Gen Y. Millennials want work/life balance, are great with technology, and aren't afraid of responsibility. Gen X leaders can coach Millennials to achieve phenomenal results.

3. Somebody's got to do the work. Gen X managers know and understand the work still has to get done. Millennials will be doing the work; Gen X will learn how to work with Millennials to achieve success.

4. We're close enough to the ground to see through the stereotypes. Generation X has seen the damage stereotypes can do to a person, the company, even the world. Believing in and acting on stereotypes is one of the signs of an ineffective manager.

5. Like us, Gen Y is going to start having kids. Every generation is self-absorbed at an early age. In the past, employees with kids became less tolerant of career risk and generally less needy in the workplace. Millennials will probably experience this, too.

⁵ Coaching Generation X, www.buzzle.com 2005
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As follows,

Generation X can be frustrating to coach and motivate. Unlike Baby Boomers, Gen Xers do not appear to be motivated by a sense of mission or organizational loyalty. The Gen X approach to work can be summed up in the adage, "I work to live; I don't live to work."

Generation X marks the beginning of the latchkey kid era. After being home alone and watching their parents work hard for a company that then downsized and laid them off, Gen Xers do not believe in job security. They are used to looking out for themselves and often view each job as temporary. Gen Xers will rise to the challenge of difficult assignments and new opportunities, particularly if they see the experience as marketable for future employment.

Generation X is continually looking forward to the next job, which they assume is not that far away. Correlations can be made between Generation X entering the workforce and the evolution of the four careers in a lifetime philosophy and the 2 years per job workplace expectation that is common in today's workplace.

The key message successful leaders communicate to Generation X is that they are valuable, unique, trusted enough to be given new and challenging work, and measured on performance rather than looks, fashion sense, or affiliation.

Leading Generation X in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen X Motivator</th>
<th>Gen Xers want quality time with the boss. Provide feedback, recognition, and rewards immediately. Employee-of-the-month type programs may not provide much motivation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide Recognition and Feedback</td>
<td>Gen Xers want to be treated as individuals. They don't like stereotypes or general characterizations. Build a strong sense of community and personal relationships in the workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care about the Person</td>
<td>Gen Xers want new challenges and the opportunity to build new skills. Training is one of the best motivators. Minimize routine, repetitive work; avoid endless rounds of meetings. Give them variety to keep them longer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Challenging Work</td>
<td>Gen Xers are most comfortable and productive when allowed the freedom to work on their own. Avoid micro management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow Independence</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Avoiding Leadership Pot Holes

Even the most experienced leader can hit a snag. Some obstacles are easier to identify and prepare for than others. Awareness of potential issues up front allows a leader to help his/her team manage these challenges and recover from lost productivity more quickly.

Caption: M&O crew inspect a large pothole on Old Steese Highway in Fairbanks, Credit: ©Dawn Champagne, Alaska DOT&PF

Technology. Today's workforce uses an impressive variety of technological tools. It has been argued that Gen Xers and Millennials have an unfair advantage over Traditionalists and Baby Boomers because they have grown up with technology. Teams can come apart at the seams when members sense value is linked to technological savvy. Avoid a potentially destructive competition by ensuring adequate training and support for IT systems. Encourage mentoring amongst team members and clearly communicate the importance of experience and institutional know-how as well as comfort with technology.

Work Environment. Vastly different expectations exist in today's workplace concerning appropriate protocol in the office. Disagreements about flexible work schedules, having fun at work, texting, and dress codes can bring a team to a standstill. Establish ground rules up front and make sure all team members are in agreement by involving them in the process. Address acceptable meeting behavior, provide a range of appropriate work schedules, and clarify how changes or issues will be communicated and resolved.

Respect. Respectful behavior can be defined in many ways. What is disrespectful to some may be perfectly acceptable to others. Keep the team from derailing by addressing respect issues immediately. Open a dialogue between team members that fosters understanding of each other's viewpoint. Establish a behavioral agreement that clearly outlines respectful behavior in the team.
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Conclusion: Endless Opportunity

Greek philosopher Heraclitus declared “The only constant is change.” Plato followed a hundred years later saying, “Everything flows, nothing stands still.” To many managers, this adage has never seemed so true as today. With four working generations, workplace expectations seem fluid at best. When planning how to build multi-generational teams, increase effectiveness, and improve employee retention, successful leaders include these strategies:

Leading the Working Generations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation Motivator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millennial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to work with experts across the organization. Acknowledge and address the desire for ongoing personal growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to work independently and try new things. Acknowledge and address the need for a life outside work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to be a star performer in the organization. Acknowledge and address individual achievement that contributes to the organization as a whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to share experience and ensure adequate training on new technology and processes. Acknowledge and address the value the organization places on experience and institutional knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is challenging to find a balance between the diverse needs and expectations of today’s workforce, the savvy leader can also find endless opportunities to increase productivity, foster innovation, and improve the overall work experience. Each generation, and every person, has unique qualities. At the same time, there are common themes in what people desire in the workplace, such as recognition, respect, personal opportunity, etc. Leaders who know and understand the individuals in a work unit or section can help them fuse into a highly functional team, able to work together or independently as needed.

