

# Generational differences in the workplace

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Today's companies are people with workers coming from different generations. The fact that the workforce features the fusion of people from different generations have generated interests among those involved not just in psychology but also in business management. It is possible that there are human dynamics-related aspects in this condition that is worth investigating. Several studies have been undertaken in the past to reveal the roles of people coming from different generations and why such was the condition and why it will change.

Example is how Generation Y is believed to have a different perspective entering the workplace in comparison to Generation X or Baby Boomers and why Generation Y is getting more work responsibilities on project teams (Rad, Anantatmula, 2010, p. 92). This and other studies and its results reflect the fact that manpower and workforce entities are changing and is different from one another, when compared on a generation per generation basis. This reflects the presence of generational differences, and it is important that this acts as a positive and not as a negative component of the company.

Generational differences cannot be eliminated. When left mismanaged or ignored, it can be the source of problem as much as it can be an asset to the company. The management of generational differences can be linked to its similarities with parenting which makes the use of Transactional Analysis suitable for this particular approach in understanding generational differences.

II. Discussion

A. Generational differences

One of the clear problems that companies and employee management face every day is generational difference.

" Generational differences have always been with us. But we are moving from an industrial age to an information age, and we have all four cohorts in the workplace - often on the same workforce (Ackerman, 2006, p. 18). " This is because of the natural system of employment in place and in practice in the society today. Employees who have been in the company for quite some time are witness to the entry of new employees depending on the demand (i. e. vacancy of position, opening of new positions, etc).

While there is a chance that newly hired employees may belong in the same age bracket as the employees that are already working for the company, there is also a bigger chance that newly hired individuals are younger (especially if youth is an essential characteristic for the position). Because of this, the company is split when it comes to generation - those from the Baby Boomer era, the Gen X and the Gen Y to name a few (Ackerman, 2006, p. 18). Unfortunately, the separation in generation is not as simple as that.

The generational separation also brings about generational differences which, if unresolved can be a primary source of misunderstanding, conflict and friction among employee. This will result to inefficiency and poor interpersonal skills of the employees that can adversely affect the production, operation and functioning of the company as a whole. Companies are integrated and one employee and one department is important to the whole. Generational differences are " a source of stifling stress and unrelenting conflict (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1999, p. 17). " Because of that, it is important that this is addressed by the company.

It is because of this that generational differences are an important focus in the practice of sound human resource monitoring and management. It

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should be approached properly in the workplace. The manager/human resources department is knowledgeable in how to approach this particular problem, leading to the creation and application of the suitable and most effective solution. i. How and why they differ - Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y - how exactly are the people coming from the different generations vary, besides the name of the generation? They vary in many ways.

How they vary and differ from one another can translate into many different and more complicated situations and conditions for the company. They differ in social background and life experiences in general; what they eat, what they do, what they feel and how, etc. The generations differ from one another because the conditions in the society changes. Those changes affect the lives of the people coming from different generations. When compared to one another, the differences between these different generations can be immense, considering how life, society and culture have changed in a generation's time (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1999, p.

17). For example, those coming from a generation affected by or directly participative to long and costly war, financial and economic slump and other problems will behave differently compared to those who came from a generation characterized by life of ease and material satisfaction, commercialization and consumerism. Those who came from a generation where life is either manual or mechanical will have difficulty matching up to the skills, knowledge and capability of those who are born and raised in a generation where higher and improved electronic and digital technology is a common characteristic of everyday socio-personal life.

What people know, what people learn, what people believe, how they act and behave are all affected by the social characteristics of the generation they belong to. As these social conditions and characteristics change, so are the people who are affected by it, on a generation-to-generation basis. Intelligence, values and beliefs and disposition are just some of the important indicators of emotional, psychological and intellectual differences found among individuals coming from different generations.

When differences in the workplace triggers or heightens such differences, the result could be very serious not just for the employees but also for the company. Zemke, et. al. (1999) explains that: The three generations that occupy today's workplace and the fourth generation that is entering it are clearly distinguishable by all these criteria - their demographics, their early life experiences, the headlines that defined their times, their heroes, their music, and sociology, and their early days in the workplace (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1999, p. 17). ii.

The impact of these differences - The differences among generations can impact human relations inside the company. For example, the differences in personal and social values of the different groups (based on generation) can create friction among the employees. One group thinks this is the best option while the other thinks otherwise. It will be complicated by other factors like seniority. Employees will assert moral right to decide based on their seniority. Younger and aggressive employees may not easily yield to such coercion and show of force, especially when seniority does not have any bearing to the problem at hand.

