PENN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CORPORATE SERVICES

Management Assistance Program

BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP AT WORK

GOALS:

To help organizations, managers, supervisors, and employees understand and bridge generation gaps and create an atmosphere of acceptance by:

- Identifying differences between generations' work experiences.
- Understanding how different generations' experiences influence their work attitudes.
- Appreciating the strengths and positive attributes of workers of every generation.
- Identifying and managing differences effectively.

OVERVIEW:

1. Defining "Generation Gap"

A generation gap can be defined in several ways:

- "A difference in attitudes between people of different generations, leading to a lack of understanding." (The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A., 2004)
- "Differences in values, lifestyles, and economic opportunities that exist between people of different age cohorts living in the same society." (The Social Work Dictionary, 5th ed., Barker, R.L., 2003)
- "A difference in values and attitudes between one generation and another, especially between young people and their parents." (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., Pickett, Joseph P., 2000)

2. Differentiating Between Today's Workplace Generations

For the first time ever, there are four distinct generations in the workplace. While ages and date ranges vary slightly and some generations are divided into sub-groups, most experts agree that today's workforce consists of these groupings:

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- *Traditionalists* (born between 1900 – 1945)
    - Sub-group: Pre-Boomers (1935 – 1945)
- *Baby Boomers* (1946 – 1964)
    - Sub-group: Cuspers (1960 – 1965)
- *Generation X'ers* (1965 – 1980)
    - Sub-group: Busters (1965 – 1975)
- *Generation Y'ers/Millenials* (1981 - 1999)

3. Considering Differences Between Generations

Of the four generations, the largest segment of the workforce is comprised of Boomers and X'ers. The greatest potential for misunderstanding lies between these two groups because of their different backgrounds and experiences. Differences can exist in values, attitudes, work ethic, and even vocabulary between generations. Such differences can lead to misunderstandings, frustration and animosity between workers.

To minimize the disruption in day-to-day operations that can result from generation differences, it can help supervisors to recognize some of the basic characteristics of each generation. The following descriptions derive from broad-based lifestyle patterns and definitions. They do *not* apply to every member of a generation, and should *never* be used for stereotyping. They are included here to help supervisors understand *some of the basic characteristics of the four generations.*

- *Traditionalist* – some common characteristics:
  Born between 1900 and 1945, members of this group are approaching retirement or, in some cases, working well past retirement. They are typically loyal, hard-working, financially conservative, and will often remain with the same employer until retirement.

    - Subgroup of Traditionalist*: Pre-Boomer*
      Pre-Boomers, born between 1935-1945, form a sub-group of the Traditionalist generation. They are often conventional, have a strong work ethic, are team-oriented, and are also likely to remain with one employer throughout their entire career.

- *Baby-Boomer* – some common characteristics:
  Members of this generation were born between 1946 and 1964. This post-World War II generation makes up one of the largest segments of the workforce. They are typically guided/driven by both money and work ethic. They can have a strong overtime work ethic (a 60-hour workweek is not out of the question!), but can also be more likely than some of the other generations to challenge the status-quo. They are

loyal and often want to manage. They can sometimes find new electronic technology challenging.

- Subgroup of Boomer: *Cusper*
  A sub-group of the Baby-Boomer generation, born between 1960 and 1965, this group is wedged between Baby Boomers and Generation X. They are often driven by a mix of money and principle, and may also feel mixed in terms of loyalty to employer. They are comfortable being leaders or followers, and they often want the approval of others. They tend to care about having a mission and winning. This group can be a valuable resource in any workplace because members of this group can identify with two generations. They are often skilled at mediating, translating, and mentoring.

- *Generation X* – some common characteristics:
  Born between 1965 and 1980, members of this group tend to be technically savvy, having ushered in the era of video games and personal computers during their formative years. More than any other, this generation has been influenced by the media and the internet. Having grown up in a time of a rapid shift in social values, this segment of the workforce saw the fall of the Soviet Union, the Lockerbie tragedy, increasing acts of terrorism, skyrocketing divorce rates, corporate downsizing, and ever-increasing social and political scandals. For some, their watchword has become skepticism and their primary loyalty is to personal advancement. They are most likely to change jobs/careers.

  - Subgroup of Generation X: *Buster*
    A sub-group of Generation X born between 1965 and 1975, they are guided by principle and satisfaction, but often put lifestyle first. They prefer to work alone and are technically savvy, but like to have a mission/goal.

- *Generation Y* – some common characteristics:
  A member of the generation born between 1981 and 1999, they are sometimes called “Millennials” or the N Generation (Net/Internet). These are the youngest members of what will be the next “boomer” wave (estimated at about 76 million). Many of this generation are still in school, but the oldest members are now entering the workforce. This generation has witnessed tragedies such as the Columbine and Columbia Space Shuttle disasters, as well as September 11, 2001 and the escalation of war and terrorism. These individuals have had access to cell phones, pagers, and personal computers all of their lives. While it is too early to determine long-term characteristics that will impact

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the workplace, this group has been described as realistic, confident, and pragmatic. Having been raised by generally optimistic Baby Boomers, many Y'ers may feel empowered to take positive action.

4. Appreciating the Strengths of Each Generation

In the workplace, different generations have different strengths:

- Traditionalists may have wisdom gained over the course of a career. Their experience and historical perspective can be of significant value.

- Baby Boomers, like Traditionalists, have a great deal of experience and historical perspective to share. While there are always newer ways of accomplishing work goals, Boomers can often help younger workers avoid some of the pitfalls that come with inexperience.

- Generation X members are experienced in today's technology. They are typically able to learn new software and technology trends quickly. They can often provide valuable assistance in helping older workers keep up with technological changes in the workplace.

