

Generational Risk: How to Know Someone Older (or Younger) Than You



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Have you ever been on the receiving end of a colleague's frustration about a co-worker? When you're at your wit's end, expressing exasperation to another human doesn't make you better, but it may make you feel better. I've noticed that venting has evolved from frustration about missed deadlines, late arrivals to meetings and other complaints of yesteryear. Today, I'm far more likely to hear a vent wrapped in a generational stereotype. One trusted colleague frequently punctuates her vents with a single word: "Millennials!"

An [article published by Korn Ferry](#) last week cites a "disturbing new survey from LinkedIn," reporting that "...some 40% of employees over age 55 haven't directly spoken to a Gen Z employee in the last year. And one in 5 Gen Zers haven't spoken to someone over fifty."

Korn Ferry leader Sharon Egilinsky points out the risks "when generations do not communicate with each other," noting that it leads to "miscontextualization and misinterpretation, even among really skilled written communicators."

In his book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks writes that "Most of us have all sorts of inborn proclivities that prevent us from perceiving others accurately." He cites a McKinsey study from 2021 that explored why people were quitting their jobs. Better pay elsewhere? Not so much. Brooks says the study found that many people quit because they don't feel "...recognized and valued by their managers and organizations. They didn't feel seen." Brooks also says that "seeing another person well is the hardest of all problems. Each person is a fathomless mystery, and you have only an outside view of who they are." He continues in a later chapter by cautioning that "And because we don't see people accurately, we treat them wrongly."

How to Know a Person offers an incredible buffet of ways to "see" others deeply and deepen relationships, trust and respect. Some of his advice may strike a nerve, particularly if your self-image includes "people person" or "good conversationalist." Among his list of pointed "don'ts" is "Don't be a Topper." Brooks explains that when you immediately share your own experience in response to a challenge or problem someone else has shared, you're essentially saying "Your problems aren't that interesting to me; let me tell you about my own, much more fascinating ones." My young, wise and self-aware daughter has admonished me over the years to forget my own more elaborate version or example of someone's mishap or challenge and simply say, "Wow, that

sounds hard. Is there anything I can do to help?” The belief that sharing a more dramatic version of the story will help is wrong-headed, Brooks explains. “If you want to build a shared connection, try sitting with their experience before you start ladling out your own.”

Crossing the Generational Divide

If you intentionally or inadvertently ignore speaking to co-workers, especially colleagues from other generations, reflect on what you might be missing. Connections to people whose insights and ideas, combined with your own, could make your nonprofit’s mission more durable, resilient and impactful. Try the following techniques to get started.

Make a call and send a text. If your go-to communications tools are text and email, try something novel and pick up the phone. Call someone with the question that would take you five minutes to compose in an email. Begin with, “Is this an ok time for a question?” If the caller says they are in the middle of something, ask for a good time to call back. If, however, your go-to communications tools are calls and emails, but you work with colleagues who prefer text, grab your smartphone and send a quick text to a colleague who will appreciate a short, less-formal message. (Hint: unless there is a true emergency, limit your calls and texts to colleagues during their regular working hours!)

SLANT during video and in-person meetings. When a colleague zones out or multitasks while you are speaking, you can’t help but feel judged. And not in the prizewinning way. Many years ago a colleague called on me in a meeting while I was checking emails and pretending to pay attention. I chastised myself afterwards but laughed remembering that his prior career was schoolteacher. In Chapter 6: Good Talks, Brooks recommends the SLANT method to put yourself into true conversation mode. Sit up, lean forward, ask questions, nod your head, track the speaker. Keep in mind that SLANT will amplify the insights and benefits you derive from the meeting while helping each speaker feel seen, heard, and understood. If your experience with SLANT is like mine, you’ll find that it’s hard to multitask and lose interest when you’re leaning in and tracking the speaker!

Curiosity is your superpower: learn from everyone. Brooks writes that “If agreeableness describes a person’s relationship to other people, openness describes their relationship to information...” He adds that “People who score high on this trait are powerfully motivated to have new experiences and to try on new ideas... They tend to be... curious more than close-minded...” When speaking to someone much younger or less experienced, lead with openness and curiosity. Listen intently to find the wise lessons or things you never thought of before or never thought of that way.

Keep others’ tasks in mind. Everyone is involved in a life task, Brooks writes. To understand a person, you have to understand what tasks motivate them: building their careers, building relationships, learning about the world. And you cannot assume what task someone prioritizes by their life stage. You have to get to know them. Finding out is what makes relationships fun and rewarding.

There’s no way around it; to reap the benefits of having multiple generations in the workforce, we have to talk to each other. Brooks writes that “Wisdom is the ability to see deeply into who people are and how they should move in the complex situations of life.” Your job is to learn to be receptive and able to see deeply into the people fortune has brought into your life. Many forces and developments have made it possible for each of us to meet and truly know people from many age groups, including in the workplace. When we resolve to see others deeply, we’re also investing in being seen. When we make the effort, the positive possibilities for navigating risk in our lives and life’s work are endless.

Additional Resources

Check out two Quick Tips resources available on NRMC’s companion website, www.risk-resources.org: [How to Manage Across Generations](#) and [How to be Age-Inclusive in Your Hiring](#).

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She values the perspectives of friends and colleagues from all five generations, and is working hard to tame her topping tendency. She welcomes your comments, questions and reflections on intergenerational discourse and “a-ha” moments at 703-777-3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.