

Embracing Generational Differences

By Pam Foster

There is an old adage that says, "Everyone is part of something greater than ones self." There is great truth in that comment. Each of us is or has been a part of a family, neighborhood, city or country. We may also be a part of groups, organizations, religions, fraternities and work forces. But larger than any other affiliation each of us belongs to a generation.

A generation can be defined as a group of people born roughly within a twenty year time period during the same era in history. (Codrington & Marshall, 2004) Members of each generation share similar social conditions, historical events, economic trends and technological advancements. They are influenced by noted personalities and cultural changes within that time period. The birth population of each generation also plays a dynamic impact on the groups competitive bids for education and workforce positions. Together all of these influences help to mold and shape the groups' values, thinking and personalities.

To identify the persona of a generation look for three attributes:

1. Perceived membership in a common generation;
2. Common beliefs and behaviors; and
3. A common location in history. (Howe, Neil & Strauss, 2000)

When you can identify these components, you will find four common generations in today's society. These are:

1. Traditionalists,
2. Baby Boomers,
3. Generation Xers; and
4. Millennials.

Listed below is a generational timeline that identify categories of years associated with these four generations.

1901-1942 - Traditionalists, Veterans, GI's, Matures, Silent or Greatest Generation

1943-1960 - Baby Boomers or Boomers

1961-1981 - Generation X, Generation 13, or X'ers

1982-2005 - Millenials, Echo Boom, Generation Y, Baby Busters, Generation Next

One should keep in mind that generational beliefs are not absolute. Significant differences may vary from rural to urban settings and low to high economic backgrounds. It is also important to note that being born early or late in a generational era may also alter ones viewpoints and opinions. Persons born within two to three years of a generational divide are referred to as "Cuspers" and may favor and display characteristics from the past, next or even both relative generations. They are the folks that cement generations together. They function as mediators, translators and mentors. (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003)

While specific generational age groups vary from research study to research study, it is important to understand that there is no specific birth or cutoff dates that truly define each group. Generations are more readily defined by their personalities. (Lancaster &

Stillman, 2003) Each group is equally important; making lasting contributions and setting the stage for the successes and problems of the following generations.

Understanding the personalities of each group is valuable tool as to what makes each so discerning with reference to education, work, parenting, politics, religion, home, economics, leisure and retirement. Generational knowledge gives us a timeless approach and foundation as we interact with family members, strengthen relationships with different groups manage the workforce and set the stage for the future.

Table 1. General characteristics and attitudes of generations.

Generation	General Characteristics and Attitudes
Traditionalists	Duty, Honor Country, Sacrificial, God Fearing, Thrifty, Patriotic, Patient, Loyal, Respectful, Partnered for Greater Strength
Baby Boomers	Idealistic, Optimistic, Educated, Work their way to the top, "Charge it," Anti-communistic, Challenge the status quo, Fix what's wrong with America, Equal Rights for all
Generation X	Skeptical, Independent, Self Reliant, Resourceful, Self Starters, Cautious
Millenials	Safety First, Educated, Empowered, Idealistic, Optimistic, Expectant, Confident, Loyal, Team Players, Realistic, Diverse, Realistic, Economical, Rule Followers, "Its Cool to be Smart"

Summary

All of us have been guilty of thinking or saying "What were they thinking? Or People just don't work the way they use to." The way we think, act and react to situations with respect to our families, work and leisure can be attached to our generational places in history. We respond to situations accordingly with what we have learned, witnessed and anticipate. How will you help to bridge the generational gaps? Will you make an effort to coach, mentor or even change your opinion about someone? Will you be accepting of different dress codes or go about doing business? Maybe in doing so, someone will change their opinion about you.

References

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