

# HOW TO BRIDGE THE WORKFORCE GENERATION GAP WITH A STRONG CORPORATE CULTURE

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You’ve seen headlines and social media posts that disparage “snowflake Millennials” and the verbal eye-roll retort, “OK Boomer.” The ruckus emphasizes the differences between these and other generations, and the fallout has drifted into the working world.

People of all ages have always coexisted in the workforce. But these days, a multi-generational staff has been branded as a new headache for business leaders. That’s because the stereotypes stoked by all the rhetoric have created bias. Now, many people automatically conclude that diverse age groups can’t work well together and achieve a healthy corporate culture.

That theory doesn’t hold up. Research shows that the actual differences between the generations at work today are far fewer than people assume. The problem isn’t that employees in each age group are vastly different; it’s the belief that they are.

These preconceived notions create barriers that prevent people from reaping the benefits from the wealth of experience, talent, and knowledge that exist among people of all ages within an organization. That’s not to say that there aren’t any differences, but those qualities are often strengths, not weaknesses.

**The 5 Generations at Work.** If you go by the labels, five generations of people comprise today’s workforce:

- Traditionalists
- Baby Boomers
- Generation X
- Millennials
- Generation Z

Below are thumbnail descriptions of each group, the percentage at work today, and the stereotypes associated with them.

## TRADITIONALISTS

Also known as the “Silent Generation” and the “Great Generation,” Traditionalists were born between 1925-1945, and few are still working. The 2% who remain on the job mainly hold senior leadership positions or are perceived as industry veterans. They lived through the after-effects of the Great Depression and World War II and have witnessed more change than any other generation.

### Best Characteristics

- Determined
- Dependable
- Loyal
- Cost-Conscious
- Great interpersonal skills

### Workplace Stereotype

“Walking retirees” who are clueless about technology and have little of substance to offer.

## BABY BOOMERS

The wave of relief and optimism that followed World War II prompted a significant population jump that defined a generation. Many in it were profoundly affected by the Vietnam War. The oldest members of the group were born in 1946 and reached 65 in 2011, and the youngest will hit 65 by 2029. They make up 25% of the workforce, and 65% of this group plans to work beyond the age of 65.

### **Best Characteristics**

- Hard-working
- Goal-oriented
- Team players
- Self-reliant
- Competitive

### **Workplace Stereotype**

Know-it-all who are averse to change and view their generation as superior.

## **GENERATION X**

People in this group were born between 1965 and 1980. Many employers consider them to be the best overall workers, and they're often the highest revenue generators. Currently 33% of working people, Gen Xers have spent their careers in a technological world, but they weren't raised in it. They were the group hardest hit by the 2008 market collapse and ensuing recession.

### **Best Characteristics**

- Self-sufficient
- Flexible
- Improvement oriented
- Collaborative
- Excel at work/life balance

### **Workplace Stereotype**

Skeptical dissatisfied cynics.

## **MILLENNIALS**

By 2025, Millennials (or the Y Generation) will comprise 75% of the workforce; they currently make up 35%. Born between 1981-2000, 9/11 overshadowed the childhood of people in this age group. This generation grew up with the internet and can't imagine working in an environment sans technology.

### **Best Characteristics**

- Principled
- Civic-minded
- Achievement-oriented
- Challenge seekers
- Enjoy growth and change

### **Workplace Stereotype**

Entitled, demanding job-hoppers.

## **GENERATION Z**

Born after 2000, the youngest cohort grew up with sophisticated technology in their hands and a more global mentality than any other group. As they are just embarking on their careers, they only comprise 5% of the workforce today. But there will be a paradigm shift once more Baby Boomers begin to retire and the "always-on" Zees start to move up the ladder.

### **Best Characteristics**

- Independent
- Multi-taskers
- Process information rapidly
- Adaptable
- Creative

### **Workplace Stereotype**

Unmotivated with no interpersonal skills and overly reliant on technology.

Note: the birth year ranges for generations are often debated. The spans above are those that are listed most commonly.

