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Leading & Motivating a Multi-Generational Workforce

by Carrie Ballone

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As a leader are you experiencing:

- ★ Frustration about how to recruit and retain quality talent?
- ★ New hires who resist corporate policies and procedures?
- ★ Younger staff that think their managers are rigid and inflexible?
- ★ Mid-level staff who prefer the status quo to climbing the ladder?
- ★ Senior staff frustrated by the lack of work ethic in the younger generation?

The issue:

The existence of the multi-generational workforce poses unique challenges to today's business leaders. A lack of understanding regarding generational differences contributes to conflict within working relationships, lowers productivity, and increases turnover. More seasoned staff can become frustrated by a seemingly aloof younger generation. Younger staff can become disenfranchised with entrenched hierarchal structures. Moreover, those who are expected to lead this broad workforce can become frustrated with everyone.

A key to thriving within this blended workforce is to raise your awareness about members of the other generations. Common generational definitions vary, but the most accepted classifications are: Builders, Boomers, Busters, and Bridgers.

- ★ **The Builders** also known as the "Silent Generation" or veterans who range between age 65 and 85.
- ★ **The Boomers** the largest cohort, are between the ages of 45 and 65.
- ★ **The Busters** also known as Gen X, are between 25 and 45.
- ★ **The Bridgers** also known as NeXters or GenY are 25 and younger.

Each generation is marked by distinct commonalities. The following overviews serve as guidelines — not stereotypes — when leading with others.

Understanding what makes each generation tick is critical to leading and motivating the multi-generational workforce.

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Table 1: At-a-Glance Foundational Influencers

	Media	Institutions	Social
Builders	Radio/Print	Respect/Community	Clear Role Definition
Boomers	Television/Print	Bureaucratic/Change	Civil/Women's Rights
Busters	Television/Computers	Cynicism/Disappointment	Unrest
Bridgers	Computers/User-driven	Global/Contribution	Youth Culture

Impacting World Events

The Builders (b. 1922 - 1942) were raised in a time marked by the Depression, the New Deal, World War II, Korean War, and the FDR Administration. They endured many financial challenges and were taught to be patriotic, frugal, to work hard, and sacrifice.

The Boomers (b. 1942 - 1962) generation was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, space travel, the Vietnam War, social unrest, Roe v. Wade, Nixon/Watergate, and television. The children of the Builders, Boomers internalized a strong work ethic and tend to be career-focused, status conscience and wary of authority.

The Busters (b. 1962 - 1982) this generation was impacted by the Challenger disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall, AIDS, diversity, Desert Storm, and the Reagan/Bush Administration. Busters were the first latchkey kids, experienced significant increases in parental divorce, and saw the inception of MTV. Busters tend to expect quick recognition and rewards, inclusion, and opportunities to grow.

The Bridgers (b. 1982 - 2002) are now finding their place in the workforce. They have been shaped by global events and social change. They are products of a child-focused society, and the first generation to have been raised with the Internet. Violence in schools, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, 9/11, and the Iraq War have shaped their experiences. Bridgers expect to be viewed as peers, allowed to work in a casual style, and participate in workteams in a diverse environment.

Action Question: *What events contribute to your generational lens? How might seminal events impact the people you lead? What might be assumptions you make that contribute to generational conflict?*



Diverse Expectations

Each generation is motivated by a diverse set of values, work styles, communication preferences, and rewards. Gaining an understanding of generational expectations will allow leaders to facilitate better working relationships.

Builders — The “Duty First” generation. They believe in the value of hard work, loyalty, and sacrifice and have respect for rules. Builders expect and respect hierarchy and are accustomed to a command and control style of leadership. Typically, Builders like to be acknowledged for their depth of knowledge and for a job well done. They tend to be wary of technology and prefer formal methods of communication, e.g., memos and phone calls.

Boomers — The “Me First” generation. They are optimistic, have a team orientation, and value personal growth and social involvement. Boomers respect hierarchy and prefer a consensual leadership style. They are likely to be workaholics, are defined by their career status and challenge rules. Boomers like to be acknowledged by raises and promotions. They spend a lot of money on and value relationships. They are accommodating of technology and prefer formal communication styles and in-person meetings. Boomers respond well to coaching and look for learning

opportunities. They are also known as the “sandwich” generation because they are caring for both their aging parents and their children.

Busters — The “Who Cares” generation. They are self-reliant, pragmatic, value fun and informality, and are technologically engaged. Busters don’t trust authority, are egalitarian, and opt for a collaborative leadership style. They work hard, play hard, and are entrepreneurial. Work/life balance is a core motivator and they are driven by an integrated lifestyle. Busters prefer informal, rapid communication. They like to be openly recognized and given rewards that they can use in their “off-hours.” Busters value flexibility in their work and many would refuse a promotion if they feel the quality of their home life will be compromised.

Bridgers — The “NeXt” Generation. They are confident, assertive, achievement-oriented and techno-driven. Bridgers question authority and have grown up in the global village of the Internet. They prefer self-leadership and believe that learning is a two-way conversation. Bridgers believe work should be meaningful and view work as a means to an end, i.e., work to play. They like communication in real-time, e.g., instant messaging, text messaging, and cell phones. Technology is a natural part of their professional and personal lives. Bridgers like to be rewarded with autonomy, opportunity, and flexibility.

