



Making the Most of

Generational Differences

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Homer Simpson: "You don't understand, Dad. You're not *with it*."

Grandpa Simpson: "I was *with it* once. But now what I'm with isn't it, and what's it seems strange and scary to me. *It'll happen to you!*"

This exchange between the two generations of Simpsons illustrates the underlying generational conflict found in most of our law enforcement agencies today. Most agencies have three or four different generations working side by side with each other. This is the first time this has ever happened in the workplace, and it is creating some interesting dynamics, especially for supervisors. In many cases, agencies have Baby Boomer or Traditional supervisors managing Gen X and Gen Y officers. Or, even more interesting, Gen X sergeants are managing Traditional, Baby Boomer, and Gen Y officers.

So who are all these "strange and scary" kids, and what's up with "Grandpa's" attitude? This issue of the Management

Quarterly will provide an overview of the unique characteristics typical of each generation and will offer valuable guidelines on managing each generation more effectively. Knowledge of what makes each generation "tick" will make your job as a supervisor easier, no matter what generation you are.

The cut off points for the generational divide vary from source to source, but in general these dates work well as a starting point:

Traditionals: 1925-1945

Baby Boomers: 1946-1964

Generation X: 1965-1980

Generation Y: 1981 – 2002

Traditionals

When the Traditionals were on the job in the 1950s, their behaviors were largely influenced by the Great Depression and World Wars I and II. As such, Traditionals tend to appreciate the opportunity to even have a job and thus exhibit loyalty to their employer. They are accustomed to a system where the supervisor is not to be questioned and subordinates accept orders as given. They will generally:

- **Respect authority**, even when it frustrates them
- **Place duty before pleasure**
- **Believe patience is its own reward** and are willing to wait for delayed gratification
- **Value honor and integrity**
- **Avoid challenging the system**
- **Maintain dedication** to a job once they take it

Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomers, who grew up with Captain Kangaroo, fallout shelters, the peace sign, and Ed Sullivan, entered the workplace and began implementing changes to the old ways. The Boomers gained influence on policy and moved towards a more participative management style.

More importantly, the Boomers' jobs became their identities. In law enforcement, we still hear "I'm a cop" rather than "I work for a police department." The Boomers tied up much of their self esteem into the job. Because of this, they are willing to work hard and sacrifice for the "American Dream." They generally:

- **Live to work**
- **Enjoy unprecedented influence on government policy and consumer products**, due to their large number
- **Maintain a general sense of optimism**
- **Willing to go into debt**, betting on future income
- **Team- and process-oriented**, sometimes to detriment of results

- **Strive for convenience and personal gratification**
- **Preserve their youth** and are nostalgic

Boomers want to improve their image and do so by overachieving. This was done with somewhat of a detriment to their children, Generation X.

Generation X

Generation X ("Gen X") grew up with Brady Bunch, Izod, Cabbage Patch Kids, MTV, *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, and VCRs. They were the first generation of latchkey kids, and because they were often home alone, this generation is more adept at certain abilities. They are definitely more independent and some are "loners."

Since Gen X watched their parents overwork themselves, many of their attitudes about the workplace and life in general have been shaped by their experience of seeing all the hard work of their parents become meaningless after corporate downsizing, mergers, layoffs, and collapse. Many of their values were shaped by an unstable economy, the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war, and unethical behavior in politics and business.

As a result, Gen Xers are often not overly invested in their jobs. Their job is not the sole source of their sense of self, and they have taken the mantra of "Question Authority" to a whole new level. This attitude tends to upset Traditionals and Baby Boomers who don't easily understand Gen X and makes it difficult for the older generations to manage them. Gen X tends to:

- **Work to live; not live to work**
 - **View jobs within context of a contract**
 - **Believe in clear, consistent expectations**
 - **Remain with a job longer if an employer presents opportunities to grow**
 - **View money as only part of the equation;** contribution to the whole is important
 - **Desire versatility**
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Generation Y

So where does Generation Y fit in? One word easily explains everything about this group: **TECHNOLOGY**. As a 10-year-old was quoted in *Growing Up Digital*, “Tech stuff is natural for me; it takes me a minute to set up a computer. It takes my parents an hour.”

