

cross generation communication in the workplace.

How many people do you know who start each day thinking, "I am going to make every effort to be misunderstood by as many people as possible today?" Most of us try to communicate clearly with supervisors and coworkers, yet the most often-cited reason for the failure of projects and companies is poor communication. Why? One major factor is the challenge of communicating effectively with employees and coworkers ranging in age from 20 to 70. The following is an example of the stress and confusion a breakdown in cross-generational communication can cause:

Two coworkers had spent much of the week preparing a PowerPoint presentation scheduled for 9 AM the following Monday. The older worker, who is 55 years old, suggested to the younger worker, who is 26, that they meet before the scheduled presentation to go over last-minute details/changes. Both kept their commitment to come in early. The 55-year-old arrived at 7 AM and the 26-year-old arrived at 8:45 AM. The older worker felt the younger worker was irresponsible while the younger worker could not understand why the older worker was upset.

By looking at the difference in preferred communication styles by generation, we may be able to understand the reason these two colleagues experienced a "failure to communicate." There are many factors that influence our communication styles. One of the major predictors of a person's communication style and expectations is the forms of communications they grew up with and those they were introduced to when they entered the workforce.

silent generation (born 1925-1945)

The Silent Generation started their careers supervised by individuals who preferred face-to-face meetings, which is still their preferred method for receiving mission-critical information. Early in their career they began relying on the telephone (landlines) to communicate with clients and colleagues. The prevalent management style was "chain of command" and they are receptive to being told how to do something and then do it well with minimal supervision or feedback.

baby boomers (born 1946-1964)

Baby Boomers continued to rely upon communication by phone (landlines) but utilised newly developed features like voice mail and conference calling. Brought up by the generation that went through a major war and the Great Depression, they were happy to have secure jobs and started their first job thinking they would stay until they retired. They expect to work hard and long hours to achieve success and internalise corporate goals, often sacrificing family for career success. If you want members of this generation to take on a project, call them or leave a detailed phone message and they will make every effort to be successful and please you.

generation x (born 1965-1982)

Generation X was the first generation to enter a workforce dependent upon e-mail and other forms of electronic communications. They prefer communicating in writing, but without pen and paper. For many, television became their primary source of entertainment and socialisation. Many members of this generation came home after school to an empty house because of the economic need for their parent/parents to work and a lack of affordable afterschool care. If you want to make sure they understand an assignment, send a concise email with project details and a deadline. In comparison to Baby Boomers and Gen Y, Gen X makes up a smaller percentage of the workforce because many Baby Boomers put off having children until they had

established their careers. This generation will ask what they are expected to do and want others to use a direct, straightforward approach; clearly state deadlines and project milestones.

generation y also known as millennials (born 1983-2000)

Generation Y prefer communication in writing using short text messages or instant messaging or video. The internet has always been a source of entertainment and information for them. Unlike their older siblings (Gen X), they are now the largest generation in the workforce, surpassing Baby Boomers in early 2015. If you want them to work on a project, send them a text with project deadlines and hold meetings via online video chat (e.g. Skype). They grew up during a cultural shift from rewarding individual achievement to team participation. Their parents are often referred to as "helicopter parents" because their parents monitored every aspect of their lives. This generation expects others to be clear about goals and expectations and do not feel a need to ask for direction.

So, using this information to figure out the cause of the failure to communicate in our earlier example, we realise the 55-year-old assumed that coming in early meant sacrificing time with family to come in several hours before others arrived at work while the tech savvy 26-year-old interpreted coming in early to mean allowing enough time make sure the laptop was synced with the projector. How could this miss communication have been avoided? If our 55-year-old had realised the difference in their communication styles, he would have clearly stated what "coming in early" meant. If the 26-year-old had understood the communication style and expectations of the 55-year-old he would have asked for a definition of what he meant by "coming in early."

tips for preventing intergenerational "failures to communicate:"

- Understand that communication styles and expectations can be age specific; demonstrating the ability to communicate with colleagues of all ages you become a more valued employee.
- Take an active role in improving intergenerational communication; spend more time listening/reading what others are saying and less time talking/emailing/texting.
- Identify your preferred method of communication and share it with others. It's OK to say, "if you need to me to start working on something immediately, walk into my office, leave me a voice mail, email me, text me."
- Ask colleagues and supervisors how they would like to receive mission-critical information; in person, email, voicemail, or text.
- Develop strategies for communicating with multi-generational teams; you may need to deliver the same message in person, by phone, email, and text to avoid errors in projects and missed deadlines.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

- George Bernard Shaw