

Quell misunderstandings by learning to consider the other person's point of view.

Perspective-Taking Skills for a Multigenerational Workforce

BY W. LEWIS JOHNSON AND ASYA ANDERSON

Imagine that two employees in your company, a Baby Boomer and a young Millennial, are working together on a project. Let's call the Boomer "Jim" and the Millennial "Emily." Their project meetings have not been going well. Jim dislikes that Emily uses her smartphone during their meetings and doesn't seem to give the sessions her undivided attention. Emily thinks she should use whatever digital tools she needs to be effective, and doesn't believe that Jim respects her contributions as a team member. Emily has asked her supervisor to reassign her to a different team.





Situations like this arise when there are misunderstandings between people of different generations. One person says or does something that the other person finds unexpected or even unprofessional, and misinterprets it. Misunderstandings cause frustration and, if unaddressed, can have a big negative impact on employee morale and retention. If your organization is having trouble integrating and retaining Millennials, read on.

A cultural perspective on Millennial issues

Any subgroup of people can develop its own subculture, with its own norms and expectations regarding behavior, and even its own values. Within the multigenerational workplace, there can be more than one subculture, resulting in misunderstandings between groups.

GET PAST GENERATIONAL STEREOTYPES AND ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING ISSUES OF COMMUNICATION, COOPERATION, AND A POSITIVE WORK CULTURE.

Your organization, like any culture, has an in-group and an out-group. The in-group consists of established employees familiar with your corporate culture, its values, and expectations regarding behavior. New employees constitute an out-group. They bring different behavioral norms learned outside the organization. Many have limited work experience, or are unfamiliar with workplace culture in general. Many happen to be Millennials.

In-group/out-group dynamics magnify the differences in behavior between young workers and older generations. People in the in-group tend to judge the behavior of others according to the norms of the in-group and, if behavior deviates from in-group norms, they sometimes jump to negative conclusions. This is one reason why there are so many negative stereotypes about younger workers; for example, older workers may feel Millennials are coddled, entitled, have a poor work ethic, and exhibit poor face-to-face communication skills.

Younger workers and those new to the workforce are as motivated to succeed as any other group of workers, and are eager to learn and develop. But they bring to the workplace different knowledge, skills, and abilities. They can get frustrated if they feel more seasoned workers judge them negatively, or are not open to new technologies and methods. At the same time, younger workers might not understand or see the value in your organization's in-group dynamics or organizational culture.

To create an inclusive, multigenerational workforce, all workers must be

open to embracing different perspectives and be willing to learn and adapt.

Perspective-taking skills

The best way to overcome and prevent conflict between generations in the workplace is to get past generational stereotypes and address the underlying issues of communication, cooperation, and a positive work culture. This requires effective perspective-taking skills.

Perspective taking is the ability to understand a situation from the perspective of another person. It is complementary to emotional intelligence but often is more useful. Emotional intelligence might help you recognize that an employee such as Emily is frustrated and upset; perspective taking can help her and her colleagues understand why she is frustrated and upset so they can do something about it.

Anthropologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists have identified perspective-taking skills as critical for promoting understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. Our own understanding of these issues is informed by extensive experience in developing cultural awareness training for people working around the world. Perspective-taking skills can help bridge cultural divides within the workplace, including divides between younger and older workers. They also can help build understanding between employees and customers, resulting in improved customer satisfaction and increased sales.

In the earlier example, both Jim and Emily could benefit from perspective-taking skills. Before jumping to negative

conclusions about Emily's smartphone use, Jim might ask himself: Does Emily know what the ground rules are for meetings in our organization? Does she know the reason for those ground rules? What is she using her smartphone for anyway—is she conducting research for the project or is she texting her friends?

Likewise, Emily could try to understand Jim's perspective. She might realize that Jim had no way of knowing what she was doing with her smartphone, and may have jumped to the wrong conclusion. She should explain why she is shifting attention from the meeting to her device. This exchange could lead to a productive discussion about expectations for appropriate use of digital tools in meetings.

Improving perspective-taking skills

So what can you and your organization do to become a successful multigenerational workplace? Start by learning about values and communication habits of new workers and how they may differ from those of older, more established workers. Be sure that the resources you draw from are based on solid research in the perspectives and values of these employees, and are not simply other people's out-group caricatures of Millennials. In their 2010 *Journal of Business and Psychology* article, "Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective," Andrea Hershatter and Molly Epstein write an objective summary of the defining characteristics of the Millennial generation. In it, they suggest focusing on differences that can affect the workplace, such as how the behavioral norms and values of the typical young or inexperienced worker might differ from the norms of your corporate culture. This will



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raise your awareness of the real differences between generations and how they might lead to misunderstandings within cross-generational teams or between managers and employees.

Your organization might consider offering training in perspective-taking skills. We recommend training that raises awareness of the different perspectives that people bring to the workplace, and develops the ability to look at workplace situations from where the other person sits.

Some diversity training programs adopt a perspective-taking approach, encouraging participants to work through scenarios and imagine what it would be like to experience the situation as a member of a different group. Interactive computer-guided simulations are now available that let learners assume the role of a member of a different group, and role-play workplace interactions from the perspectives of all parties involved.

Adopting perspective-taking skills will result in a workforce that hires and retains the best available talent regardless of age group and cultural background. Organizations with such a workforce are then better able to engage with customers of all ages, and are best equipped for success in an increasingly global and diverse economy.

■ **W. Lewis Johnson** is founder of Alelo, a producer of innovative learning products focusing on communication skills; johnson@alelo.com.

■ **Asya Anderson** is an expert in organizational culture with an emphasis on cultivating ethical business practices and negotiating multicultural workforces; aanderson@alelo.com.



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