Closing the Communication Gap Between Individuals of Different Ages

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Objectives

1) Learn about current research on generations and generational differences.

2) Understand how the popular media promotes generational stereotypes, thereby contributing to conflict in the workplace.

4) Learn techniques to resolve conflict in the workplace, including conflict between individuals in different age groups.
About Me

• CEO of Human Systems, providing leadership and organizational development workshops and consulting services
• Extensive experience in all aspects of non-profits
• Some policy work
Human Systems Mission and Vision

• **Mission**: Prevent and repair the effects of burnout in individuals and organizations

• **Vision**: Thriving organizations.
Why are you here today?
What would you like to learn?
Today’s Approach to Discussion

• Non-discriminatory: “generationalism”

• Assumptions:
  • Everybody is doing the best they can with what they have and what they know.
  • Everybody wants to be a productive and contributing member of society.
What is a generation?

• Begins with a sudden rise in births, ends with sudden drop in births

• “The exact years demarcating a generation matters less than the shared experiences and historical events that shape their worldviews, values, beliefs, and attitudes.” – Ng, Lyons, and Schweitzer, p. 4
Sample variations in generational cutoff years and terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Generation</th>
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<th>Generation</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928 - 1945</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>1901 – 1942</td>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>1940 - 1946</td>
<td>World War II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are generational “personalities” real?

• Lack of empirical evidence supporting significant differences in personality or motivations, but there is a perception of differences.
  
• Most research is cross-sectional, meaning that effects of maturation are not taken into account.
  • Many research models detect no generational differences after controlling for age.
  
• All the information about generations that we read is based on generational characteristics as conceptualized in the Western world.
Research methodology for measuring and defining generational characteristics

• **Theory**: Cohorts develop distinctive *perspectives and behaviors*, based on social conditions, when they are young (late adolescence, early adulthood) that persist throughout their life
  - **Pulse-rate** – used in popular media
  - **Imprint** – used in sociological research
Pulse rate theory

- Used in popular media
- William Strauss & Neil Howe, marketing consultants
- Society can be divided into a series of mutually exclusive generations
- Comparing cohorts (Millennials vs. Gen X vs. Baby Boomers)
- “peer personality”
Flaws in the pulse-rate theory

• Arbitrary start dates
• Lack of evidence that life stages are a fixed length
• Changing life expectancies
• Social construction of life course
• Inherent personality characteristics

“Quite simply, there is no credible evidence that society’s entire population is organized neatly into a succession of cohorts of roughly equivalent length that are indexed to life stages, but polling firms and academics who adopt the terminology perpetuate the myth that there is.” – Peter Hart-Brinson, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
How are you different today than you were 10 years ago? 20 years ago?
Imprint theory

• Karl Manheim, sociologist influential in first half of the 1900s
• Generations/cohorts emerge in response to a specific “trigger”
  • Ex: women’s suffrage, feminism, Great Depression, WWII, Civil Rights Movement
Imprint theory

- Historical events
- Social structure
- Social interaction within cohort
- Worldview

Generation-specific motivations and behavior
Historical events and triggers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Traumas</th>
<th>Demographic Shifts</th>
<th>Changes in policy and government</th>
<th>Social movements</th>
<th>Shifts in cultural meaning</th>
<th>Economic events</th>
<th>Technological advances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>Baby Boom</td>
<td>Shift in political party in power</td>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>Great Depression</td>
<td>Internet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So what does this mean for us?

• If we accept that:
  1) patterns of behavior differ for different age groups due to environmental factors \textit{and}

  2) our behavior patterns change over the course of a lifetime...
How might this change how we think about “generations” in the workplace?
Generations in the Media

• Digg Video
Bad press

• Books
  • Generation Me
  • A Generation of sociopaths: How Baby Boomers betrayed America

• “Baby Boomers stole the American Dream, but Millennials can take it back” – Fast Company, 3/22/18
• “Millennials: You will not be quite so special in the ‘futr’” – Financial Times, 3/18/2018
• “Did the Baby Boomers ruin America?” – WBUR, 1/15/2018
Generations in the media – biased surveys and misinterpretation of the results

• **Comet Financial Survey**
  • 364 individuals surveyed, less than .0005% of the millennial population in the U.S.

• **News outlets**
  • [NBC Bay Area](#)
  • [USA Today](#)
  • [Forbes](#)
  • [Entrepreneur](#)
Millennial Myths

• “Millennials are job-hoppers”
  • Younger individuals in the workforce change jobs more often than older individuals
  • Millennials are actually staying with their employers longer than Gen Xers at their age (U.S. Department of Labor)
  • Increased education → less changes in jobs

• “Millennials are critical of their employers”
  • Millennials more likely than individuals from other generations to use words like “honest”, “loyal”, and “respectful”
Millennial Myths

• “Millennials are narcissistic”
  • Not supported by the research

• “Millennials have a different work ethic than people from older generations”
  • Scientific research shows non-significant differences in work ethic, expectations of leaders, and incentive preferences
Contributing factors to intergenerational conflict

• More experienced workers may believe that less experienced workers should have to “pay their dues”, and compete to get ahead, including working long hours, but newer workers appear to be more interested in work-life balance
  • More experienced workers may see younger workers as undedicated and lazy
• Less experienced workers may believe that they should not have to wait to get key roles and decision-making power in projects
• Less experienced workers may demand more, and in-depth, communication and feedback from supervisors
• Different perceptions of time (multi-tasking)
The role of the internet in magnifying generational differences

• Computer-mediated communication (CMC) muffles social differences and variations in social status; people comfortable with CMC may not pay as much attention to social status or hierarchy

• Availability of information flattens hierarchical structures

• Extreme advantage for people who are comfortable using new technology

• Significantly increased communication speed
Trends to look for in the workplace

• Policies that discourage “workaholic” behavior and encourage work-life balance
  • Example: New York law making it illegal for bosses to contact employees after work
• “Flexwork”
• “Continuous feedback” policies instead of, or in addition to, periodic evaluations
• Focus on emotions in the workplace
• Focus on better, open communication, especially between supervisors and supervisees, that is kind and thoughtful
More trends

- Increased transparency throughout organization
- Flattening hierarchies
- Customized job descriptions, role innovation
- More openness about salaries
- Prioritization of diversity and inclusion
- People-focused policies
Biggest difference across age ranges: approaches to technology and communication.
Advantages of individual and organizational communication policies

• Clarity
• Consistency
• Boundaries
Creating a group communication policy

1) Create a workgroup
2) Distribute version of personal communication policy worksheet.
3) Compile answers and use them to develop draft policy.
4) Allow opportunity for feedback on draft policy.
5) Meeting to introduce policy and answer questions.
6) Reinforce as necessary.
Thank You!

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