Structural Connection

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Five Generations of Structural Engineers Working Together
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For the first time in history, five generations of structural engineers are active in the profession. While the generational mix adds valuable diversity to the workforce, it also has the potential for conflict and disagreement. Each generation is influenced by the major historical events, social trends, and cultural phenomena of its time. These influences include politics, culture, media, education, world events, religion, war and peace, family, peers, technology, and values. The generational mix of influences result in a melting pot of backgrounds and expectations.

At the 2015 NCSEA Summit in Las Vegas, the Young Member Group Support Committee (YMGSC) hosted a panel discussion on Working with Multiple Generations. As Chair of the YMGSC committee, I had the opportunity to moderate the session. The ensuing conversation between panelists and the audience led to enlightening, first-hand input from each of the generations. As a follow-up to that session, I have compiled the following observations, to continue the conversation on how to successfully collaborate between the generations.

Traditionalists (born pre-1945)*:* This generation was largely influenced by the Great Depression and World War II. Traditionalists are often very loyal, respectful of authority, stubbornly independent, have an excellent work ethic, are dependable, and have advanced verbal communication and interpersonal skills. When working with Traditionalists it is important to honor the chain of command, value their legacy and experience, appreciate their dedication, communicate face-to-face, and understand the corporate history.

Baby Boomers (born 1945-1965)*:* This generation was impacted by the Vietnam War, the moon landing, and postwar social change, including feminism and civil rights. Baby boomers are often well-educated**,** results driven, plan to stay with a single organization for the entirety of their career, have excellent teamwork skills, and thrive on adrenaline-charged assignments. When interacting with Baby Boomers, one should show respect, choose face-to-face conversations, give them your full attention, and teach them how to use latest technology.

Generation X (born 1966-1977)*:* This generation was largely influenced by the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger disaster, and the invention of the personal computer. Generation X is often independent, family-focused, intolerant of bureaucracy, critical, hardworking, and socially responsible. When interacting with Generation X in the workplace, colleagues should be succinct, use email for communication, give them space, and be willing to relax the notion of "paying dues".

Generation Y/ Millennials (1978-1990)*:* This generation was associated with rapidly changing technology, often-doting parents, the 9/11 terrorists attacks, the invention and growth of the internet, and the Iraq/ Afghanistan wars. Generation Y is highly socialized, loyal, technologically savvy, socially responsible, and aspires for a work-life balance. When working with Generation Y employees one should challenge them, ask them their opinion/ collaborate, encourage them find a mentor, and provide timely feedback.

Generation Z (born after 1990)*:* Generation Z has been influenced by a media-saturated world, the recent recession, and the collapse in the housing market. Generation Z is extremely technologically dependent and savvy**,** closely tied to their families, tolerant of alternative lifestyles, environmentally conscious, and socially active.

While every person does not fit cleanly within their generational category, some general conclusions can be drawn and leveraged in the workplace.

1. Understand Work Styles: Traditionalists and Baby Boomers do not appreciate micromanagement, while Generations Y and Z may crave specific, detailed instructions and are likely more accustomed to receipt of constant feedback.

2. Consider Generational Values: Each generation protects a distinct set of values, and conflict may threaten these values. As an example, Baby Boomers value teamwork, cooperation, and buy-in, while Generation X may prefer to make unilateral decisions and move on, preferably solo.

3. Find a Generationally Appropriate Resolution: Realizing one cannot change an individual's life experiences, try to work within the attitudes and expectations that result from those experiences. For example, if a knowledgeable Baby Boomer is frustrated by the lack of experience or a perceived sense of entitlement of a Generation Y employee, encourage the Baby Boomer to become a mentor and leverage the expectations and tendencies of both generations toward resolving the conflict.

4. Find Commonality: Commonalities and overlap in experience and attitudes exist between all generations, not just those which happen to be chronologically adjacent. Examples include: Traditionalists and Generation Y employees tend to value security and stability. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers may be resistant to change. Generation X and Y employees place a high value on workplace flexibility and work-life balance. Baby Boomers and Generation Z are often most comfortable with diversity and alternative lifestyles. Generation Y and Z are technologically adept and committed to socially responsible policies.

5. Learn from Each Other: Each generation has valuable lessons to share. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers have a wealth of knowledge and engineering intuition that our younger generation of structural engineers must develop. Generation X employees are widely known for their fairness and mediation abilities. Generation Y workers are technology wizards, while Generation Z holds clues to future workplace, marketing, and business trends.

In summary, five generations working side by side is a potential source of conflict and distraction. However, generational diversity can lead to numerous benefits for organizations and their respective employees. Managing and leveraging the five generations and their differences will lead to an efficient, collaborative, and high-functioning organization.