Teamwork allows a group of diverse individuals to blend their individual talents, skills, and experiences in order to achieve objectives and goals. Highly functional teams with strong leadership work together for the team members’ individual benefit as well as the organization. Through effective teamwork, success and personal growth opportunities can be optimized, regardless of generation. Leading a team can be challenging, frustrating, and disappointing; it can also be one of the greatest rewards in the workplace.
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<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Events &amp; Experiences</strong></td>
<td>- Great Depression</td>
<td>- Civil Rights</td>
<td>- Fall of the Berlin Wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New Deal</td>
<td>- Sexual Revolution</td>
<td>- Watergate</td>
<td>- School shootings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- World War II</td>
<td>- Cold War</td>
<td>- Women's Liberation</td>
<td>- Oklahoma City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Korean War</td>
<td>- Space travel</td>
<td>- Desert Storm</td>
<td>- Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Assassinations</td>
<td>- Energy Crisis</td>
<td>- Child focused world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td>- Hard work</td>
<td>- Optimism</td>
<td>- Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dedication &amp; sacrifice</td>
<td>- Teamwork</td>
<td>- Diversity</td>
<td>- Civic duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Respect for rules</td>
<td>- Personal gratification</td>
<td>- Techno literacy</td>
<td>- Achievement oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Duty before pleasure</td>
<td>- Involvement</td>
<td>- Fun &amp; informality</td>
<td>- Respect for diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Honor</td>
<td>- Personal growth</td>
<td>- Self-reliance</td>
<td>- Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Views on the Workplace</strong></td>
<td>Prefer conformity over individuality in the workplace. Used to strict, vertical lines of authority.</td>
<td>Value individuality, creativity, and personal fulfillment. Desire to &quot;make a difference.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Work to live.&quot; Expect work to be fun – and if it's not fun, it better have significant, tangible rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback Styles</strong></td>
<td>&quot;No news is good news.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Feedback once a year and lots of documentation.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working with the Generations</strong></td>
<td>Can be frustrated by lack of discipline, respect, logic, order, and structure. Respect hierarchy, policy and procedure, and expect people to put others' needs first.</td>
<td>Need to know why their work matters, how it fits into the big picture, and what impacts it will have on whom. Relationship oriented.</td>
<td>Don't mind direction, but resent intrusive supervision. Prefer regular feedback about work. Will leave a job quickly if a better deal comes along.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Article Resources

http://www.deloitte.com

http://www.deloitte.com

http://www.IPMA-HR.org

http://www.IPMA-HR.org

http://www.IPMA-HR.org

Kris Dunn, Workforce Management. *Five Reasons Gen X is Cool with Gen Y*. May 2008
http://www.workforce.com

Beloit College. *Mindset List for the Class of 2010.*

http://www.beyond.com/Media/Generation-Y-In-The-Workplace.asp

CMOE Development Team. *Coaching Generation X*. 2005

http://www.buzzle.com/articles/effective-teamwork.html

http://www.buzzle.com/articles/characteristics-of-a-good-team.html

http://www.canadianhrreporter.com

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Additional Resources

ARTICLES

Donald G. Zauderer, The Public Manager. *Leading with Character*. Spring 2005
http://www.thepublicmanager.org

Steve Kaplan. *Capturing Your Creativity*. Introduction to Psychology, West Publishing
Company, 1989


Resources for teambuilding training and free teambuilding articles
http://teambuildinginc.com/

"Flexibility and Choice: What Business Leaders Need to Know to Connect Across Generations
in the Workplace."
http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-
UnitedStates/Local%20Assets/Documents/us_hr_talentmarketseries_v2_160606.pdf

Several articles regarding the different generations and strategies for enhancing communication
among them.
Officer-CHRO/article/4be66718f610e110VgnVCM100000ba42f00aRCRD.htm

Several resources regarding generations in the workplace
capital/article/fc5d28c4f101210VgnVCM100000ba42f00aRCRD.htm

Free articles regarding teambuilding
http://humanresources.about.com/od/involvementteams/Team_Building_Employee_Empowerm-
ent_Employee_Involvement.htm

Free teambuilding articles

Free teambuilding and leadership articles
http://www.teambuildinginc.com

BOOKS

http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&tbs=bks:1&tbo=u&q=Wess+Roberts&ei=EQekS6ThLoL0
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[Link](http://books.google.com/books?id=aMIQAAAACAAJ&dq=flight+of+the+buffalo&hl=en&ei=TwekS6CvLI2kswO8lMTeAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CEAQ6AEwAA)


