Retiring the Generation Gap

How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground

Jennifer J. Deal
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and

In honor of my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins from the Lost Generation and the WWII Generation who told me and showed me that attitude, dedication, and effort are more important than age. I am grateful every day for their gifts.
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Preface

People often ask why I chose to study generational conflict; some even want to know whether I chose this topic because I harbor some deep-seated anger toward people of other generations. *Did you have conflicts with your parents when you were a teenager?* (Didn’t every reasonably healthy adult?) *Did you have problems with authority figures, such as your Ph.D. adviser?* (No comment.) *Do you disrespect older people?* (No!)

Actually, I have been lucky to have had my life enriched by the influence of relatives from generations that are not included in this research because very, very few are still in the workplace and, sadly, most are no longer with us—the so-called “Lost Generation” (although none I have known seemed lost) and the World War II Generation (the “Greatest Generation”). I grew up with the example of my grandmother, who, when my grandfather died too young, took over and ran his roofing company, raised two children, wore a dress and nylons to work every day, lived with diabetes for forty years, and never *ever* complained about the hand that life dealt her. As she climbed ladders to inspect roofing jobs in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, she may have become the model for the feminist saying, “As you climb the ladder of success, don’t let the men look up your dress.” My grandmother (who was born in 1903) and other older relatives always told me that age was immaterial—that attitude, dedication, and effort were much more important.

So, generational conflict wasn’t my primary area of interest, at least not initially. I was finishing another project focused on what makes a good global manager, and was writing a book about the results with my colleagues (Dalton, Ernst, Deal, and Leslie, 2002) when another colleague suggested strongly (on the order of “Get your backside to this meeting!”) that I come to a meeting about a new research project on intergenerational conflict. She thought I might be interested in getting involved. She pointed out that the
project didn’t have a full-time researcher on it yet and that my other project was ending soon. Why not, I thought; it never hurts to gather information.

When I arrived at the meeting, I wasn’t convinced that this topic was worth much time, because I honestly didn’t think the issue of generational similarities and differences was important. It certainly wasn’t important in my life (at the time). I also thought that any generational conflict was relatively unimportant to clients and would be (research-wise) relatively uninteresting to study. But I emerged several hours later intrigued by the research, both because of how useful it would be for our clients and because of how interesting the questions were (I’ll say more about this in the Introduction).

How different are the generations, really? How important is generational conflict in the workplace? What, if anything, can people in organizations do to reduce the conflicts among people of different generations? Contrary to my initial thoughts, the issues that were driving the research were both compelling and timely. For one thing, I learned that many of our clients at the Center for Creative Leadership believed that they had ongoing problems with generational conflict. For another, the published material on generational issues seemed to be too consistent with the stereotypes to be true. (Call me suspicious if you like, but when what is published on a topic echoes the stereotypes this closely, I suspect that people are just finding what they’re looking for, rather than what is actually there.) Further, too little of what had been published relied on what I considered to be good, rigorous research for me to accept the conclusions. (Although the joke among social science researchers is “data is the plural of anecdote,” basing conclusions on a small number of interviews isn’t the sort of “data” I am comfortable relying on.) What was written was interesting, but I would never use it to make recommendations to a client.

It also seemed likely that demographic shifts projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be coming (between 2005 and 2020) will have a much larger impact on the work world than the previously published material indicates they would. This meant that the information we hoped to discover through our research was going to be useful to clients immediately, was likely to be useful for at least a decade, and could potentially be useful for decades to come.
if we continued to gather data. That seemed to me to be a solid business case for the research project.

So we began the work. The more we learned, the more intrigued we became. The more interesting trends we discovered, the more we were able to tell clients about the realities of the differences and similarities among the generations. The more time we spent talking with clients about what we were finding, the more glad they were to tell us about what they were seeing in their work, which helped us focus our questions even more. This research project was supposed to take three years and has now been ongoing for seven. It is likely to continue for the foreseeable future as the next generation (Generation Y/Boomlet) moves into the workplace.

You’ll see in the rest of this book the distillation of what we think are the most applicable and interesting results of the research. By necessity, the book doesn’t contain everything. (Is anyone except my coworkers interested in 1,000 pages of minutiae, dozens of spreadsheets, and a plethora of chi-squares, Fs, Ts, and the other fun symbols that brighten a statistician’s day?) What it does contain are the results of the research we hope will be most interesting and useful to people working in organizations that employ people from several generations—and that’s almost everybody!

**Why This Book Says “We”**

You’ll notice that I say “we” a lot, even though my name is the only one on the cover. The reason I do this is because I didn’t do this work all by myself. Not even close. I was research scientist and project manager, but in truth, the research and the book itself were completed only because many people were willing to do a lot of work.

