

How to Speak so Five Generations will Listen & Engage

THE CHALLENGE & THE OPPORTUNITY

Leaders face a new challenge in American work life: five generations sharing office space. Engage them, and new levels of greatness will emerge. Repel them, and hunker down for a generational cold war.

Imagine the potential of pooling and collectively tapping the experience of the Builders, Baby Boomers, Gen. Xers, Millennials and incoming Gen. Zers. In contrast, imagine isolating them.

Reaping the benefit requires intention. So why bother? Research repeatedly demonstrates that diverse teams [problem solve](#) better and [create higher profitability](#). It pays for leaders to become generationally savvy speakers.

Each generation has earned its vantage point. Leaders who want to reach each must use words to which they relate, and in this way build rapport, foster collaboration and facilitate their maximum collective contributions.

Here's the caveat: these generalizations are meant as guidance. One need not know an employee's age. Rather, learn to spot the traits of each generation, and adjust your communication accordingly. Some 35-year-olds show Boomer traits. Speak Boomer-ese to them. Other 35-year-olds relate as Millennials, let your words do likewise.

GENERATIONAL FLUENCY IN ACTION

Here's an example of Generational Fluency incorporating information from the chart on Page 2 to introduce a new website project:

BUILDER: *"Studies show our clients want a new website and it's our duty to meet their needs. The web designer is reliable and trustworthy."*

BOOMER: *"The team feels that a new website will make a big difference in our company's success. We're experimenting with new features to save us all 2 hours a week. It's a win-win!"*

GEN. Xer: *"This website will be the best in the industry. You will be seen as the creative visionary who inspired the team to launch a new concept. Research shows the best way to go about it systematically is..."*

MILLENNIAL: *"This will bring together our different stakeholder communities. We can build it in stages, so we don't have to work 80 hour weeks for the next 2 months."*

GEN. Zer: *"This is the newest technology. It's going to be fun and fast and draw tons of recognition. Some roles can work flexibly wherever, whenever. Headphones and no dress codes are fine as long as we meet the deadlines."*



The 5 Generations at a Glance

Generation Birth Years	BUILDERS 1929-1945	BOOMERS 1946-1964	GEN. X 1965-1982	MILLENNIALS 1983-2000	GEN. Z 2001-2018
% of Workforce*	2005 7%	44%	39%	10%	0%
	2015 2%	31%	38%	28%	1%
	2026 >1%	15%	31%	44%	10%
Defining Times	WWII. Great Depression.	Civil rights. Anti-war protests. Economic gain. Suburbia.	Vietnam. AIDs. Watergate. Layoffs. Scandals.	Hover parents. Everybody wins. Smart Phones. Wi-Fi.	Terrorism. Racism. Great Recession. Born connected.
Guiding Values	Plan ahead. Be frugal.	Don't trust the system.	Life is hard.	Life's a buffet of options.	Be alert. Hack it.
Individual Identity Generational Identity	I'm humble. We'll sacrifice for future generations.	I'm in charge. We'll do better than our parents.	I'm scrappy. We're realists.	I'm awesome. We'll save the planet.	I'm fluid. We value human equality.
Societal View	Build the System.	Hijack the system.	Avoid the system.	Work in the system.	Work around system.
Instilled Hope Experienced Reality	Trust our systems. (Systems are corrupted).	Peace, love, rock 'n roll (Won't pay the bills.)	I can make it on my own. (No man is an island.)	A degree = a good job. (Or not, oops.)	You can be anything. (... if you have the talent.)
Work Ethic	I work hard and follow the rules.	I work my way up the ladder & pay my dues.	I work independently for work/life balance.	My parents paid the dues; I do what's meaningful.	I breathe Wi-Fi, think 4D & work fast w/ everyone.
Words that Motivate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duty Loyalty Patriotic Reliable Responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits & Features Consensus/Team Experiment Make a difference Save time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As you like it Best, Finest It's your time World class You'll benefit by... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance Connection Diversity It's meaningful Text now to... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative Exciting Fast-paced Flexible Headphone-friendly
Respect their...	Experience.	Drive to work hard.	Independence.	Social sensibilities.	Privacy.

Sources: How the Last Five Generations Have Changed Us, Growing Leaders; Workforce Generational Chart; Generations at Work: Bridging...Expectation Gaps . *Estimated numbers and projections from Bureau of Labor Stats.