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Making the most of generational differences

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Taking Charge

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Listen in on conversations about what's going on in the workplace and you're likely to hear some pointed references to generational differences.

Perhaps it's a comment about an older worker being stuck on how things have "always been done," or the "new kid" whose idea of time in the office is to videoconference in on a meeting.

Fortunately we're moving beyond many stereotypes about gender, but we still draw conclusions based on a person's age. We assume that older workers are loyal to a fault, and that younger ones are genetically wired to be tech-savvy.

We are lucky to be working at time when the workplace is truly a multi-generational place. Four generations, to varying degrees, are in the workforce – the so-called Traditionalists (born from about 1922 to 1945), the Boomers (1946-1964), Gen Xers (1965-1980) and Gen Y/the Millennials (born 1981 onward). The truth is that no matter where we fall on the spectrum, we're all products of the socioeconomic and political times we grew up in and the family, schools and communities in which we formed our values, opinions and ways of doing things.

Researchers who study multi-generational issues in the workplace have identified characteristics that tend to apply to specific generations of workers. Traditionalists, for instance, tend to respect authority and the chain of command and believe that working hard pays off. Boomers tend to be optimistic and willing to put in the time at work, and they often draw their identity from their jobs. While they are used to a traditional work environment, boomers may feel the need for flexibility as they manage children and teens at one end and aging parents at the other. They may be asking themselves, "Isn't there more to life than work?"

Gen Xers, in general, tend to be more wary of institutions and pride themselves on being self-reliant, portable and comfortable with change. They helped promote the notion of "work-life balance," an idea that older workers might see as tantamount to slacking off. Gen Y/Millennials tend to be at ease with technology and multi-tasking, and they assume they will have multiple jobs, perhaps moving from one sort of career to another. This generation is used to a lot of praise from their parents – "You're so special!" – and tend to like quick results.

The point of being aware of those generalities isn't to pigeonhole coworkers but rather to figure out how to harness the attributes that each generation brings to the table. "Hard work equals results" is a good motto for any age group, and flexibility and portability are increasingly demanded in our 24/7, global marketplace.

Effective leaders find ways to create a diverse workplace that values the views of multiple generations. So often organizations work from the top down, which often means younger workers and older workers who didn't climb the corporate ladder feel undervalued. Leaders can encourage a diversity of views by having multiple generations

represented on recruiting and training teams and by establishing mentorship programs that reach both ways across the generations. A Twitter-savvy worker may be the perfect mentor for a seasoned employee who is struggling with how to utilize social media in a meaningful way. An older worker with excellent communication skills and the long view of a company's dealings may bring insight to a younger worker who is figuring out ways to broaden the customer base while holding onto traditional clients.

The bottom line is that we all need to see each other as people, with different life and work experiences and perspectives. No matter what generation we fall into – young, old or in between – we have lessons to learn from one another.

The Main Line Society of Professional Women (SPW) events are so unique because they encompass all of the generations in one room. Experienced leaders and emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds and businesses can help each other grow personally and professionally by networking and making long-lasting connections.

No matter what your experience level or background, I hope that you will come to the next SPW event on March 14 at the Union League of Philadelphia. In 2010, Joan Carter became the Union League's first female president in its 148-year history, and she will share her journey to leadership and how to break glass ceilings that get in the way. SPW will be joining forces with the Union League Business Network for this unique city event so it is sure to fill up quickly. For more information or to register, please visit www.spwmainline.com.

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