It’s amazing to me how many people’s work goes into the production of a book—or at least went into this one! In the past when I’ve read authors’ notes saying, “This book couldn’t have been written without the work of a number of people, yada, yada,” I’ve always thought, “How gracious, but not necessarily true.” I was really really wrong. Really. The number of people who were kind enough to spend their personal time commenting on my work rather than doing something important to them was incredible. It is a gift that I’ll never be able to thank them for enough . . . and that I’m sure
they’ll be reminding me of forever . . . especially when it’s time to pick up the check!

Seriously though, this book could not have been written without the efforts of an almost endless number of people, many of whom are listed in the acknowledgments.

**Why We’re Writing to Everyone and Not Just to Managers and Leaders**

One question we wrestled with was whether this book should be written for people in positions of authority (managers, leaders, and the like) or aimed at a more general audience. Given that we are the Center for Creative Leadership, we began with a definite “leader” tilt. However, I think of generational conflict as an issue everyone experiences, not one that only people in positions of authority encounter. After all, everyone has parents, and many people have children—and through those relationships people experience the most volatile generational conflicts there are. So when I was writing I found that I was writing for everyone, not just for the people who have “VP” or “director” (or whatever) next to their name. After the editors read the first draft, we decided that we should make a conscious decision to go with the “everyone” orientation, rather than try to twist the whole thing back in the direction of people in executive positions.

So this book is written for everyone who has to interact with people from other generations (at work or at home) and occasionally finds himself or herself confused, annoyed, ticked off (or worse!) by the behavior of people of a different generation. And again, that is obviously . . . everyone!

However, people in management positions don’t have to deal with generational conflict only as individual people; they also have to deal with other people’s generational conflicts. Therefore, we’ve included special sections for those people who manage others (at any level) or who are anticipating moving into managerial positions.

A note on style: you’ve probably already noticed that I’m not writing in anything approaching a standard academic style. Rather than write with the (academically) obligatory dense prose, page-
length sentences, and copious footnotes, I have opted for a more conversational tone. I hope for your sake that it makes the book easier to read!

September 2006

Jennifer J. Deal
San Diego, California
Introduction

Do Not Pass Go Without Reading This Chapter!

Children today are tyrants.
They contradict their parents, gobble their food,
and tyrannize their teachers.
SOCRATES (470–399 B.C.)

If you read no further than this paragraph, we want you to leave knowing two things:

1. Fundamentally people want the same things, no matter what generation they are from.
2. You can work with (or manage) people from all generations effectively without becoming a contortionist, selling your soul on eBay, or pulling your hair out on a daily basis.

Got that? Good. You’ve got the essence of what we’ll be talking about. Now (if you must) go check your e-mail, take a call, whatever. But then come back, because there’s more to the story. . . .

“But what about the generation gap?” you may ask. “If you knew the old farts/young slackers (choose one—or more!) I work with, you’d know that the generation gap is alive and well!”

Well, appearances can be deceiving, whether it is gray hair and wrinkles, or jeans and pierced body parts. In fact, as we’ll explain, the so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout—which includes control, power, authority, and position.
How We Got Here

This book introduces and explains a set of principles that come out of an extensive research project conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) on managing and leading across generations. Why principles? Because they are the easiest and most intuitive way to explain thousands of results from our research. (We presume you don’t really want to read through a 25-page spreadsheet that contains all the statistical results.)

But you should know that we were not in search of principles per se when we began our research. We were instead driven simply to explore the working world in search of answers to a number of questions our clients had asked, including these:

What do we need to do to retain younger employees?
Why is there so much conflict among the generations?
Why do older employees hate change so much?
What do younger people want to learn?
Do younger people want all development through their computers?
Why do younger people dress so informally at work?
What can we do about the feeling of entitlement among younger employees?
What can we do about the feeling of entitlement among older employees?
Why are younger people so disrespectful, and what can we do to fix the problem?
Why are younger people so disloyal?
Do older people have any interest in learning?
Why don’t our employees trust us? Is it a generational thing?
Who wants coaching?
What do younger people want in their leaders?

As it turned out, the answers to these questions—and dozens more—can be effectively summed up by ten principles that apply across all generations. And, as the research revealed, dealing effectively with people of other generations can be pretty straightforward.
In all matters of opinion and science . . . the difference between men is . . . oftener found to lie in generals than in particulars, and to be less in reality than in appearance. An explanation of the terms commonly ends the controversy, and the disputants are surprised to find that they had been quarreling, while at the bottom they agreed in their judgement.

—David Hume (1711–1766), Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, 1875

So this book explains (when possible) what you can do to retire the generation gap and why you should. In each chapter, you’ll find

- A description of the issue
- A description of our research on the issue
- The principal conclusion of the research expressed as a principle
- Our best take on how to apply the principle to make cross-generational work life easier for you

By the end you should know what your employees and colleagues at work are really saying when they cry “Generation gap!” and what you can do to “retire the gap” so you can address the real issues.