Generation Y (“Gen Y”) grew up with Barney, the Internet, cell phones, and Britney Spears. These folks tend to be more optimistic than their Gen X parents and believe in civic duty and diversity at levels previously unseen. They tend to:

- **Live in the moment**
- **Rely on immediacy of technology**
- **Demand clear and consistent expectations** to ensure productivity
- **Believe that earning money translates into immediate consumption**
- **Demonstrate respect only after they are treated with respect**
- **Question everything**
- **Be more diverse demographically**

Why is Gen Y difficult for managers? Our school system has taught them that their opinion matters, and they need to contribute to make a difference. If they find themselves ignored or not valued, even on the first day on the job, they will go elsewhere. They find the concept of “paying dues” completely distasteful and hate busy work. They work great in teams and want a job that is truly fun. Law enforcement tends to place a lot of credence on experience, but Gen Y feels they can offer improvements regardless of how much street time they have. In many areas, especially in technology, they can. Fully 1/3 of Gen Y states the most important area of a job is the salary. Many will move to another agency with little or no time at a previous agency for any increase in salary. As one Gen Y woman stated, “I told my boss if he wants loyalty, get a dog.”

One Style Does Not Fit All

So as a manager, what can you do to maximize your multi-generational workforce? Here are a few tips.

In managing Traditionals, communicate that you trust and respect their judgment, experience, and their desire to contribute. Use them as teachers for younger employees, and when teaching them—especially technology—do it in a safe environment.

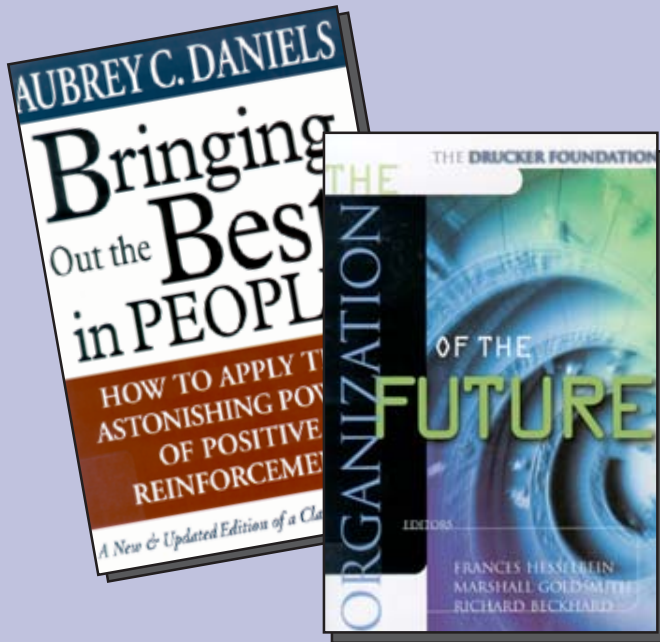
When managing Boomers, try a coaching approach to supervision rather than a dictatorial one. Boomers appreciate being granted authority and appreciate respect being given to them. You should always challenge Boomers to continue growing in their own way.

Gen Xers need constant feedback to let them know how they are doing. They appreciate frequent and honest communication from supervisors. Xers like training and skill development opportunities, and they resent micro-management. Give them the leeway they need to complete the task without worrying about the process.

As for the new kids on the block, Gen Y, keep them focused on the task at hand by incorporating speed and interactivity into their job routine. Show Gen Y the same level of respect and courtesy you give to veteran officers. Don’t be shocked at the number of questions they ask. Try redirecting their questions with “What do you think?” and then guide them within their own answer.

Each generation has their own assets and liabilities. By familiarizing yourself with generational differences, you can maximize your output and minimize your problems.

CJI offers *Managing Generational Differences* as a stand alone class available upon request and as a section of *Basic Principles of Supervision*. Please contact Mike Mashburn or Jason Goodrich of the Law Enforcement Management Center for more information.



For more information about the Generational Divide and how it can affect your organization, check out the following resources from the CJI Library:

The Organization of the Future

In addition to taking a look at how generational shifts will transform organizational life, *The Organization of the Future* will show you how to develop successful teams, attract the best employees, and create a change-adept agency.

Bringing Out the Best in People

Bringing Out the Best in People takes a look at managing the Nintendo Generation and beyond by examining the perils of traditional management and discussing effective tools you can use to revitalize your agency.

CJI Management Quarterly

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