Leaders must adapt their attitudes about rewards, workstyles, communication preferences, and motivators to match generational expectations

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Action Question: *How does your generational profile fit you? How does it fit the people you lead? How might these profiles impact your perception of one another? How might this impact your style of leadership?*

When Leading — Perception is Reality

Builders may be perceived as:

- ☆ Rigid
- ☆ Judgmental
- ☆ Wary
- ☆ Distant
- ☆ Set in their ways

Boomers may be perceived as:

- ☆ Self-absorbed
- ☆ Workaholics
- ☆ Fickle
- ☆ Rigid
- ☆ Hypocritical

Busters may be perceived as:

- ☆ Cynical
- ☆ Ungrateful
- ☆ Disloyal
- ☆ Overly casual
- ☆ Not team players

Bridgers may be perceived as:

- ☆ Inexperienced
- ☆ Overly confident
- ☆ Impatient
- ☆ Lazy
- ☆ Naive

The following table features a quick guide to use when leading and motivating a multi-generational workforce.

Table 2: Leading and Motivating Different Generations

	Builders	Boomers	Busters	Bridgers
I need	Respect	Status	Feedback/ Autonomy	Structure/ to Contribute
Reward/ Motivation	Acknowledge Expertise	Symbols of Achievement/ Promotion	Professional Development/ Flexibility	Flexibility/ Growth
Attitude	“Get the job done”	“Let’s have a meeting and talk about it”	“I’ll do my part, you do yours — we’ll meet up later.”	“I can, I will — just let me.”
Work Ethic	Sacrifice	Driven	Balance	Integration
Communication Style	Formal/ Protocol	Formal/ Process	Informal/ Pragmatic	Casual/ Immediate



Maximize the Potential

When a leader understands the forces that have shaped each generation and flex their style, they can more effectively structure workflow, engage employees, and foster communication. Incorporating a range of strategies that promote collaborative relationships among the generations is an imperative to lead effectively. Leveraging generational strengths requires strategic commitment but the outcome is a stronger, more innovative, adaptable, and profitable organization.

Theory Becomes Practice: Work It Out

Use the following exercises to practice leading across generations.

Recruitment — Generational profiles influence how employees pursue opportunities—“employer of choice” awards can put a potential employer on the “radar screen.”

Leadership Action Question: *What can your organization do to highlight benefits to potential employees? Talent attracts talent—profiling high-potential employees and relationships with social causes will motivate potential employees to research your organization.*

Tips to engagement:

★ **Builders** — How does current status relate to past accomplishment? How does the organization value those that built it?

- ★ **Boomers** — What is the potential for high-level positions, status, and impact?
- ★ **Busters** — How does what you stand for make an impact on me? Are the awards and involvement media fodder or do they really matter?
- ★ **Bridgers** — Does the organization take a broader view of social and environmental issues—is the bottom-line globally responsible?

Onboarding — Generational profiles influence how employees internalize the mission, purpose and impact of their employer.

Leadership Action Question: *What policies can you highlight that demonstrate your organization's commitment to being a good corporate steward? What can you do to more fully enroll each generation in your organization's mission and purpose?*

Tips to engagement:

- ★ **Builders** are past-oriented and civic-minded.
- ★ **Boomers** have influenced social change and are brand conscious.
- ★ **Busters** want to be associated with innovative and forward-thinking organizations.
- ★ **Bridgers** are globally-minded and want to be part of an organization that is innovative and socially conscious.

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Work style—Tapping into each generation's preferred work style can allow organizations to increase retention and generate higher performance.

Leadership Action Question: *What can you do to structure multi-generational teams and create high-performance teams?*

Tips to engagement:

- ★ **Builders** will bring their wealth of knowledge and want to get the job done.
- ★ **Boomers** will want to meet, collaborate, discuss and create a plan.
- ★ **Busters** are pragmatic and don't like to waste time.
- ★ **Bridgers** want to contribute as equals.

Face Time—Each generation views “face-time” differently.

Leadership Action Question: *What spoken and unspoken values exist within your organization about expectations relating to the value of facetime?*

Tips to engagement:

- ★ **Builders** expect to work in the office and expect others to put their time in also.
- ★ **Boomers** have grown up in an environment that put a strong emphasis on facetime and try to be accommodating, but engrained beliefs may offset good intentions.

★ **Busters** would sacrifice a promotion or advancement if it will adversely affect their family. They are willing to work, but want to be measured by their outcomes, not the length of time they are in the office.

★ **Bridgers** are very ambitious but don't see a need to sacrifice quality of life— they believe work can be done anytime and anywhere.

Organizational Change—Generational profiles influence how employees react to changes in policies and procedures.

Leadership Action Question: *How can you frame changes in policy to get most of your employees to buy-in?*

Tips to engagement:

- ★ **Builders** may be slow to change, and are less likely to speak up.
- ★ **Boomers** expect to be involved in the process, and want to know how will it affect them.
- ★ **Busters** want to know what difference it will make, it will change tomorrow, so what is the reasoning?
- ★ **Bridgers**—Change is no big deal— but have a reason that you can explain.

Clients and Vendors — Generational profiles also affect your relationships with clients and vendors.

Leadership Action Question: *How should you tailor your message so it is best received by each generation?*

Tips to engagement:

- ★ **Builders** — Is the message polite, formal, and clearly laid out?
- ★ **Boomers** — Do you make the connection to how your product or service will directly benefit them and ask for their ideas?
- ★ **Busters** — Are you direct and do you have additional resources for them to check?
- ★ **Bridgers** — Are you informal and collaborative? Do you make a connection to larger social and environmental issues?

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