



Building Workplace Connections Across Four Generations

With the recent entry of Generation Z into America's workplace, businesses are now managing employees representing four generations. Building connections among and between the generations will be essential to capitalizing on the strengths that each generation, and each employee, brings to the organization.

Generations are defined loosely by chronological dates, but more accurately by the social events and trends that influence their lives and their attitudes. Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964 and shaped by post-WWII hardship and 1960s activism, tend toward company loyalty, are team oriented and value a strong work ethic and competence. Generation X, born between 1965 and 1976 and shaped by the Energy Crisis, Watergate and having to fend for themselves as both parents worked outside of the home, tend to be pragmatic and independent with less organizational loyalty and more skepticism. Millennials, born between 1977 and 1995 and shaped by 9/11 and the proliferation of technology, with protective parents in a time of economic expansion, tend to be technologically savvy, self-confident and competitive, and value ongoing feedback and collaboration. Generation Z, born after 1996 and shaped by mounting terrorism, recession and the rise of social media, tend to embrace technology, build electronic communities and value innovation.

Each generation brings value to the work force: longevity, entrepreneurship, innovation and social connection being just a few. They also tend to be motivated differently: for example, Baby Boomers tend to value the ability to build a stellar career while Generation Xers value the ability to build a portable career.

"We tend to judge people based on stereotypes, but the tangible data across many employee engagement surveys across the years is that Farm Credit employees believe in the mission and are almost universally highly engaged," says Nicole Sullivan, Associate Consultant and Recruitment Specialist. "There are differences, though, in the generations' priorities and motivations, and once organizations recognize that, they can take active steps to leverage these differences."



However instructive generational characteristics can be when viewed across an entire population, though, it's important to recognize that not all individuals within a given generation will embody the stereotypical traits, and assumptions shouldn't be made solely on the basis of generation. A Baby Boomer may be proficient in technology, a Generation Xer may value recognition and a Millennial may exhibit strong company loyalty. Personal experiences like family upbringing, being raised on a farm versus in the city, or global travel can impact attitudes to the point that someone may feel more aligned with a different generation. The most effective organizations find ways to identify and capitalize on the individual strengths of their employees, connecting these valuable attributes to company goals.

"It can take a significant investment of time to learn individuals' strengths and weaknesses, but it's worth it in the long-term," says Chris Keller, Senior Vice President of Talent and Leadership Development with FCC Services. "The first step is to understand the expectations for any given role and how the individual can continue to challenge themselves to deliver, recognizing their personal motivations."

It's imperative to build connections across generations to fully actualize the strength of the organization. Generational relationships almost always exist between leadership, which tends to include Baby Boomers because of their long tenure, and younger generations like Millennials, particularly within Farm Credit which has a disproportionately low representation of Generation X. Leaders should take the time to understand and actively encourage and support their younger colleagues, asking insightful questions and supporting them to think for themselves.

"This is the epitome of the manager or leader role, creating the conditions that allow people to flourish," says Chris.

"Fostering effective connections between members of different generations comes down to communication," says Sarah Spivey, Senior Consultant in FCC Services' Leadership Development group. Such communication can create a challenge, though, as Millennials seek more collaborative conversations that can feel interruptive to Baby Boomers, who prefer more structure and respect for authority. Recognizing that communication styles differ, and finding ways to connect while meeting the needs of both, is the strongest path forward.

"Getting to open and effective communication requires a level of curiosity and a willingness to ask questions and actively listen to the answers," Sarah says. "Recognizing similarities, such as common goals and an organizational mission, rather than perceived differences also builds connection that can improve communication and effectiveness."

Proactively building connections across generations can also be achieved by forming teams with members representing different generations. "Putting together a diverse team with diverse skills but



also diverse perspectives from within any given generation will solicit the best from everyone,” says Jean Canteley Segal, Senior Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness Consulting for FCC Services. “Leaders shouldn’t make assumptions about what a given employee can bring to a project, and instead strive for diversity and open, supportive communication.”

Building connections within a generational group is also an effective strategy to enhancing organizational efficiency, strengthening relationships that make sharing information more streamlined. Some organizations have created “affinity” groups, such as Young Professionals groups, to enhance internal connections.

A learning session at the upcoming Learning Conference will explore generational differences, sharing insights and ideas about generational dynamics, existing biases, needs and communication styles, and how best to understand and develop talent and grow current leaders while transitioning institutional knowledge imperative for organizations’ long-term success. Leadership and development programs, such as FCC Services’ Crucial Conversations, Leading and Managing for Results, and I Love Feedback can also help foster stronger connections between members of different generations.

“By being able to tap into the diversity of today’s workforce, you bring such a broad perspective into an organization that it allows you to leverage the best of each type of generational candidate, recognizing that individual strengths can expand beyond standard generational traits,” says Jean. “Leaders should ask themselves how they can glean the best results from their current employees, identify the characteristics they should be seeking in new employees, and build an organization that will be welcoming to those they seek.”

For more information on the programs and conferences mentioned in the article, go to:

- Learning Conference, July 24-26, Tampa, Florida – <https://www.fccservices.com/conferences/learning-conference>
- Crucial Conversations – <https://www.fccservices.com/training/leadership-development/crucial-conversations>
- Leading and Managing for Results – <https://www.fccservices.com/training/leadership-development/leading-and-managing-for-results>
- I Love Feedback – <https://www.fccservices.com/training/leadership-development/i-love-feedback>