

# Decoding Generational Discourse:

## *Cracking the Code to Improve Communication Across Generations*

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*“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”*

– George Bernard Shaw

**E**very nurse has been there: caring for a patient who only speaks a foreign language. The shift is characterized by a high-stakes game of charades, a sincere effort to communicate, and a desperate search for a confirmation of understanding. When someone speaks words that

sound so different from our own, we go out of the way to ensure that what we meant to communicate was understood. We try harder. We fully commit to and actively engage in the process of communication from beginning to end. By contrast, when we hear familiar words in our most comfortable language, we don't try as hard. We sometimes unknowingly assume the intended message was received without closing the communication loop. Communication is quick and effortless, or so we think; perhaps this effortlessness is because we are skipping the crucial step—a confirmation of understanding.

**S**ame-language miscommunication like this happens every day on age-diverse teams because in addition to having a different set of values, biases, communication preferences, and goals that compete with those of the other age groups, each age cohort also has its *own language*. (I am not talking about text acumen, BON—“believe it or not” to those non-native to millennial jargon.) I mean words. Words that sound like ours. Words that we use every day. The same words have the same meaning, right? *Wrong*. So, how can we say what we mean and mean what we say if what we say means something different to each generation?

Following is a discussion of several key words defined differently by the generations including respect, accountability, loyalty, engagement, and coaching. The emphasis is less on adapting and more on understanding—if we learn how each generation understands these words and concepts, communication and teamwork reap the benefits.

### **RESPECT**

Most of the intergenerational management guidance requests I receive begin with some derivative of “Staff of that generation are so disrespectful when they...” These small initial

judgments set the tone for subsequent interactions and ultimately dictate the dynamic of the age-diverse team. Commonly, a deeper dig into this common issue reveals the root cause is quite simple: *respect* is defined very differently by each generation.

I have learned that the baby boomer generation (1944 to 1964)<sup>1,2</sup> understands respect through *obedience and deference*. They feel respected when they are obeyed and treated with traditional courtesy, and they show respect in the same way. Knowing this, you can understand their shock when a young nurse addresses them with an informal “hey” or does not even think to give up a chair to the senior physician on the unit.

Generation Xers (1965 to 1980)<sup>1,2</sup> understand respect through autonomy and leeway to work independently using their own time management and expertise. Hell hath no fury like a gen-Xer micromanager. As leaders, Xers allow their less experienced staff what they perceive to be the courtesy of autonomy and trust by providing loose guidelines toward a specific goal. Trending now is Xer frustration when less experienced staff members are unable to function effectively independently without specific step-by-step instructions to meeting expectations.

The youngest generation understands respect through value and inclusion. Millennials (1981 to 1995)<sup>1,2</sup> feel like a respected member of the team when they are included in projects and decisions that impact their daily operations, which in turn has been linked to active engagement, accountability, and empowerment at work.<sup>3</sup> As such, they also show respect to others by including even indirectly involved personnel in projects and workplace drama.

With these generational definitions in place, let’s revisit a classic complaint, “Millennials are so disrespectful when they text message during the staff meeting presentations.” To the older generations, this lack of deference, submission, and courtesy to the speaker is disrespectful; however, to the millennial generation, they do not understand this behavior as disrespectful because it strays so far from their personal definition and understanding of the concept of respect. They have shown up to your meeting and believe they are showing you value by their attendance—they wouldn’t be there if they didn’t value your leadership.

The solution to mitigate the contrasting understandings of respect is simple: Talk to each other. Acknowledge assumptions and differing definitions. Tell each other how you define respect, how you show respect, how you understand respect, and your understanding of various behaviors. With these clarifications, you are likely to see more demonstration of behaviors that you consider to be respectful; and as a bonus, you have modeled for the age-diverse team effective communication of needs in the professional space.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is a dirty word to many leaders; it is considered by some to be the Achilles heel of leadership—our most vulnerable area, our “small, but fatal, weakness”<sup>4</sup> by which we can be struck down and devoured by toxic employees or a destructive workplace dynamic. But why do we struggle to

hold others accountable? For several reasons: Not only is it uncomfortable to be “the bad guy,” but it also requires acknowledgment of and responsibility for broken processes or poor performance. Beyond those, it may simply be a matter of differing definitions of accountability.

Baby boomer leaders tend to define accountability in the traditional sense based on individual performance and with emphasis on the pecking order; staff is directly accountable to their superior for their job performance. Although this approach has worked for boomers for years, the rub is when this traditional understanding clashes with the contemporary shift in approach to accountability from the individual to the collective. The “I” is becoming “we.” The conventional, “I am accountable to my boss for this outcome” is becoming “we are accountable to each other for this outcome.”

As the most group-oriented generational cohort yet,<sup>5</sup> millennials rarely feel motivated to perform solely for their manager; rather, they will work diligently and productively for the good of their team. Their definition of accountability has less to do with their top-down individual performance evaluation and more to do with collaborating effectively toward a greater purpose and contribution to the whole.

These contrasting definitions undercommunicated can wreak havoc on workplace harmony, staff job satisfaction, and productivity. As a leader, is it possible to hold an entire group accountable? How can you evaluate individual performance if what you see is all group work? The solution to finding a balance that accommodates all generational definitions and understandings of accountability is a mix of frequent communication, visible metrics, and giving individuals credit for their contribution toward team successes.<sup>6,7</sup>

Just as with respect, start by openly acknowledging assumptions and differing definitions of accountability. Tell each other how you as a leader define accountability, how you understand accountability, and your expectations regarding behaviors demonstrating accountability. This might take several iterations before an open-communication culture is established on your team. Importantly, if you consistently use a strengths-based approach to acknowledging generational differences, you will cultivate a solid appreciative culture, free from judgment.

To reinforce the nonjudgmental aspect of this open communication of expected behaviors and performance, frequently show and discuss metrics used to define success. I am reminded of the classic thermometer used to display fundraiser progress—in a visible location, it largely displays the collective goal and where the team lies in progress toward it. There is no judgment for shortcomings, rather a focus on a clear, measurable goal and real-time progress. Some measurable goals that might apply to your departments include improving the medication scanning percentages to X%, earning departmental patient experience scores of X%, handwashing compliance to a certain percentage, hourly rounding compliance, rounding on 100% of patients before discharge, and others.

Finally, we know a portion of individual evaluation must focus on outcomes; however, to accommodate the contem-

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