Worse, some employees who are subordinates to a younger boss or superior and immediate officer will have to decide which between rank and seniority shall prevail in the workenvironment. Eventually, such problem will be resolved but generational differences will continue to impact corporate culture and lifestyle in this manner if this issue is left ignored by those concerned. From disagreements among individuals and groups, generational differences can also lead to worse effects, like resignation of employees and the creation of blocs which maybe political but is nonetheless fueled by differences found in the generational differences level.

These blocs will be created as a result of different threats stemming from generational differences. For example, the high IQ of employees from younger generations when it comes to technology can threaten older employees. Those who can foresee this threat would try to protect their interests at all costs. However, not all kinds of impacts resulting from generational differences are negative. In some cases, generational differences provide flexibility and adaptability to the company and make the corporate culture mimic the structure of the functional home.

There are older people that younger people look up to, and the older employees acting as people that guide younger employees, while younger employees provide the fresh legs and fresh ideas for the corporate team to function in a holistic manner. There is the presence of wisdom of the generations when people from different generations are present inside the work environment. The company uses the generational differences to be able to have the ability to be flexible and have as much range as it possibly

can, considering what the diverse manpower can provide the company (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1999, p.

17). " Their source of differences can be a source of creative strength and a source of opportunity (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1999, p. 17). " iii. Managing generational differences in the workplace - What is important for the company and its managers, leaders and executives to realize is to recognize the importance of addressing generational differences, starting with the detection of possible sources where generational differences may leak out from and the detection of persistent problems that are rooted to generational differences.

This can never be totally eliminated, but it can be managed every time it manifests itself. It should be detected and addressed at the earliest stage it manifests itself to lessen the possibilities of complicated negative effects to the employees and to the company itself. Today, modern human resource management practices, models and theories are geared at minimizing the negative effects of generational differences inside the workplace.

Professionals tap into the field of psychology, among others, to find answers and solutions to generational differences and its negative effects to the employee and the company. The HR often resorts to or engages employees in activities set at breaking the boundaries created by generation and generation differences. Executive and management level leaders try to create and maintain a corporate culture characterized by fairness and equality among employees so that generational differences is not a source of friction, problem and issue in the company and among employees.

In the management of generational differences, it is important for company leaders to ensure that any measures they take are designed for long term so that the maintenance of a well managed set of generational differences among employees remain in a positive and healthy level and not reaching negative and destructive levels. B. Managing generational differences and parenting: what managers can learn in comparison of the two?

Exploring ways on how to address and provide solution in the problems resulting from generational differences will lead the HR, executive or manager into exploring management approaches found in other settings which possess a similar condition - home and family management. Inside the house, the nuclear family is immediately faced with the problem of generational differences. Mothers and fathers are often at least 18 years older than their children.

When their children becomes youth or young adults, the age gap becomes wider, the generational differences and its effects more pronounced. Because of this (and in the hope of keeping and maintaining a home that is conducive to positive relationship between one another), parents are tasked to handle generational differences. Among the approaches parents often make, the transactional analysis model or pattern appears to be a model that defines how family members interact with one another and how generational differences is addressed.

i. The need to use Transactional Analysis PAC model (Parent, Adult, Child) - Workplace culture is influenced and is strongly patterned with family roles and models (Weisberg, 1997, p. 553). It is not surprising that the analysis of workplace problems are placed parallel to home and family approaches and

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styles, like parenting and how parenting addresses problems, like generational differences. Handling generational differences in the workplace points to the use of the transactional analysis model as it is used at home.

The management of people from different generations or ages is similar both in the workplace as it is in home. If transactional analysis is suitable at home, it can also be used (and be suitable) in the workplace. Transactional analysis has several important characteristics that makes it suitable for both home and workplace and suitable in addressing generational differences at work – when they talk to one another, when official business is being handled and at times, when confrontation takes place among co-workers (Cartwright, Cooper, 1997, p.

100). " Transactional analysis provides a useful way of analyzing interactions between organizational members (Cartwright, Cooper, 1997, p. 100). " First, it has what is known as the ego-state model of Parent-Adult-Child, a model which explains how individuals found in different age category levels behave and express themselves. This is, at the same time, a communication theory, explaining how people from different age level (and in this condition, different generation) communicate to one another.

Transactional Analysis is used by professionals in the past and in the present to explain workplace communication problems (Cartwright, Cooper, 1997, p. 96) and to find solutions to that problem. This is suitable in addressing the communication problems resulting from generational differences. Transactional analysis features transactions - reciprocal or complementary, crossed and duplex or covert - that categorize how individuals act and

interact, with the person from their own level and with those from other levels (i. e. parent-to-parent, adult-to-adult, child-to-adult, etc).

Transactional analysis explains when people communicate to the other in consideration to what ego state they are in. It explains why problems in communication occur when the individual does not address the ego state the other individual is in (like when an adult to adult conversation is responded to in a manner similar to child-parent communication). There are many other different aspects of the transactional analysis that can come into play and address workplace problems stemming from generational differences, similar to how it addresses age gap inside homes.