- Generation Y members, like X'ers, are experienced in technology and can be a valuable resource in helping others navigate rapidly changing computer technology.

5. Recognizing Different Loyalty Patterns

One of the differences – and strengths – of each generation is the way in which members demonstrate loyalty. In the workplace, loyalties include:

- Loyalty to company – this person will work hard to achieve company goals and will be a team player or a leader, as the situation requires.

- Balanced loyalty – this person will work hard to achieve goals but not at the expense of his or her personal priorities.

- Loyalty to skills/loyalty to self – this person will work hard for an employer as long as that work will also help to achieve his or her career goals.

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6. Bridging the Generation Gap

To cultivate an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and create a climate where every employee feels valued, it is essential to establish an understanding of the characteristics and attitudes of each generation. It is also critical to provide employees with the training, tools, and strategies they will need to work together effectively. Flexibility is the key. Employees of different generations can thrive in a culture where they can express themselves and where they are encouraged to learn from each other. Being exposed to generational diversity can offer valuable insight into the past and help everyone envision a future where differing ideas and opinions are valued, and employees of different generations learn from each other and work together to achieve common goals.

7. Consequences of Ignoring the Generation Gap

As we have established, widely differing views and attitudes between generations can be a source of frustration for everyone. Workplace misunderstandings and outright disagreements can escalate to the point of having a negative impact on the day-to-day operations of a business and, in some cases, may even have a negative bottom-line impact. Failure to provide tools and strategies for helping employees work together can lead to reduced productivity and retention issues, as employees become more and more dissatisfied and look for other positions.

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OBJECTIVES: Steps to Success in Bridging the Generation Gap

1. Workplace strategies for Generation X'ers to use with Baby Boomers.

- Show Respect – Acknowledge that you have less experience and can learn from them. Even the brightest people can always learn something new.

- Choose face-to-face conversations – Many Baby Boomers find e-mail or voice mail too impersonal and prefer speaking with people directly.

- Give your full attention – Multi-tasking (taking a phone call, using a blackberry during a meeting) is important but may be interpreted as rudeness by an older colleague.

- Play the game – Workplace politics are a fact of life. As a Generation X'er, you may be completely turned off by politics, but sometimes you have to play along. Baby Boomers tend to be diplomatic and can be particularly adept at navigating politically charged environments.

- Learn the corporate history – Unless you've been with a company since its inception, you may not be aware of all the ins and outs of your organization. Find out what has gone right and what has gone wrong in the past. Nothing is more upsetting than to have a new employee breeze in and change things without seeming to take account of what has gone on before. This is especially true in the case of new, younger managers in charge of older employees.

2. Workplace strategies for Baby Boomers to use with Generation X'ers.

- Get to the point – Avoid corporate jargon, buzzwords, and clichés that obscure what you are really trying to say. State your objectives clearly.

- Use e-mail – Take advantage of technology when the matter can be handled with a well-worded concisely written message. Save meetings for issues that really require face-to- face interaction.

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- Give space – Many Generation X'ers crave autonomy. Give them direction and allow them the freedom to accomplish tasks in their own way.

- Get over the idea of "dues-paying" – As a Boomer, you may have worked very hard to get ahead. Maybe you started from ground level and think all younger workers should do the same, but that does not mean that this is the only way for them to be effective.

- Lighten up – Remind yourself that it is alright to have different views on a subject. Stay flexible and open to new ideas and methods.

3. Workplace strategies for working with Traditionalists.

- Honor the chain of command – Traditionalists usually have respect for authority and they expect it in return.

- Recognize the importance they place on job security – Traditionalists often value the legacy they've built with your company.

- Value their experience – Use them as a resource to learn the history of the company and respect the knowledge and insights they have gained from years of experience.

- Appreciate their dedication – Unlike other generations, Traditionalists are most likely to have taken a job and stayed with the company for their entire career. They are loyal to the success of the organization.

4. Workplace strategies for working with Generation Y'ers ("Millennials").

- Challenge them – Y'ers usually want to work on things that really matter. Offer more responsibility as a reward for accomplishments.

- Ask their opinion – Y'ers often love to collaborate and be team players. If they feel valued, they are more likely to respond enthusiastically. Conversely, they are less likely to respond well to a dictatorial chain-of-command management style. They tend to work well with those who respect and appreciate their contributions.

- Find them a mentor – Y'ers often have an affinity and great respect for Traditionalists. Establish mentor relationships between these two

groups and both will benefit. Y'ers should seek out mentors they can respect and learn from.

- Provide timely feedback – Y'ers are used to instant feedback at the touch of a button. In the workplace, they may also expect frequent and worthwhile feedback.

SUMMARY: Tips for Bridging the Generation Gap at Work

In today's global economy, diversity in the workplace has moved to the top of the international agenda. Cultural, ethnic, gender, and generational diversity in the international workforce has dramatically changed the global economy. Successful management of today's increasingly diverse workplace is among the most important challenges faced by corporate leaders today.

- Develop training programs to build employees' skills, assist them to understand the differences between generations, and work together to achieve common goals.
- Provide strategies for better communication and cooperation among all age groups.
- Invest in training for managers and supervisors so they will be able to recognize and respond to generation differences.
- Focus on strengths and not on weaknesses.
- Foster an atmosphere of acceptance from the top down so employees in all age groups feel valued.
- Create opportunities in the workplace for gathering and generating feedback between generations.
- Recognize the valuable resources of both experience and new ideas within the various generations.
- Encourage the groups to adapt to their differences of style and perspectives and to support one another regardless of their alternative approaches.
- Cultivate relationships (such as mentoring) between employees in different age groups.
- Require and demonstrate respectful behaviors and appropriate workplace interactions between all employees regardless of their age or length of employment.

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