

Consulting Your Clients to Leverage the Multi-Generational Workforce

Carrie Ballone

Are your clients experiencing:

- Senior staff frustrated by the lack of work ethic in the younger generation?
- Younger staffs that think their managers are rigid and inflexible?
- New hires that resist corporate policies and procedures?
- A lack of loyalty among staff?

Do your clients find themselves:

- At a loss as to how to best recruit and retain quality talent?
- Looking for ways to connect with a diverse vendor and client base?
- Trying to navigate vastly different motivations and expectations?
- Wishing the new workforce was a little less challenging?

The issue:

The existence of the multi-generational workforce poses unique challenges to today's business environment. A lack of understanding regarding generational differences contributes to conflict

Understanding what makes each generation tick is critical to optimizing your organizational culture.

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 employees stuck in the middle can become frustrated with everyone.

A key to thriving within this blended workforce is to raise your client's 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 particular commonalities. The following generalizations serve as guidelines—not stereotypes—when working with others.

Impacting World Events

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

The **Boomer** (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 very career-focused, driven, status conscience, and wary of authority.

The **Busters** (b. 1962 – 1982) were 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) who are now finding their place in the workforce, 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, be allowed to work in a casual style, and be able to participate in work-teams and in a diverse environment.

Table 1: At-a-Glance Shaping Influences

	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

Differing Expectations

Each generation is characterized by differing values, work-styles, communication preferences, and motivators

Differing values, work styles, communication preferences, and motivators characterize each generation. Gaining an understanding of how others differ from oneself can 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, informality, and are technologically engaged. Busters do not 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.

Client action questions:

- How does your generational profile fit you?
- How does it fit the people you work with directly?
- How might these profiles impact your perception of one another?

Practically Speaking—Perception is Reality

Builders may be perceived as:

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

Busters may be perceived as:

- Cynical
- Ungrateful
- Disloyal
- Overly Casual
- Not team players

Boomers may be perceived as:

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

Bridgers may be perceived as:

- Inexperienced
- Overly confident
- Impatient
- Lazy
- Naive

The following table features a quick guide to use when coaching clients to work with other generations.

Table 2: Working with 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

Leverage the Potential

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

Practically Speaking

Use the following exercises to assist your clients in becoming more generationally aware.

Organizational Change – generational profiles influence how employees react to changes in policies and procedures.

- **Client 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; if it will change tomorrow, what is the reasoning?
 - Bridgers—change is no big deal, but have a reason that you can explain

Work Style – tapping into each generation’s preferred work style can allow organizations to increase retention and generate higher performance.

- **Client Action Question:** What can you do to structure multi-generational teams and to 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 do not like to waste time
 - Bridgers—want to contribute as equals

Enrollment – brand recognition is critical to creating a high-level of enrollment and connection to your organizations’ mission and purpose.

- **Client Action Question:** 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

Face Time – each generation views “face-time” differently.

- **Client Action Question:** What spoken and unspoken expectations exist within your organization concerning what commitment looks like?
 - Tips to engagement:
 - Builders—expect to work in the office and expect others to put their time in also
 - Boomers—have grown up in a environment that put a strong emphasis on face-time and try to be accommodating, but engrained experience may come through
 - 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

Clients and Vendors – generational profiles also affect your relationships with clients and vendors.

- **Client 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?

About the Author

Carrie Ballone manages a women's recruitment, retention, and advancement initiative at a professional services firm. Carrie has 20 years of experience in program planning, design, and implementation—linking people strategies with organizational effectiveness. Ballone specializes in women's business issues: non-profit management, team dynamics, and leadership development. She holds a B.A. in Sociology and an M.S. in Management from the College of Saint Elizabeth and earned her Executive Coach Certification through Kaplan University. E-mail: carrieballone@gmail.com

References

- Families and Work Institute. (n.d.). *Tips for managers: Generations & gender in the workforce*. Retrieved from <http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/GG-managertips.pdf>
- Hammill, G. (2005, Winter/Spring). Mixing and managing four generations of employees. *FDU Magazine*.
- Merril, M. (2004, August). Five generational differences shaping leadership. Merrill Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.merrillassociates.com>
- McNulty, E. J. (2006, February). Tips for managing multiple generations. *Harvard Management Update*, 11(2).
- Raines, C. (2003). *Connecting generations: The sourcebook for a new workplace*. Thomson Learning.
- Ruch, W. (n.d.). *Full engagement manage multiple generations*. Retrieved from www.LeadersExchange.com
- Sago, B. (2000, July). Uncommon threads: Mending the generational gap at work. *Executive Update*. Retrieved from www.asaecenter.org
- Zemke, R. (2000). *Five Generations at Work*. AMACOM Publications.