Transactional analysis is used in the workplace to address generational differences because of the belief that the generational differences equation is peopled by individuals and groups representing different generations (older and younger generations). This people has the tendency to represent or act parallel to the generation they represent in (people from older generations acting like the older people while the people from younger generations act like the younger, etc).

As they take their places in that kind of hierarchy, they also unknowingly assume roles similar to the ego state in transactional analysis. In ensuing conversations in the workplace, some would assume the role of the Parent or the Child. If the people from different generations converse in an Adult-to-Adult pattern regardless of which of the two generations is older and younger, then generational differences will not be a problem.

In the workplace, one of the common and noticeable problems is how older people (from a different generation) assert authority via seniority, even when at times, the younger individual is more skilled and more talented. However, the new and younger employee often will allow himself or herself to be subordinate to the older employee because of many different considerations; workplace pressure, the need to be accepted and wanting to be popular and not unpopular with his or her workplace colleagues, the belief of the merit of seniority, etc.

When this happens, there is a strong tendency that the superior individual or group will influence the inferior group (often, the younger group). This will result in conflict and friction especially if the status quo that the superior group is trying to present, sustain and maintain goes against the values and ideals as well as beliefs and norms of the group being suppressed. This difference is most likely rooted at generational differences more than anything else because of the holistic impact of the generation-per-generation molding and designing of an individual.

It seems that the characteristic from a generation is hardwired to the individual and it is difficult from them to negotiate and accept something that is against these traits, ideas, characteristics and beliefs. This will eventually result to a domino effect pattern wherein generational differences affected, at first, interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and later (and in the long run), productivity of the company. While workplace conditions may feature the dominance of either the younger or older generations, this is not the case in the family or home setting.

Often, authority rests on the older generation (parents or guardians). At best, there are families wherein parents treat their children or young adults as equals and there is no sense of repression or repressive authority wherein one generation dominates and forces itself over the younger generation. At home as well as in the workplace, one of the noticeable characteristics of the problematic generational differences is its negative impact in communication.

This is serious, considering the fact that overall, employees are stressed from work because of poor communication (Cartwright, Cooper, 1997, p. 96) and the addition of concerns on the impact of generational differences worsens workplace condition as well as the condition of the employee. How people communicate is affected by their personal characteristics (and in some degree the conditions inside the workplace). Their personal characteristics are, in some degree, shaped and influenced by the general characteristics representative of and characterizing the generation from which they came.

Given that generations vary from one another, approaching problems and the use of varied communication style in the workplace among people from different generation complicates the process of establishing positive and ideal interpersonal relationships and agreeable communication settings. This results to the growing danger of the negative effects of generational differences in the long run, centered on communication breakdown among others. III. Conclusion Generational difference is something that the workplace cannot be without.

The workplace (especially those which features vast number in manpower) will always feature individuals coming from different generations. Generations are identified basically because of the characteristics they share among those included in that generation, and how these characteristics, often, are unique from the other generations. Because of the difference in the characteristics of generations and the people that belong there, generational differences are expected when these people get together. Generational differences do not automatically mean problems, at home or in the workplace.

However, when problems start to arise and manifest because of generational differences, it is important to address it. Addressing it requires the use of a model, theory or paradigm. The individual is able to assess both parties involved in the analysis of generational differences, know how they rationalize and behave and why in such manner, and be able to explain and provide solutions to the problem so that generational differences does not become a problem in the future. Transactional analysis is described as "useful for improving workplace interpersonal communication (Cartwright, Cooper, 1997, p.

96). " It is a model as well as a communication theory that can help explain generational differences and assist in the understanding of human behavior as they are found in the three different stages or state in life (Parent, Adult or Child). In the end, what is important is that there is an appreciation for generational differences. There are initiatives set to address such problem, if and when it becomes a problem because as many professional analysts believe, these differences are not always a negative point.

In some aspects, these differences can be a source of positive characteristics that a company can benefit from, like flexibility, availability of wide range of talents and skills, among others. " Understanding generational differences are critical to making them work for the organization and not against it. It is critical to creating harmony, mutual respect, and joint effort where today there is suspicion, mistrust and isolation (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 1991, p. 17).

" In addressing workplace issues surrounding generational differences, one can see how parenting is similar to workplace management when faced with generational differences. Home, like the workplace, features people trying to live harmoniously with one another even when they come and represent different generations and the different values, beliefs, ideas and practices their own generation is characterized with. References Ackerman, L. J. (2006). Blackwell's five-minute veterinary practice management consult. Iowa: Wiley-Blackwell

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