Bridging Age Gaps in the Workplace: Beyond Stereotypes to Strategies

By Simma Lieberman and Kate Berardo

For the first time, four generations of employees are simultaneously playing a prominent role in the workplace. Today we have more and more people who are working beyond their 60s into their 70s, 80s and even some into their 90s, which means you may find two people working together who could potentially have a 50 year age difference.

The two of us writing this piece—Simma and Kate—with nearly 30 years between us, are testament to the fact that an age difference does not have to translate into more difficulty working together. We've collaborated on projects for over 6 years, written a book together, and celebrated personal and professional milestones in each of our lives. We both feel strongly that our relationship has been significantly enriched because of our age difference, not in spite of it.

Bridging age gaps does, however, often involve a bit more effort and investment in the relationship—at least at the beginning. Why? People are products of their history, their environment and all of their experiences, so people from different generations often have very different life experiences that shape how they think, what they value, and what drives them at work.

If we were writing a traditional cross-generational article, at this junction we would probably start writing out bullet points of the main differences between the four generations. Well, we can't bring ourselves to do that. While its tempting to hope that a few bullet points could suffice in summing up a whole generation of

millions of people, we are doubtful. Such descriptions need to be viewed holistically, cautiously taking into account all the dimensions of diversity and individuality that exist so you don't end up getting stuck in stereotypes.

Even the 'safest' description, like lists of key events that have shaped various generations can be misguiding. While one generation may experience a collective event (e.g. Generation X as being shaped by the technology boom and dotcom era), that event may impact them as individuals very differently. Let us give you a few examples.

Much is written about the experience of baby boomers during the Vietnam War and the 60s. Most of what we have read talks about baby boomers being characterized as protesting the war with peace marches and demonstrations. Its true that there were massive marches and demonstrations during that time, but there were also baby boomers in the military in Vietnam, dying, getting wounded, and coming back having experienced the trauma of being in a war. They were shaped very differently by the same experience.

Or, take the Veterans generations, who lived through the depression. Many people from this generation were frugal, saved their money, and kept a lot of canned food in their pantries "just in case." Yet at the same time there were other people who decided that they didn't know what was going to happen so they had to live for today, and spent every paycheck.

Remember as well that generations typically span 20 years. That means an event like the dotbomb for Gen Xers in their early teens may be nothing more than a faint memory of a TV report, while for older Gen Xers it may remind them of the painful memory of a lost job.

Our point is this: while it's helpful to know some of the generalizations about different generations as a starting point, the real learning and the real bridging of age difference comes through doing two things: 1) suspending your assumptions and judgments, and 2) engaging in dialogue across generations.

What does this mean in practice? When you are interacting across age difference...

Find out not only about the seminal events that occurred as they were growing up, but also about the ways in which this event impacted the person with whom you are interacting.

Avoid assuming that because people are a certain age they will act a certain way. There are generational trends and norms but there are a lot of people in each generation that don't fit, like the 70 year old computer whiz who designs websites and blogs, the 25 year old who is not computer literate, the 55 year old who runs marathons, and the 45 year old who volunteers 20 hours a week at women and children's shelter.

Instead of treating others as you like to be treated, find out how they like to be treated and respect them by honoring that. When working with someone older than you, this means not automatically addressing them by their first name, as you may prefer to be called. Instead, ask such individuals whether they want to be called by their first name or their last.

Acknowledge age difference and talk about how you can learn from each other and help each other be more successful. You may be surprised by some of the things you have in common and want to know more about each others different experiences.

These are just a few ways in which you can break through generational stereotypes and bridge generational differences. For additional strategies like avoiding generational jargon and approaching interactions with a learning orientation, check out other articles on generation communication at www.simmalieberman.com

Simma Lieberman works with people and organizations to create more profitable and productive cultures, where people can do their best work. She specializes in diversity and inclusion, diversity dialogues and power living. Simma is a consultant, speaker and author. She is the co-author of the book "Putting Diversity to Work, how to successfully lead a diverse workforce". Contact Simma at simma@simmalieberman.com or visit her website at www.simmalieberman.com

Kate Berardo is an intercultural trainer and consultant who specializes in programs on cross-cultural awareness, international relocation, and multicultural teambuilding. She is the founder of the global resource site Culturosity.com and co-author of Putting Diversity to Work. www.culturosity.com.