"So much of what is going on in our lives is seen through our own generational lens."

When Generations Collide:
How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work

A presentation by

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Synopsis by Rod Cox

"Generational collisions are among the key management issues being faced by leaders of today's organizations." Because people are living longer and staying in the workforce longer, this is the first time in history that four generations are likely to find themselves looking at each other over the same conference table.

The research of Lynne C. Lancaster (with business partner David Stillman) clearly shows that many problems formerly ascribed to loss of employee loyalty and work ethic are actually generational in nature. Companies are finding that productivity, culture and viability are being negatively impacted by poorly handled generational issues. Indeed, 65% of the research respondents say that generation gaps make it hard to get things done. They cite lack of communication; the tension between "that's the way we've always done it" and "let's change it because we <u>can</u> change it"; differences in generational values on issues as diverse as work ethic and dress codes; workforce shifts; and the problem of obtaining and retaining multi-generational talent.

In short, the potential for collision, conflict and confusion between the generations has never been greater.

In this presentation, Lancaster broadens and deepens our understanding of the generational variables that influence performance:

- Who the generations are: their demographics, traits, stereotypes and values

- How to analyze your own organization for generational weaknesses and strengths

Lynne C. Lancaster is a respected management consultant and coach. Her research on intergenerational communication stems from observing the challenges her clients face in recruiting, training, managing and retaining a work force that spans four generations, often at conflict with each other. She has been reviewed, quoted and featured in numerous national magazines and journals including *The Futurist, Nation's Business* and *The Washington Post.* With business partner David Stillman she is co-founder of Bridgeworks, a company dedicated to researching and promoting generational issues and understanding. Her latest book, upon which this presentation is based, is *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why they Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work.*

L ancaster notes that the coming workforce loss of both Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will create a shortage of workers as well as a severe brain drain. Utilities, government, and manufacturing – industries which expanded massively in the boom of the 60s – will be particularly hard hit. Within seven years, 30 million currently employed workers will be over age 55. The skilled worker gap is estimated to be 5.3 million by 2010; 14 million by 2020. What is now a talent overload is quickly becoming a talent deficit, and companies will find themselves competing for qualified workers. Thus, taking advantage of generational strengths – both now and in the future – is a critical characteristic of agile and profitable companies.

Truly understanding generational characteristics is a good starting place since misleading generational stereotypes are pervasive, and they divert attention from the strengths that each generation brings to the party. *"You can't expect to understand someone you've already put in a box."* Are "old people" really forgetful? Are "young people" really focused only on themselves? Lancaster says, "no," and she has the research to back it up, as shown on the clarifying grid below.

(Note that this grid is not intended to "put people in a box," but instead, to take the lid off the box to increase understanding, appreciation and workplace productivity. Further, this grid does not include Cuspers, those who have a foot in two generations. They often do tremendous work in connecting the generations. Lancaster also notes that many people "jump generations": i.e., there are very traditional millennials as well very hip traditionalists, so categorizing solely by birth year would be a mistake.)

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation Xers	Millennials (Gen Y, GeNext)
Birth Years	Pre-1946	1946-1964	1965-1981	1982-2000
Population Size	75 Million (25% of whom are still in the workforce)	80 Million	46 Million	76 Million
Influencers	The Great Depression; World War II; the GI Bill; the Cold War	Booming birthrate; economic prosperity; Vietnam; Watergate; protest and human rights movements; sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll; suburbia; dual incomes	Sesame Street and MTV; personal computers; children of divorce; AIDS; crack cocaine; loss of "world" safety	Expansion of technology and the media; drugs and gangs; pervasive violence; widening chasm between haves and have-nots; unprecedented immigration growth
View of institutions	Loyal to institution	Want to put their stamp on institutions	Are skeptical of institutions	Judge institutions on their own merit
#1 reason for staying on the job, or for changing jobs	Loyalty to clients and customers	Making a difference	Building a career	Work that has meaning

