

How to End the Generation War

By **Simma Lieberman**, *The Inclusionist*



I've been facilitating cross-generational dialogues for over ten years. I started them because I was tired of one-dimensional conversations filled with bias and wrong assumptions about people who were older or younger. After the first three sessions, it was clear to me that we have a lot to learn from each other. Cross-generational mentoring became an integral part of my inclusive leadership coaching process.

People who participate in my cross-generation dialogues are always surprised at the connections they make with people a lot younger or a lot older. They find new ways to collaborate as whole people with multiple identities.

Inclusive leaders are aware of any biases they may have towards people who are younger or older and are willing to let go of those biases. They recognize what each individual brings to the organization.

Here are some of the generalizations, stereotypes and assumptions that are permeating the mainstream media, YouTube and TikTak. (Can we have some humor?)

- **“Ok boomer”** This is a meme that some younger people have been saying to older people who they view as condescending or who trivialize their issues. In response radio host Bob Lonsberry tweeted, “boomer is the n-word of ageism.” ?????? No!!!!

It's getting sillier every day. People are taking positions on social media about the “generation divide.” This is the “anti-inclusion” and doesn't take into account that within each generation there is much diversity. No one is just an age.

- **“Millennials can't keep a job.”** I've heard this for years and makes no sense. From Baby Boomers on down, it's rare to find someone in the same job at 40 they had at 20.

By the time I was 25, I probably had at least 25 jobs. Young people are supposed to explore different paths. (I probably over did the job changes.) They don't need to stay at the same minimum wage job until they're 70.

I like to remind other boomers (yes, I am) that some of their complaints about younger employees are the same complaints people had about us when we were young. We were considered by many older people to be irresponsible, anti-authority, and hard to understand.

• **“Younger employees always want to go home early.** They have no work ethic.” Baby boomers often complain that young people don’t want to work a full day. The difference is that many young people focus on results and not the number of hours. That makes sense to me. If more people worked that way there would be less stress.

It’s also not always true. My 25-year-old son worked two jobs seven days a week to pay his bills.

Unless you are a shift worker; foodservice, health care, law enforcement it’s a waste of energy to stay at work when you’ve reached your objective for the day.

• **Older people just want to tell stories.** I used to hear this complaint from younger employees. Now story tellers are in demand and the hot trend is to learn how to use stories to educate, explain and enlighten.

The internet, personal computers, and the technology we have today began with baby boomers. However, each generation keeps advancing that technology for new ways to work, do research, and save time (although some of us in every generation spend too much time on mindless browsing, or staying up and watching YouTube.)

I would be really bored if I only worked with people my age. It would definitely slow up the learning curve. Younger employees have the technology and willingness that I need to market myself on social media, develop my speaking and facilitation programs, and measure my activity to stay fit. (Fitbits etc. are for every age.)

Older employees have the stories, knowledge and experience to share that provides context, essential history and information needed to sustain successful organizations. Plus, having already made mistakes in the past, we can share our experience and prevent younger people from making those mistakes. (We don’t need to lecture, we just need to share.)

Here are three ways to create cross-generation collaboration.

1- Recruit a cross-generational team to solve a problem together and have them share the process they used to involve everyone in the group.

2- Set aside times for co-mentoring. Ask older and younger employees what they want to learn from each other. Provide a way for people of different ages to ask each other questions about their experiences and reasons for their perspectives.

3- Get volunteers for two or three cross-generation innovation groups. Each group will develop and build a prototype of a breakthrough product or service that can appeal to people of different ages. Have each group give a demonstration of their creation, and share what they did to get input. Give a prize to the group that best leveraged the strengths of each generation.

Inclusive leaders need to be wary of taking “generation sides,” and instead create opportunities for employees to get to know each other, find commonalities and leverage what each generation brings.

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