

How to Manage Across Generations



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The conflicts began shortly after a staffing change at a former job. Suddenly, I was at odds with someone I'd thought I had a good working relationship with.

She frequently checked in on my progress on tasks or pointed out places where she thought I'd skirted a rule. *If you don't trust me by now, I thought, there's nothing I can do to make you.* I avoided dealing with her. My boss noticed and told me to cut it out. I gritted my teeth and reached out to the person to start a conversation about our working relationship.

Turns out she wasn't having any more fun interacting with me than I was with her. (Imagine that.) My defensiveness baffled her. She thought she was looking out for a colleague by checking in and raising concerns. We began to talk about how we approached work. Soon we were trading tips on how to deal with difficult co-workers. We still had conflicts, but we talked through them to arrive at a solution, even if it was one neither of us was totally happy with.

Those conversations brought us closer. She shared that she was in recovery and spoke with pride of how she'd maintained her sobriety through major losses and challenges. When we went our separate ways to different organizations, I missed her company.

The two of us were many years apart in age. I can't say whether that was the whole cause of our conflict—everyone is different; if you've met one Baby Boomer, you've met one Baby Boomer. But generational differences are real, and they arise more often now that five generations are in the workforce at once. Nonprofits face major staffing shortages and never-ending competition for great employees, so it's essential that nonprofits learn to manage generational differences and teach employees how to work across them. Here are some ways to do that.

Strategies for Cross-Generational Management

Remember that your employees are whole people. Many factors beyond age affect a person's perceptions, including family upbringing, gender, ethnicity, cultural background, religious or spiritual beliefs, and more. Make no assumptions, except that any group of people will include a variety of perspectives. The best way to find out what matters to any individual or group in their work is to ask and listen to the answers.

Share your preferred methods of communication and encourage your team members to do the

same. This helps people get to know each other and avoid falling into stereotypes (“Millennials only answer texts.”) Spell out group communication expectations.

Respect boundaries and differing opinions. Topics that might not have been discussed at work 15 years ago—sexual orientation, gender fluidity, mental health—surface frequently now. Spell out values that are non-negotiable for your organization: for example, your nonprofit values the diversity of its employees and clients, and requires employees to treat others with utmost respect even if they don’t share their views.

Solicit a wide variety of viewpoints across generations and other differences in meetings. Everyone wants to be heard, whether they’re at the beginning of their career or 40 years in. Give all your team members that opportunity.

Acknowledge conflict when it arises. Solicit diverse views on how to move forward. Explain how and why you made your decision.

Tap into [appreciative inquiry](#) to manage conflict. Appreciative inquiry focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. The approach recognizes that people who have very different perspectives and experiences across generations can collaborate effectively, and all of them bring something different to the table.

Offer as much flexibility as possible in work schedule and location. Employees consistently rank flexibility as one of the most important aspects of a workplace, and flexibility benefits people at all stages of life. Don’t assume that staff from one generation value flexibility more than others.

Communicate changes clearly. Make sure employees know when and how they can come to you with questions or feedback about changes at your nonprofit.

Provide professional development opportunities across all levels of your organization. Employees across generations want to learn and grow in their work. If your team sees those opportunities get distributed evenly, it will increase their trust.

Foster cross-generational mentoring. Take advantage of the amazing opportunities having five generations in the workforce at once presents. Seek ways employees can [team up to teach each other things they’re great at](#). This will help build camaraderie and respect.

Check your own biases. Do you make assumptions about how age shapes an employee’s work style or opinions? When you assign work, focus on how well employees execute tasks. Don’t let intangibles guide your decisions on project management or promotion. You’ll not only avoid the risk of illegal age discrimination, but you’ll make better decisions for your team.

With people across generations contributing to the success of your mission, nonprofits have the opportunity for a rich and vital exchange of ideas that will help them better carry out their missions and make a difference in the lives of individuals and the health of a community. And no matter our career stage, learning from each other across differences is one of the most rewarding professional and personal experiences we can have.

Want more on this topic? Check out [last week’s Risk eNews](#) on how to foster age inclusivity in nonprofits.

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