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Generational differences can be pronounced in workplace

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Last week we took a brief look at the changes in the workplace and the people who populate it. Here's a brief review. Much of it comes from my recent book, "Becoming a Successful Manager" (McGraw-Hill)

The workplace isn't necessarily an actual place anymore. Computer technology has expanded the reach of every business and of every customer.

Effective communication requires that we consider the different audiences we face every day. Remember, communication is all about the audience. We've often been reminded of this basic principle. To be an effective presenter, you must think like your audience.

So what do we know about the work force population that constitutes our various audiences?

That population now includes four major groups: traditionalists (born 1927-1945), baby boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born between 1965-1980), and Generation Y (born after 1981).

These aren't just labels. They include individuals with different work habits, expectations, and attitudes. The members of each group bring valuable contributions, but communicating effectively with them requires attention and flexibility. How do you navigate a conversation among different people, for example, where some see technology as a simple convenience, others call it a complication, and still others see it as an integral way of life?

Consider the varied factors that might exist within your work force. Traditionalists and early baby boomers grew up in an age of corporate structure, having to justify themselves, pay their dues, and bide their time. They are less tech-savvy than younger generations, and they prefer in-person interaction rather than e-mails and technological gadgets.

Late baby boomers, GenXers and GenYers (also known as Millennials) grew up in a more global economy filled with layoffs, downsizing, and offshoring. These relatively younger groups learned from the do-more-with-less mantra.

GenYers often want only bits and pieces of information, specifically, the

parts they feel are most important to them. In some instances they are uncomfortable with face-to-face communication because of their extensive use of text messaging, cell phones, and e-mail. They are used to working in a fast paced environment; but short, abrupt communication might omit important details. The older generations, however, may over-inform causing confusion or the need to dig out the pertinent information.

Gen Yers are creative, optimistic, and tech-savvy. They act and react quickly. Traditionalists, on the other hand, prefer to build relationships over time.

There is a great attitudinal and behavioral divide among these generations. Communicating with them as customers, colleagues and co-workers requires awareness, understanding, and a willingness to be flexible in the messages we send and the way we send them.

We can't expect a one-size-fits-all methodology to work today. It's important for all of us to become "multi-lingual" in the way we communicate. Because the most important element in the communication process is what the receiver thinks a message means, we must be sure messages are clear before sending them.

Here's an example of a perceived "clear" message that got lost. I once ordered a club sandwich with mayo on the side. When the order arrived -- with no mayo -- I informed the waitress of the oversight. Indignantly, she pointed to the mayo carefully spread on the cut sides of each piece of bread, and said, "It's right there on the side." In her mind she delivered exactly what I had ordered!

Although this is a light-hearted example, consider for a moment how the four different groups might react when confronted with such a misunderstanding related to business topics. What impact might their reactions have on future communication you might have with them?

When constructing messages, ask yourself these questions. What do I want to convey? Who's getting the information? What options do I have for sending it?

Evaluate those options, and choose what will work best. It doesn't matter which group you represent, being multi-lingual is important for members of all four groups. No one method of communication is better than another. Each is simply different -- and so are the people who receive your messages.

Recognize those differences and celebrate them.

Bob Parkinson recently published "Becoming a Successful Manager" (McGraw-Hill). Contact him at jrp@jrparkinson.com.

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