We don’t promise that you’re going to like everything we say—in fact we’re sure that just about everyone is going to object to something in this book. But when we say things that offend you, please understand that it is not our intention to offend; we are simply trying to understand how one part of the world works, and good science sometimes leads to unexpected—and sometimes uncomfortable—conclusions.

About the Research

When you’re reading about the conclusions of any research project, it is often difficult to know what you should believe and what you shouldn’t.

There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.

—Attributed by Mark Twain to Disraeli

Sometimes it is nearly impossible to tell when people are manipulating data to sell their theory (or their product or their political agenda). Therefore, we promise the following:
• Our results are as accurate as we can possibly make them; we aren’t playing games with the statistics to support a particular position. If the data had shown that older people are fossilized and younger people are slackers, we would have reported that result.

• Our conclusions are drawn from our best understanding of the results as a whole. We aren’t taking one result in isolation and building a whole theory around it.

• Our recommendations are based on our best understanding of the results and include knowledge gleaned from many other researchers, consultants, and organizational scientists.

• The quotations we use are entirely accurate and are drawn from our database. We have not altered the quotations for effect, though we have corrected spelling when the original was difficult to read.

• The stories we use are all true. We couldn’t believe that people would actually do some of these things, but they did.

We also need to take some time to tell you about the people who participated in this survey, because they are not representative of everyone everywhere in the United States. Understanding who filled out the survey will help you understand how far you can generalize the results, so please bear with us for the next few pages.

As of the publication of this book, more than 5,800 people have participated in this research. Of that number, 3,200 who were both born in and are currently living in the United States were included in the research for this book. Those who either were born outside or are currently living outside the United States (the other 2,600) were not included because explaining every similarity and difference of generations for the rest of the world in addition to the United States would have made the book far too long. We may be using their data for another book in the future.

Although the database comprises 3,200 respondents, not every one of those individuals filled out every part of the survey. The results we report are based on the total number of people who responded to an item (not necessarily the total 3,200). For example, only 2,732 people responded to the question about retention, so those results are based on 2,732 respondents. Also, we didn’t ask specific questions about change or respect in the workplace, so the
results in the corresponding chapters are based on the comments of those people who volunteered information on those topics—a small subset of the total number of respondents. Nonetheless, we have reported only those results for which we believe we have ample evidence.

People began filling out the survey in 2000, and we stopped adding people to the database for this book in 2005. (An interesting aside: we have been unable to find any differences in responses between the people who filled out the survey before the events of September 11, 2001, and those who did so after.)

People who filled out the survey were born between 1925 and 1986. As of this writing, they are between the ages of 19 and 80. We assigned them (based on birth year) to a generation with this terminology and distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Percentage of Survey Participants</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silents (b. 1925–1945)</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>This group is called the Silent Generation because it tends to be quieter than the Baby Boomers and isn’t discussed as much, but if you look at the organizations controlled by people in this age range, you will see how powerful the members of this generation are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Boomers (b. 1946–1954)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>These were the children born following World War II. There was a massive increase in the birth rate, known as the Baby Boom, that began shortly after the end of the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Boomers (b. 1955–1963)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>This is the second half of the Baby Boom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Xers (b. 1964–1976)</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>The group identified as Gen X began when the birth rate decreased after the end of the Baby Boom. The term <em>Generation X</em> became widespread</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
after the publication in 1991 of Douglas Coupland’s book of the same name. Coupland’s book followed Charles Hamblett and Jane Dever-son’s 1964 novel, also titled Generation X, which described the generation of people who would come of age at the end of the 20th century as apathetic and materialistic.

Late Xers 5.5 This group includes the youngest part of Generation X.

(b. 1977–1986)

People who filled out the survey came to us from a variety of places and types of companies, and they participated for a variety of reasons:

- Their organizations agreed to participate.
- They saw us speak about the subject and wanted to find out what was going on in the research.
- It was part of the work required before they came to a CCL program.
- They read about the research in a news article and wanted to put their two cents in.

We welcomed everyone who wanted to participate; all a person needed in order to become part of the research was a password from one of the research team, and we gave these out freely.

Of these 3,200 respondents, 41% were men, and 59% were women. Why so many women? Because we had a large sample from nonprofits, and more women worked in the nonprofits than worked in the for-profits. And no, there were no significant differences between for-profits and nonprofits regarding anything we’ll be discussing.

Of the people who identified themselves by race, 88% self-identified as white, 6% as black, 1% as Asian, 2% as multiracial, and 3% as other. Why did we choose these categories instead of the ones that are used more commonly to describe race in the United States? Because we were conducting the study simultaneously on other continents, and we had to use racial categories that