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# Boomers vs. Gen Y—the new communication gap

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# Boomers vs. Gen Y— the New Communication Gap

*A key issue between Baby Boomer managers and Generation Y employees is a dissimilarity of opinion on how often feedback regarding performance should be administered and the mode of feedback that is appropriate. Feedback is essential to inform an employee whether or not he or she is performing to the needs of the employer.*

Generation Y (also referred to as Millenials) entered the working world approximately 10 years ago and they are here to stay. Negative misconceptions about this generation include: disloyalty, laziness, a complaining nature, and a need for constant praise. These perceived "negative" behaviors may actually be intuitive responses to a changing economy. All generations desire feedback, some require more than others, but the dynamics of the working world are evolving to meet the needs of the changing economy and workforce.

## Millenials demand feedback... NOW!!

Conflict is evident between the generations, but what causes this strife? The issue lies in the vast differences in what each generation expects from their employment experience. Baby Boomers worked in large corporate hierarchies for the majority of their career and took on teamwork-based job roles. Millenials believe their working environment should consist of challenges, work-life balance, social interaction, immediate results in their work, and rapid advancement within their career.

Ideals about effective feedback are polar opposites as well. The once a year performance appraisal was developed by the Baby Boomers in response to the Traditionalist generation's tendency to believe that no news was good news and thus kept silent most of the time. To appease the Traditionalists, Baby Boomers provided significant documentation to supplement the annual review.

Millenials have created their own set of rules regarding feedback including: timing, frequency, tone, and delivery. Generation Y expects feedback in a timely manner. For instance, they prefer to receive feedback about a project within one month from the date of completion (or the next week, if possible) rather than eight months later at their next scheduled annual evaluation.

Frequency of feedback expected by Generation Y is linked to timing. If feedback is timely, then it in effect will be frequent as well because a number of work assignments will be completed throughout the year that should be addressed in a timely fashion.

Millenials became accustomed to receiving praise frequently all throughout their formative years. Constructive feedback is not widely accepted amongst this group of workers. Clear and specific (delivery)

feedback is desired as it provides Millenials with exact information to carry out the task at hand. Specific feedback about how to improve performance prompts Generation Y to be more accepting of constructive feedback.

## Consider more than one method

The contrasting expectations of what constitutes appropriate feedback for Baby Boomers and for Generation Y present problems. Leaders must determine ways to address the needs of both generations. We have determined that more frequent feedback is necessary, but how often does it need to be administered, and in what form? Multiple methods are available for managers to consider:

• Mid-year assessment

• Regular, informal discussions with staff

• Reverse Mentoring

• Group Mentoring

The simplest way to provide feedback to Generation Y employees more than once a year is to conduct a mid-year assessment in addition to the annual evaluation. This type of assessment does not need to be as formal as the annual evaluation, but it can provide another opportunity to touch base with employees about their performance.

Caution is advised when utilizing only an annual review or conducting assessments twice a year. Too much reliance could limit an employee's potential as it can influence an employee to work to an assigned group of tasks without considering what else they might be capable of. This type of formal assessment concentrates on a set list of tasks and responsibilities that creates unintentional boundaries. Other areas may not be explored because they are not on "the list."

Feedback does not need to be highly structured, nor formal. Managers can talk briefly as often as daily (if time permits) or once a week. By directing more frequent, but less formal interactions with staff, managers can avoid any big surprises that can occur during annual evaluations.

The traditional format of mentoring programs involves an older, more experienced worker serving as mentor with a younger, less experienced colleague serving as a mentee. Reverse mentoring reverses the roles of traditional mentoring with the younger colleague serving as the mentor and the older colleague acting in the mentee role.

The goal of this type of mentorship is for the mentor to teach the mentee about new technological advances and current trends, gain a cross-cultural global perspective, and to facilitate cross generational knowledge.

*Millenials want to ask questions before getting the job done.*

Millenials gain the opportunity to develop leadership skills while creating an immediate impact on the organization. Pairing best suited under this model is between a Baby Boomer and a Millenial because of the immense differences in ideals and work values.

Mentoring can also be conducted with groups. Group mentoring consists of multiple team members with a senior leader – or with peer-to-peer members – with a technology based platform that provides members with the opportunity to define mentoring on their own terms.

Within this technology platform members can utilize micro feedback as a way to limit time invested. Micro feedback is a tool that provides consist feedback up to 140 characters, similar to the structure of text messaging or Twitter. This type of feedback can be useful within group mentoring due to its requirement of minimal resources and time invested. An individual can request feedback to a group of people regarding his most recent project and get a broad range of perspectives quickly.

## Learn how to communicate effectively with another generation

Not only is the mode of feedback important, but also how feedback is communicated. Baby Boomers learned to work with a mentality of "just get the job done" and "don't ask questions". Millenials want to ask questions before getting the job done. Understanding how to communicate effectively with a younger generations of workers is paramount to providing appropriate feedback. Effective communication is essential to resolve workplace issues before they become unduly problematic.

*When a situation needs to be improved, involve the employee. Have a collaborative discussion … to devise ideas about how he can perform differently.*

To avoid miscommunication, managers are advised to be aware that the Generation Y worker may interpret feedback or lack of feedback differently than others. A worker may be uncertain about his performance. As a manager, you deem his work to be sufficient and do not provide feedback. He may misunderstand the lack of feedback as a sign that he is performing below par.

Ensure your employees understand your message by discussing the feedback with your workers and ask questions to determine whether or not the employee clearly comprehends the information presented.

Be sure to structure your feedback –positive or negative – in a framework that leaves no room for misunderstanding. Feedback must be clear and specific to be effective. Millenials are accustomed to receiving greater amounts of praise than prior generations received. This may not be a communication style accepted by Baby Boomer managers, so it is important to have a balance between constructive feedback and positive feedback.

Specific information is essential (especially with constructive feedback). Describe in detail the employee's performance level. Rather than telling an employee he is performing satisfactorily, go into detail about why his performance is only satisfactory as opposed to exemplary. Perhaps he never offers to stay late or meets only the minimum job requirements?

Do keep in mind to avoid vague generalities. When a situation needs to be improved, involve the employee in the situation. Have a collaborative discussion with the employee to devise ideas about how he can perform differently. After a proposed solution is recommended, set a due date to review the situation and determine if the solution is working.

## Feedback can improve performance

As a new generation enters the workforce, adaptations are required. Changes were made when each of the preceding generations entered the workforce. Dissemination of feedback is one way in which Millenials are changing the workforce today. Steps can be taken to mold feedback to meet the needs of Generation Y while also benefitting multiple generations.

Not every avenue will work. Explore what fits your organization best based upon your culture (environment) and time available. For instance, if you oversee 50 employees, the ability to have regular, informal discussions with each employee may be limited. Utilizing micro feedback might be a better fit because you can provide feedback to your subordinates in a concise format and thus not need to invest a significant amount of time providing feedback and consequently neglecting other responsibilities. Feedback, when used correctly, can be a great tool for managers to improve the performance of their employees.

## About the author

Sara McMIllan is a business consultant for the Nebraska Business Development Center. She has completed her Economic Development Finance Professional certification from the National Development Council and has obtained the CVA, CEPA and CBPA credentials in business valuation and transition planning. In 2014, she was recognized by the Association of Small Business Development Centers as the State Star for Nebraska.

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