



Play Nice

Understand the nuances of each generation's workplace feedback preference

by **Lynne Lancaster & David Stillman**

If your workplace sometimes feels like a battlefield and your colleagues seem like hostile forces, you're not alone. There are four distinct generations of employees peering at one another across the conference table, so the potential for conflict and confusion has never been greater.

Enter you, the manager responsible for bridging generational gaps, ensuring workplace productivity, and generally troops happy. In this minefield of potential misunderstandings, few communications are as highly charged as the feedback you and your staffers provide to each other. A little history lesson from us can help you better appreciate each generation's expectations when it comes to giving and receiving workplace feedback.

Evolution of the performance review

Ask a Traditionalist (born prior to 1946) about workplace feedback, and you're likely to hear, "Well, no news is good news. I'm not yelling at you, you're probably doing fine." The top-down, boot-camp style of coaching makes sense to a generation of veterans who value authority and discipline. The strong, silent types who constitute a generation of Traditionalist lean long on praise—they aren't even long on words—but when they say something about your performance, they mean you'd better listen up.

That worked fine in most organizations until along came the Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) who were raised with the psychology of the 1960s that said people should open up. Suddenly, letting it all hang out was good and being uptight was bad. Compared with the silent stoicism of Traditionalists, Boomers are in touch with their feelings and in love with verbal communication.

Boomers' original motivation for exchanging tons of information wasn't as pure as it sounds, however. Entering the workforce with 80 million cohorts contending for the same jobs can lead to a competitive obsession with knowing how you're doing. The fact that Traditionalists weren't exactly forthcoming made the need to know even more intense. So what did Boomers do? They instituted the once-a-year performance appraisal, with lots of written documentation. It forced Traditionalist role models, bosses, and mentors to sit down with Boomers on a regular basis and let them know where they stood. To make the Traditionalists more comfortable, performance evaluations were conducted via numerical rating systems that made the process less subjective. The process seemed so scientific you would have thought they were trying to calculate the next solution.

Again, everything was fine for a while. Then along came Generation X (born 1965-1981). A Boomer manager—echoing the

values feedback as much as anyone in the workplace—finds herself in meetings with Gen X direct reports. She signs off on the project, heads back to her office, and tries to nab five minutes to catch up on paperwork. Two seconds later, one of her direct reports is knocking on the door: “Uh, can we talk about how I’m doing on the project?”

While Boomers seek feedback, Generation Xers want candid, instantaneous feedback. It’s no wonder, considering they were raised on immediate results: instant meals from the microwave, instant cash from the automated teller machine, instant news from CNN, and instant information from the Web. This is annoying to a Boomer, who is dying to say, “I want to provide you with feedback, but can’t we just talk about it next week at the project review?” Many Boomer managers we know have even resorted to keeping their doors locked to prevent the interruptions.

The varying expectations can create major generational collisions. We can only imagine what the Millennials (born 1981-1996) will expect!

While we’re constantly learning from our clients and helping them tweak their feedback systems, our best advice is to talk with each team member what works in terms of feedback frequency and format. Don’t expect one approach to work for every generation. You can provide feedback primarily during your institution’s formal review process or more frequently in other ways, including in person, by telephone, via e-mail or voice mail, through a written memo, or in meetings.

Style counts

Generations also differ in their acceptance of candid critiques. You can deliver feedback in a care-fully diplomatic or frank style, and different staffers clearly appreciate different approaches.

“The older generations are so cautious and political in the way they phrase everything that half the time I don’t know what they mean,” one Gen Xer complained to us. “It’s like, ‘This feedback was edited for content and reformatted to fit your style.’”

For Gen Xers, the formal and political approach can be too slick. Raised on television, they saw countless ads that promised to change the world and delivered nothing. As a result, they didn’t just watch advertising messages, they deconstructed them. For Gen Xer, feedback that’s not straight talk is no more reliable than an ad for the Super Slice-O-Rama. When it comes to feedback, the more raw, the more real.

Feedback that a Generation Xer thinks is immediate and honest can seem hasty or even inappropriate to older workers. Boomers are looking for fair and judicious comments. Traditionalists prefer critiques that are instructional and that they come from superiors.

It goes both ways

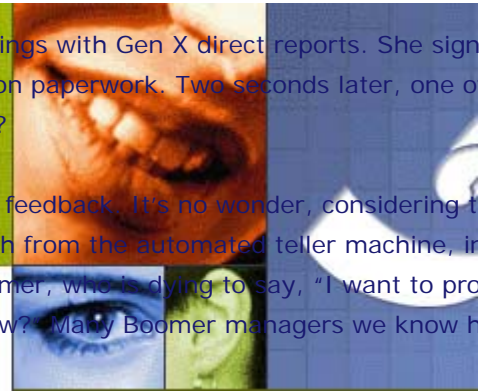
Younger employees desire something the Traditionalist top-down model didn’t allow—feedback that travels up the ladder as well as down. While politically conscious Boomers would have thought twice (or more) about telling the boss what was wrong with department operations, Traditionalists wouldn’t have even considered it, and Xers and Millennials seem to have no problem being upfront with higher-ups, which isn’t always appreciated.

“I feel like the Xers are so ‘in your face,’” says one Traditionalist manager. “Not only am I sometimes shocked by how direct they are when they ask me for feedback. I’m shocked by how willing they are to give me feedback—whether I ask for it or not.”

The candor and chutzpah that the younger generations bring to the workplace can be rare and valuable commodities if management encourages the feedback, listens to it, and responds to it. Some successful managers hold weekly huddles during which everyone in the department is welcome to share information and opinions. Other organizations design

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representatives of various ages to receive feedback from employees and then relay it to the appropriate people.

A few kind words

When you're reaching out to someone from another generation, there's nothing quite like the power of positive feedback. Mutual respect bonds colleagues like nothing else. And sadly, all generations, no matter how cocky or self-assured they seem, are starved for positive feedback.

Traditionalists are sometimes so experienced that we forget how much they still need to hear the occasional word of praise. While they may not let on, they still appreciate a quiet, understated compliment recognizing their contributions.

Boomers are busy managing up to four generations of direct reports. With the disappearance of several management levels in many organizations, feedback has gotten a little too thin. Boomers may be providing feedback to dozens of employees while receiving any themselves. And as Boomers struggle to connect with an ever-younger workforce, they can be particularly touched by feedback from an Xer telling them they did something right.

Gen Xers need positive feedback to show them when they're on the right track. As one 25-year-old told us, "Some of us have been promoted so fast, we're afraid to admit what we don't know." Telling them what they're doing right reinforces performance and eliminates some of the guesswork for a generation struggling to fit in. But remember, praise needs to be sincere and grounded in fact.

Many Millennials have been raised by Boomer parents whose belief in the "I'm okay, you're okay" style of communication taught them to expect lots of praise. Millennials are likely to mistake silence for disapproval and easily can become discouraged if they don't receive a reasonable amount of verbal strokes.

So call a time out on the generational playing field and take a moment to provide your colleagues with feedback that they can understand and appreciate.

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