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Management is not one size fits all

When managing four generations, understand and appreciate differences

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For the first time in many managers' lives, four distinct generations – Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y – are working side by side and bosses are just beginning to realize the severity of the situation. To maintain profitability and stability at your business, understanding age and style differences is critical to success.

Consider asking different age groups about President Kennedy. World War II veterans will remember young John F. Kennedy's debate against Richard Nixon; Boomers will focus on President Kennedy's assassination in Texas; Gen Xers will remind you Sen. Edward Kennedy isn't president; and Gen Y may ask, "Who's Kennedy?" Management needs to be capable of approaching, motivating and uniting these diverse age groups without alienating any demographic.

Consider how these generations break out to better comprehend your workforce. These birth ranges are usually a safe bet:

- 1922 – 1945: Veterans, traditionalists and GI's
- 1946 – 1964: Baby Boomers
- 1965 – 1980: Generation X
- 1981 – 2000: Generation Y, millennial generation and Internet generation

Now, consider the trends happening within each generation because your business could depend on it. Some of what's happening to the workforce:

- Gen Y is entering the workforce in full, and they are demanding and technically savvy.
- Gen X may move around more often and have multiple simultaneous careers.
- Baby Boomers are split, some heading into retirement, some finding second careers as hobbies and others continuing to work for financial stability.
- Veteran numbers may be waning, but those staying in their careers are valuable for their work ethic, practical workplace knowledge and experience.

Determining the rules of engagement for each generation is particularly important. Amongst Boomers, a need to "get the report done" is forceful, immediate and necessary. Yet, Gen Xers may interpret a Boomer's direction to "get the report done" as merely an observation rather than an order. To Gen X, the report needs to "get done *sometime*," but that may not necessarily mean today.

Clear communication under these circumstances is essential. These simple reminders can help build a more efficient office:

- Understand how different communication mediums are perceived and consider the unintended consequences of communication styles. Notes, e-mails, voicemails, text messages and meetings are all perceived differently by each generation.
- Be specific when giving instructions. Clearly outline deliverables, timetables and expectations and double-check.
- Create a dialogue. Open communication is more important than ever, and encouraging employees to voice opinions and reasoning is a healthy business practice.

Work itself is also viewed differently by each generation. Take into account the motivations and desires of your employees and you'll be better equipped to manage. According to George S. May International, some of the workforce's feelings include:

- Veterans: Work is an obligation that must be done.
- Boomers: Work may be tumultuous at times, but a career is an exciting adventure.
- Gen X: Work is approached with an entrepreneurial spirit and is a personal challenge.
- Gen Y: Work should be personally fulfilling and inspiring. It is only a means to an end.

It's always important to be conscious of management styles too, and how they are perceived by employees. How your workforce might view you:

- **Veterans** usually manage with clear directions, with a concern for command, control, formalities and a central authoritative figure.
- **Boomers** are typically more collegial and attempt to build consensus, but are usually comfortable dealing with people one-on-one too.
- **Gen X** is generally direct and challenging, typically asking "why?"
- **Gen Y** isn't in a managerial position yet, so it's slightly more difficult to understand their nature, but they'll probably desire participative decision making and will communicate through new technologies.

While businesses aren't designed to be psychology labs, understanding and appreciating generational differences is important to keeping a business running. . Fostering a company culture helps with employee retention, attitude and business direction. Understanding culture and work styles can direct hiring, and save businesses time and money. Whatever the generational makeup of a business may be, the profitability is improved when the generational differences are taken into account to create a more productive workforce.

About the author: Israel Kushnir is President of management consulting firm George S. May International Company. George S. May International Company is one of the most established management consulting firms in the United States. Since 1925, it has been helping business owners improve their operations, profits, efficiency and effectiveness. The company is headquartered outside of Chicago in Park Ridge, Ill. For more information, visit www.georgesmay.com.