

The Myth of Generational Differences

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, June 2007

Conventional wisdom has it mostly wrong about generational differences in the workplace, according to Jennifer Deal, a research scientist with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), a nonprofit educational institution. She says research shows that, regardless of age, we all want essentially the same things.

Positive stereotypes about the four generations in U.S. workplaces suggest that members of the Silent Generation—generally, Americans in their 60s—value hard work, baby boomers value loyalty, Generation Xers value work/life balance, and Generation Y values innovation and change.

Negative stereotypes claim the silents are fossilized, the boomers are narcissistic, the Xers are slackers and the Yers are even more narcissistic than the boomers.

Not so, says Deal. She argues that the generations now of working age value essentially the same things. Her findings are based on seven years of research in which she surveyed more than 3,000 corporate leaders. The findings are presented in her new book, [*Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground*](#) (Jossey-Bass, 2006).

“Our research shows that when you hold the stereotypes up to the light, they don’t cast much of a shadow,” Deal said in a press release. “Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback and the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your level in the organization than on your age.”

According to Deal’s research:

All generations have similar values. Many people talk about the enormous differences in values between older and younger people as if these differences were an established fact. The most striking result of the research, Deal says, is how similar the generations are in the values that matter most. Family tops the list for all of the generations.

Everyone wants respect. We often hear that that younger people are disrespectful of older employees and those in authority. We hear complaints that older people show no respect for younger talent and ideas. Everyone wants respect, but the generations don’t define it in the same way. In the study, older individuals talked about respect in terms of “giving my opinions the weight I believe they deserve,” while younger respondents characterized respect as “listen to me; pay attention to what I have to say.”

Leaders must be trustworthy. Different generations do not have notably different expectations of their leaders. Above all, people of all generations want leaders they can trust.

No one really likes change. The stereotype is that older people resist change while younger people embrace it. These assumptions don't stand up under the research, which found that people from all generations are uncomfortable with change. Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it has to do with how much you stand to gain or lose as a result of the change.

Loyalty depends on context. It is said that younger generations are not as loyal to their organizations as older workers. But the research shows, for example, that the amount of time a worker puts in each day has more to do with his or her level in the organization than with age. The higher the level, the more hours worked.

Everyone wants to learn. Learning and development were among the issues brought up most frequently by people of all generations. Everyone wants to learn and to make certain they have the training to do their job well.

Everyone likes feedback. According to the research, everyone wants to know how they are doing and wants to learn how to do better.

Clearly, people of different ages see the world in different ways. But that's not the primary reason for generational conflict, according to the book. Deal says the conflict has less to do with age or generational differences than it does with clout—who has it and who wants it. “The so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout,” says Deal.

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is online writer/editor for SHRM.