

LEAD

Here is the free guide with 3 Tips for How Leaders Can
Communicate Across Generations



Communication across generations has always had its challenges. Today, as parenting and educational trends intersect with new technologies and globalization, we are seeing an even more significant gap between generations.

DIFFERENCE

in values, views, and behaviors often contribute to frustrations, misunderstandings, and low morale. Being effective in communicating with colleagues of different ages has never been more important. Here we look at some timeless principles that can help us navigate this important task. I hope you find them helpful as you engage in communicating effectively with all generations!

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TIP 1:

DEMONSTRATE RESPECT

Have you ever experienced disrespect? What happened? Think about how it made you feel. Unfortunately, a significant barrier to effective communication across generations today is perceived disrespect. Young leaders communicate disrespect by assuming people and processes need to change, failing to take the time to understand the past, and pressing forward on initiatives without consulting those with more experience. Experienced leaders communicate disrespect by making young colleagues “pay their dues” before giving them opportunities, failing to include them in key conversations and decisions, and overlooking the changes occurring in society that are intuitively understood by Millennials and Gen Z. Expressing respect in a manner that is appreciated by colleagues is a critical first step in healthy communication across generations.

STRATEGY

When contemplating a decision or change, consult with a colleague who is older or younger than you. Approach the conversation as an opportunity to learn and grow. Ask them what they would do and why? Seek to understand their perspective without becoming defensive or frustrated. Sincerely thank them for their time and input.

TIP 2:

ACTIVELY LISTEN

We live in an incredibly noisy and stimulating world. We often have videos, articles, emails, messages, and posts coming at us via multiple screens throughout the day (and into the night!). As a result, most of us have become adept at skimming and sorting information to identify what is important. Our attention spans have adjusted to keep up and on average are 6-8 seconds long. While helpful in dealing with an overload of information, this does not help us in effective communication. One of the best skills we can develop for communicating across generations is active listening. This is not just hearing what a person is saying, but truly seeking to understand their intentions, emotions, and motivations. Active listening requires patience to focus our attention. Leaders who can actively listen to their colleagues are equipped to avoid or navigate potential conflict, misunderstanding, and miscommunication.

STRATEGY

When communicating with a colleague regarding an important subject, minimize interruptions. Ask open-ended questions. Show you are listening with your body language (lean forward), facial expressions (smile and nod), and tone (friendly, not defensive). Avoid distractions and maintain eye contact. Ask follow-up questions to be sure you understand what they are communicating.

TIP 3:

IDENTIFY VALUES

Our values are what help us determine what is right and wrong. They drive our perceptions and actions. Societal, parental, and educational trends and experiences often result in different generations holding diverse values. This can create sharp differences in expectations and desires among colleagues. For example, a generation that grew up in an era where a strong work ethic meant working when and how the organization demanded may expect colleagues to put in 50- or 60-hour work weeks without question. A generation that experienced their parents working 60-hour work weeks only to be laid off from their jobs during a recession is likely to prioritize family over work. Our values not only guide our actions but provide the basis for how we assess the actions of others. This can be dangerous as we may identify something as wrong when it is really just different. Identifying the values of our colleagues can help us understand their point of view and communicate in a way that resonates with their values.

STRATEGY

When you encounter a confusing quality or behavior in a colleague, seek to identify the values that drive that behavior. Observe what motivates them. Where do they invest their time, energy and resources? What ignites their passion? Express interest in those areas of their work and life they value most; show them that you care to understand what is important to them. This will provide a valuable foundation for critical conversations.

QUESTIONS

Here are a few discussion questions to help foster understanding and communication across generations:

Q1:

Discuss an instance when you felt disrespected. What about that situation was most difficult for you? What most effectively communicates respect to you?

Q2:

What qualities are most important to you in a coworker? What behaviors do you find most frustrating in colleagues or leaders? What does this reveal about your values? How can you seek to better understand the values of others?

Q3:

How often do you actively listen? What is most difficult for you about actively listening? What is one way you want to grow in listening actively to others?

For more on intergenerational communication
and leadership, check out Jolene's new book,

DANIEL GENERATION

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