

# White Paper

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Solution Focus Areas:

**Engagement / Morale**  
**Productivity**  
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# *Dealing with a Changing Workforce: Supervision in the 21st Century*



## *Dealing with a Changing Workforce: Supervision in the 21st Century*

*Walk into almost any business today and one thing will become immediately apparent ... the great diversity of today's workforce. One aspect of this diversity is the generational differences among today's workers.*

According to most experts, for the first time in history, we are seeing members of four distinct “generations” working together, and often experiencing clashes in both attitudes and values. Referred to by many different names, the four generations represented in today's workforce have been identified as “Traditionalists” – born between 1925 and 1946 – make up approximately 5-10% of today's workforce, “Baby Boomers” – born between 1946 and 1963 – make up approximately 40-45% of the workforce, “Generation X” – born between 1963 and 1981 – also make up approximately 40-45% of the workforce, and “Generation Why” – born between 1981 and 2000 – make up the final 5-10% of the workforce.

### **Historical Context:**

The major events and historical conditions each of us experience as grow up have a significant influence on both our attitudes and behaviors. Different generations typically share fads, dress, music, technology, heroes and other cultural experiences.

Think back, can you recall the major historical events which may have occurred while you were growing up? How did they affect you? How did they affect your generation?

- For Traditionalists (age 60+), major events such as The Great Depression, World War II and the Korean War have been attributed to such generational values as hard work/positive work ethic, dedication and sacrifice, respect for rules and an emphasis on both duty and honor. Traditionalists value job security and expect strong ethics and moral values from both their leaders and the company as a whole. They want/need respect from their supervisors and want to be recognized for their dedication and sacrifice at work.
- For the Baby Boomers (age 44 to 60), historical events such as Civil Rights, the “Sexual Revolution,” the Cold War, space travel and multiple assassinations have led to such generational characteristics as a strong “team” orientation, an emphasis on personal gratification and a focus on personal growth. For the most part, they were raised by parents who taught them to believe that they could be and do anything they wanted. In the workplace, they seek status and will often sacrifice family for advancement, bonuses, nice homes, nice cars, and other material possessions. They work hard and put in lots of time at work. Many still believe that hard work and loyalty equals career success.

- For the Generation X'ers (age 26 to 44), events such as the Fall of Berlin Wall, Watergate, Women's Liberation, Desert Storm and the energy crisis have all influenced such characteristics as an appreciation of diversity, technological literacy, fun and informality, self-reliance and pragmatism. Members of this generation were brought up in times of rapid social change and many of them grew up in single parent homes or as "latch-key" children. They tend to be skeptical of almost all institutions and believe its "every person for themselves." They expect to work hard, but also expect to be well paid for it. They tend to prefer cash and salary over time off or other types of rewards. As a generation, they are heavily focused on a positive "work-life balance."
- For the younger, Generation Why (age 26 and under), recent events such as 9/11, Oklahoma City, school shootings, technology and the focus on children's rights have all led to such social values as civic responsibility, confidence, achievement orientation and respect for diversity. They are characterized by "Baby on Board" car stickers, safety seats, air bags, and superb medical care and their parents typically protected them and intervened on their behalf. They bring an even higher level of technological sophistication to the workplace and a strong emphasis on multi-tasking. They are looking for immediate feedback and are interested in making a difference. As a generation, they thrive on change and expect a high level of flexibility at work.

### **The Challenge:**

Unfortunately, many of today's managers and supervisors are unaware of, or simply choose to ignore these important generational differences. However, research over the past 20 years on employee engagement has clearly shown that in order to reduce conflict and get the most out of your staff, you have to treat your employees the way they want to be treated. This appreciation of diversity allows each generation to contribute to, as well as become part of the long-term growth of the organization.

### **The Solution:**

While research suggests that most workers want many of the same things from their supervisors (i.e., respect, honesty, integrity, fairness, confidentiality, professionalism, etc.), each of the four generations place a difference emphasis on what they find most important and most rewarding:

- Approaching the end of their careers/work life, the Traditionalists are looking primarily for a sense of security. They have worked hard and want to know that what they have worked for (their retirement) will be there for them when the time comes. They want to know that their time has meant something and that their years of experience are both valued and respected. They want to know that, although changing, the older, more "traditional" ways have not been forgotten.

- Currently in the second half of their work life, the Baby Boomers are primarily focused on earning a sense of respect and independence for the level of experience and competence they can now demonstrate on the job. They are looking for opportunities to grow and to expand their influence and, of course, to earn more money, respect and autonomy. For many, they are looking for a new, more collegial relationship with their supervisors and often welcome the opportunity to coach and mentor others.
- Being a highly mobile generation facing the challenges of a growing family, the Generation X'ers are looking for the biggest return on their investment (their time and energy). They are willing to work hard, but they want to see tangible outcomes for their efforts. For the most part, they value their privacy and prefer to keep a clear separation between work and home life. They value their time off and expect their employers to offer both benefits and opportunities for a successful work-life balance. They are willing to give, but typically only as much as they are given.
- Perhaps the most challenging generation for most supervisors to deal with, the Generation Why employees bring to the workplace the same complexities and dichotomies which they face on a daily basis. They expect unconditional acceptance from their supervisors and have a high need for respect of their personal space. They seek immediate, ongoing, positive feedback and want regular recognition and appreciation from those they work with. They have been taught to continuously challenge and ask the question why and appreciate the opportunity to have significant input into the way things are done. The most important thing to remember, however, when dealing with the Generation why employee is the need for both autonomy and immediacy in feedback and reward.

### **Conclusion:**

While obviously challenging, today's business leaders need find ways to support and respect each of the four generations. This will naturally require a great deal of flexibility. However, learning what they need and how best to communicate with each of the four distinct generations can eliminate many confrontations and misunderstandings between employees, as well as between employees and management.