## **WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENERATIONS...REALLY?**

It's true that each generation is influenced by the events of their early years, which shape their work ethic. But sweeping generalizations aren't an accurate reflection of any group. In fact, there is more disparity of personalities within a given age group than between generations.

A composite of 20 different studies covering almost 20,000 people showed only minor and inconsistent differences in job attitudes between generational groups. So what's at the root of the stereotypes?

An analysis in Harvard Business Review contends that two factors cause generational bias in the workplace.

1. Preconceived notions about people in another age group
2. What people think others believe about their age group

The first issue is a default mindset. People cling to misperceptions about groups because it's an easy excuse to explain workplace problems. The second is a "meta-stereotype" compounding the problem as people second-guess others' motives behind every interaction with them.

## **What's a manager to do if real, consistent differences among age groups are a myth but perceived stereotypes are causing barriers?**

The cure for the problem is to whittle down perceived bias by accentuating commonalities and celebrating the positive aspects of the differences that do exist.

Building a strong company culture is the best way to administer that remedy.

## **WHAT DO OUR GENERATIONS HAVE IN COMMON?**

Jennifer Deal, a research scientist with the Center for Creative Leadership, gathered information from over 3,000 corporate leaders to write *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*. She contends that regardless of age, people working today all want the same things.

*"Our research shows that when you hold the stereotypes up to the light, they don't cast much of a shadow," says Deal. "Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback, and the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your level in the organization than on your age."*

The most striking finding, according to Deal, is how similar the generations are in the values that matter the most. When employees of any age feel they are respected, empowered to excel, and appreciated for their contributions, they remain engaged with their jobs.

## **CULTURE IS THE TIE THAT BINDS**

Business leaders aiming to galvanize their teams should take a hard look at the culture in play within their organizations. If tensions and conflict exist because of perceived differences, it's time to overhaul the organization's culture to build a better, more productive workplace for everyone.

Leaders who don't devise a plan to fortify their culture miss a golden opportunity to develop unity among their workers.

As author and CEO Joe Burton points out:

*"When it comes to matters of the mind, most companies simply expect employees to figure it out. Put them all together and leave them to their own devices. Unfortunately, human beings are complex and dynamic. We don't simply 'work it out.' Instead, we tend to be judgmental of what we don't understand—including other people."*

A systemized approach to strengthening the positive behaviors that define a workplace culture helps align people of all ages.

That was CultureWise CEO David Friedman's goal when he created a logical, eight-step framework for designing a company culture that teaches and reinforces optimum working behaviors.

## BEHAVIORAL TRAITS THAT BENEFIT EVERYONE

The traits reinforced by a program like CultureWise blend with the values shared by all generations. When they are taught and practiced using a “common language,” people discover they are similar in many fundamental ways.

Behaviors that help eliminate differences include:

- Practicing blameless problem-solving
- Listening to understand
- Showing meaningful appreciation
- Sharing information
- Assuming positive intent
- Treating each other like family
- Checking the ego at the door
- Embracing diverse perspectives
- Having a team-first mindset

Behaviors that enhance everyone’s abilities include:

- Making quality personal
- Getting clear on expectations
- Delivering results
- Being relentless about improvement
- Embracing change and growth
- Investing in relationships
- Creating win/win solutions
- Looking ahead and anticipating
- Being a lifelong learner

People may funnel these behaviors through different perspectives based on their age and life experiences. But everyone can relate to and embody the core of these traits.

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The workplace community, comprised of people of multiple age groups, is strengthened by a solid cultural structure. Once that structure is in place, people have a platform to showcase their individual strengths—and a multi-generational workforce is brimming with expertise.

The diverse skill sets of people in different age groups allow a workforce to ably respond to multiple, complex issues. Their spectrum of attributes increases an organization’s creativity level, problem-solving capability, and consumer insight. A multi-generational staff, when supported by a strong culture, is a distinct advantage for a company.

To learn about the clear and proven steps you can take to begin a culture building journey, reach out to Carlos Quintero at 864-349-1032 or 770-842-8744, or email [carlos@one2onecx.com](mailto:carlos@one2onecx.com)

ONE to ONE CX, LLC is a Licensed Consultant and Implementation Specialist for CultureWise™



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