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	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation Xers	Millennials (Gen Y, GeNext)
Traits	Patriotic; loyal; heads down, onward and upward attitude; polite; fiscally conservative; faith in institutions; high work ethic; graciousness; experience; keepers of institutional memory; may feel overlooked and unappreciated ("I've acquired wisdom over the years but there doesn't seem to be much demand for it.")	Idealistic and optimistic; highly competitive; overwhelming need to succeed; question authority; the "sandwich generation" with elder-care concerns; responding to healthcare issues, divorce, death of parent, kids in college; may be turning inward; have difficulty admitting something is wrong; don't like to ask for help; at risk for burnout; experienced; team-workers; skilled at mentoring	Eclectic; resourceful; comfortable with change; self-reliant; adaptable; skeptical about relationships and distrust institutions; high divorce rate; info-highway pioneers; entrepreneurial and independent; innovative; full of energy; fun at work; the generation that "got rid of the box"	Aka "The Digital Generation"; globally concerned; integrated; cyber literate; media and technology savvy; expect 24-hour info; realistic; probably have too much stuff to sort through; acknowledge diversity and expect others to do so; environmentally conscious; will try anything
Negative Stereotypes	Can't learn technology; refuse to give up the reins; non-engaged	Materialistic; work hard not smart; sold out their ideals; heavily in debt; not loyal	Haven't paid their dues; too young for management; say what they think; slackers; aggressive; annoying; loud	Unaware of lack of skills; require excessive affirmation; MTV generation
Values	Job stability; long-term careers; great reputation; fiscal responsibility; take care of possessions and responsibilities	Who am I? Where did my passion go? Is it too late to get it back? Seek organizations with integrity; politically correct; eager to put their own stamp on things; good pay; community involvement	Be my own boss; team environment contrasted with entrepreneurial spirit; advancement oportunity	High value on education; high value on life style balance; work is not the most important thing; stepping stone for future opportunities; high tech, innovative; diverse workforce; Be my own boss
Recruitment, engagement, management, and retention	Recognize their loyalty and experience; select activities that help them show what they know; remember that traditionalists have career paths, too; focus on evolution, not revolution	Be aware of Boomers' competitive nature; acknowledge their contributions; focus on how they can make an impact; offer continued training opportunities, especially life skills and balance	Respect their skepticism; establish your credentials; show you have a sense of humor; let them know you like them; talk about how training applies to their careers, not just their jobs	Don't assume they are all at the same level in training; expect to do more remedial training; teach in shorter modules, testing often and making it fun; help them visualize how the training applies to their jobs; understand they learn best by collaborating

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	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation Xers	Millennials (Gen Y, GeNext)
The workplace as an institution	40% say their companies don't do a good job at making them want to stay; 70% think a one-company career is good; 48% said training opportunities play a role in staying; 73% plan to return to work in some capacity after they retire	43% say they lack mentoring opportunities and 30% say that contributes to job dissatisfaction; 75% say time off would be the greatest reward; 35% think a one-company career is good; prone to workplace burnout	30% have left a job due to lack of training opportunities; 80% of Gen Xer men put time with family above challenging work or a higher salary; only 17% think a one-company career is good	Globally aware, cyber literate, techno-savvy; personal safety is #1 workplace issue; they expect diversity
Improving feedback and communication	"No news is good news." May not be sending enough info down the ladder, nor receptive to info coming up the ladder; provide training in feedback skills (50% haven't received feedback training); assume they can change behaviors	"Once a year, formal and documented." Initiate weekly informal talks and formally document them;	"So how am I doing?" Give feedback all the time and to the point: be available; allow freedom to keep them learning and focused on career paths; immediate and regular feedback; tell it like it is (Xers have a well-tuned BS-ometer)	"I want it with the push of a button. Let's all talk about it." Initiate the connection; consider electronic connections and newsletter; make it visual; allow them an active role in creating their own education and work plans
Performance rewards	Seek high-performing traditionalists and mix them with high-potential Xers to transfer the learning; consider alternative scheduling or job sharing; recruit them actively; make them feel part of the culture; help them ease into retirement; recognize the satisfaction of a job well done	Money, title, recognition; recognize them as the first "sandwiched" generation caring for children as well as parents; provide time off with pay; provide life skills and balance training; provide second-career avenues	Xers have shaken up the rewards system; skeptical about jobs and organizations; prefer time with family and outside interests; provide opportunities for development of personal and professional life	Provide work that has meaning

The critical message is, *"generational differences have the potential to enhance rather than harm organizations."* Lancaster observes that the companies who learn to take advantage of the generation gaps – not simply manage or endure them – are likely to be "employers of choice" in the future, capable of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. *"It has to do with being liked, trusted, listened to, provided with training, and establishing an atmosphere of good will for employees of all ages."* Said another way, successful organizations are wise to recognize, understand and employ the strengths of all generations as they consider immediate and future needs.

Learning Applications

Consider the value of conducting a serious, forthright analysis of the generational puzzle in your own organization:

- Does the organization understand and embrace the contributions of each generation? What are the evidences?

- How is each generation currently being understood or stereotyped?

- What does each generation bring to the table? How do they clash? How do they interact?

- What is your expectation of the roles each generation will play in decision-making?

- What are you doing to hire and retain employees from each generation?

- How do generational influences and shifts affect your succession plans?

- What needs to happen to weave generational respect into your organizational culture?

- Who will lead the charge?