

An Age-old Problem

Tips for navigating a multigenerational workforce

MY COWORKER, Helen, is a member of Generation Y. I'm a "boomer," a cohort that didn't get its own letter. When you meet Helen, the words that come to mind are energetic, enthusiastic and extroverted. She doesn't slow down for a second.

The older I get, the more interesting it is to hear certain phrases. I was in a staff meeting once when Helen reported on a recent leadership training class she attended. She disliked hearing the organizational war stories. The phrase "war stories" takes me back to my first job after college.

My boss was a retired lieutenant colonel from the U.S. Army who arranged first-line supervisor training for a defense contractor. Many attendees were ex-military, and one of the instructors retired from the U.S. Air Force. He received glowing reviews because of his ability to pull old stories out of his military hat to reinforce the main points of the course. Similar experiences through

the years formed in my mind the notion of "war stories" as a tried, true and valuable communication technique for passing on organizational wisdom to the younger generation.

To hear Helen associate negativity with this phrase provoked my curiosity. I caught up with Helen and asked her to elaborate.

"I called them 'war stories' because some of the attendees sounded as if they were fighting a war. They consumed the limited discussion time available just to complain about how bad their jobs, bosses and coworkers were. None of them offered any solutions. Young people like me want to be part of the solution, not just hear about problems," she said.

I admired her attitude, but I thought to myself that it is not always clear whether to change things or to leave them be. A wrong decision could be hazardous to careers and organizations. Helen acknowl-

edged the value of venting your frustrations once in a while. But eventually, you must stop venting and start doing something.

Get on their level

I asked Helen how organizations should pass on their wisdom to younger staff. "I learn best when I have mentors. I think this is the rule for young people. It is easier to accept what older people have to say when they respect us first as a person. Ideally, bosses should invest at least half their time being coaches and not just telling people what to do without offering their guidance."

When coaching younger generations in the workforce, one size does not fit all. "Each young person has a unique communication and learning style. Bosses who take the time to learn and reach out to us on our wavelength will have our respect. At this point in my career, I'm most interested in what I should learn to advance, either through promotions or lateral moves in the organization," Helen said.

Someday soon, Generation Y will sit at the head of the table. "Should the older generation regard the younger as apprentices and help them move from journeymen to masters of their craft?" I asked Helen.

"Sounds like you get it," she said. "Speaking for myself, young people are ready for challenges. Step back and throw us some. And take time to listen to us. My generation is used to switching priorities quickly when situations change rapidly. Our facility with technology means multitasking is more second nature to us."



Let them make their mark

"It seems important to be free to take the high-level goals of the organization and use your own imagination and energy to fill in and execute the details." I said.

"That's it, or at least a big part of the picture," Helen said. "Young people are interested in what the older generation has to say, but don't talk to us as if you have all the answers. And if we go ahead and try something you suggest, remember: We may not do it exactly like you did."

I followed up with, "I imagine we shouldn't use our respect for the past as a way to avoid facing serious problems?" Helen agreed.

Next, I asked Helen if she has heard any helpful war stories with lessons that she liked since the class. "Funny you should ask. I just added a story to my personal stock the other day," Helen said. "My boss, an awesome mentor, was telling me how she handled a project where someone on the team wasn't pulling their weight," she said. There were four valuable lessons:

1. Not all problems require complicated solutions.
2. Focus on the situation and not the person.
3. You can't control others; you can only control your reaction to others.

4. Take responsibility for what you can do.

I said, "That's quite a haul for one story, and it all sounds solid. Will you be adding more stories like it?"

"You bet," Helen concluded with a laugh. "I want to build up my supply now. I won't be in the younger generation forever." That triggered a smile of my own.

As Helen turned to go, I thought about my next steps. I was left wondering what I might have to say to the younger generation. And, just as importantly, how to say it. **QP**



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