Understanding The 5 Generations (And Why It Matters) At Home & At Work
By Dr. Karyn Gordon

The secret to any effective communication is understanding – so starting with an understanding of the different generations is imperative! So what do we need to know?

1. Understand The Traditionalist (Ages 71-94)
This generation grew up in an incredibly scary and turbulent time. They were raised during the aftermath of the Depression & World War II and produced 4.1 children / family (to replace the population you need only 2.1). This drastic population increase would strongly impact the generations that followed. Also, traditionalists lived in an employee’s market, as it was a time of rebuilding after the war and there were many jobs available. So as a result, this generation is extremely hard working, loyal & conservative. They are often criticized for being “cheap” but that’s a judgmental attitude from those who do not understand the traditionalist experience. Although they tend to be more conservative financially - it makes sense when we put ourselves in their shoes. One value we can learn from Traditionalists is about respect. While other generations believe ‘I’ll respect you if you respect me’ - Traditionalists believe strongly in the importance of respecting hierarchy and that one should respect all people (even before it is earned)!

2. Understand The Boomer (Ages 52-70)
While Traditionalists grew up in a scary time, Boomers grew up in a very vibrant time! This was the time of drugs, sex, rock & roll! However, because there were 2x more people than in previous generations, and in addition the economy shifted to an employer’s market – there were fewer jobs. So think logically about what would result from this. When I do training sessions for especially Gen X’s & Y’s they find this part very interesting. It’s easy to point fingers and criticize Boomers for being “married to their job” and “work-alcoholics”, however when we see life through the lens of another we understand and are less judgmental. For many Boomers they learned that the only way to get and keep a job was to work extremely hard (otherwise there was a line-up of others who would be happy to take it). Yes, they invented the 60-hour workweek, but to them it was a means of survival. As a result Boomers are extremely hard working and goal oriented, and therefore one key value we can learn from them is their outstanding focus and work ethic!

3. Understand Gen X (Ages 36-51)
Generation X experienced 2 recessions growing up. Many saw their parents devote their lives to an organization and then lose their jobs. Also in the 80’s, 75% of families had both parents working outside the home and many women were entering the workforce during this period and so the term ‘latchkey kids’ was coined. The market didn’t change significantly from the previous era, – it was still an employer’s market. But the big shift from the previous generation is that Gen X’s decided that there was more to life than work and they started the entire ‘Work-Play Balance” movement. So while some may see them as disloyal to organizations – Gen X wants to “Work To Live”, not “Live To Work”. They will still work hard but they will likely want to leave by 5pm! The value we can learn from Gen X is to strive for balance – work hard but play hard too!
4. Understand Gen Y (Ages 21-35)
This generation has unfortunately been raised in an era of overindulgence. They’ve been brought up in a culture of “Buy now, pay later” – a culture that reinforces instant gratification in everything from food, to schedules to money. If you stop and look at all the “systems” (family, education, technology) in their life you start seeing a powerful pattern of instant gratification. In the family system many families have dual incomes and many of these parents will admit they have overindulged their kids to alleviate their own fear, guilt and exhaustion. They did too much, bought too much and micro-managed everything from homework getting done to helping them get a job. Many parents of Gen Y kids admit that they were afraid to set limits (which is how we teach delayed gratification – the essential skill of self-discipline), because of a lack of time and a desire to avoid conflict. Most of these Boomer parents meant well - they were loving, encouraging and genuinely wanted to give their kids “everything they did not have”. Their intentions were good, but they didn’t realize that by doing too much it was hurting their kids instead of empowering them. Changes in the educational system for this generation also resulted in power being taken away from teachers, who found themselves no longer able to take away marks for assignments being late, and students not being allowed to fail a grade, even if they did not do their work. These students were raised in the “Everybody’s A Winner” mentality instead of teaching children to learn to be a great winner and a great loser. Whether we win or lose, pass or fail should never be attached to our self-esteem - failure is just data, information to help us learn what we need to work on. Allowing children to fail in all parts of life is a fundamental way to help build resilience and strong character! Unfortunately for many in this generation, they never had the opportunity to learn these lessons, through no fault of their own. So while this generation gets criticized for being “impatient”, “needing their hands held”, “unable to accept failure” or “disrespecting punctuality” – when you understand their context and upbringing you can understand why. Yes it’s easy to blame them – and a lot harder for the rest of us older generations to take some responsibility in what we taught (or more importantly what we did not teach) this generation. I have worked nearly 20 years with Gen Y’s and they have taught me so much! One key value we can learn from them is around social responsibility. More than any other generation they care about our world, including social and global issues (they often challenge me on how I recycle in my office)😊

5. Understand Gen Z (Ages 6-20)
There is a lot of optimism around this next generation, who are known as “Digital Natives” (the rest of us are “Digital Immigrants”). Raised mostly (not all) by Gen X parents, they are being raised to be much more independent. They have seen high school dropouts achieve wild success building Internet empires, so they place less value on formal education (only 64% want degrees, compared to 71% of Gen Y). Research tells us they are fiercely entrepreneurial (72% want to start their own business) and thanks to our education at schools and home they are more tolerant of diversity and more conservative with risky choices (drinking, smoking). They still get criticized for being “entitled” or “hand-held” – but once again it depends on how much parents are micro managing. The values we can learn from them are a combination of the previous 2 generations – they appreciate the balance emphasized by Gen X before them but they are also ambitious, and they too recognize the importance of volunteering and being more socially aware.

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