

# Overcoming Generational Gaps in Learning Organizations

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While there are many considerations to be taken into account when working to improve an organization, mental models may be the largest barriers to overcome. Currently, there are four employed generations working within organizations at once, the first time in history for such overlap. Generational perceptions are mental models which new research shows bring gaps into the work place. These generational gaps can be minimized by organizations after careful review of biases formed by mental models, true characteristics of each generation, the impact generational differences have on organizations, and how organizations can approach such differences. This information is not only applicable in developing a current organization, but can be strongly applied to the creation of learning organizations.

Generational biases impact all aspects of an organization because of mental models. According to Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*, mental models are “deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 163). These perceptions are built off personal experiences, thus they vary from person to person; because no two people have the exact same experiences, no two people share the same mental models. With each individual having their own mental models, it is impossible for organizations to condition all employees to have a single point of view. To overcome mental models, one must continually recognize that they exist and that others may hold different opinions because of their own differing mental models. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge says,

Though highly personal at one level, effective work with mental models is also pragmatic, that is, it is tied to bringing key assumptions about important business issues to the surface. This is vital because the most crucial mental models in any organization are those shared by key decision makers. Those models, if unexamined, limit an organization’s range of actions to what is familiar and comfortable (Senge, 176).

When considering this, it is important to overcome biases and assumptions so that they do not impede on organizational productivity. Each generation and their unique perspective should be

acknowledged and incorporated through the implementation of organizational policies. Thus, management needs to leverage the strengths of each generation and ensure that decisions are made using input from each demographic. The result of these efforts will be a company in a better position to service its diverse clientele, one that mirrors the workplace (Glass, 2007).

Generally, biases towards veterans note them as being loyal to employers, having consistent performance, having strong work ethic, being financially conservative, and being respectful of authority. Baby boomers are said to be idealistic, workaholics, arrogant, are recognized for micromanaging, and have strong networking skills. Generation x is noted as being overly cynical, independent, skeptical of authority, out by of the office by five, and for having poor networking skills. Last, generation y is recognized for having a poor work ethic, a negative attitude, a feeling of entitlement, for being opinionated, being too dependent on technology, needing a lot of stroking, having unrealistic expectations of their job and their organization, and for earning to spend.

When employees hold mental models that include these biases, much negativity can result in the workplace. Not all people within an organization embody these traits; so to assume that all employees from a specific generation act a certain way is unrealistic. If one does not overcome their mental models of a particular generation, the people within that generation could subconsciously "become" their biases as if prescribed to it, according to the normative theory. Some of these biases created by mental models are said to be based on the historical events of each generation, and they way it impacted them.

At work, generational differences can affect everything, including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity. Think of how generational differences, relative to how people communicate, might affect

misunderstandings, high employee turnover, difficulty in attracting employees and gaining employee commitment and engagement. Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons. Learning how to communicate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace and the world of business.

To begin to understand how individuals in different generations act and react, it is vital to first understand oneself and personally held mental models. This mindset ties into Senge's personal mastery discipline, which says that people constantly need to evaluate themselves in order to grow. Whether at a family gathering or in the workplace, how should a leader manage inner-generational groups with conflicting work ethics, dissimilar values and idiosyncratic styles? How do you get them to stop snarling at each other? How do you motivate them to get along or work together? Senge's five disciplines, which include mental models and personal mastery, along with additional research provide much insight into how to help employees overcome generational biases in a professional setting.

Every generation has created its own commotion as it has entered into the adult working world. And, every generation says the same things about other generations; "They don't get it," or "They have it so much easier than we did." Based on research, the underlying values, or personal lifestyle characteristics often align with each individual's generation as shown in the following table:

<b>PERSONAL AND LIFESTYLE CHARACTERISTICS BY GENERATION</b>				
	<b>Veterans (1922–1945)</b>	<b>Baby Boomers (1946–1964)</b>	<b>Generation X (1965–1980)</b>	<b>Generation Y (1981–2000)</b>
<b>Core Values</b>	Respect for authority Conformers Discipline	Optimism Involvement	Skepticism Fun Informality	Realism Confidence Extreme fun Social
<b>Family</b>	Traditional Nuclear	Disintegrating	Latch-key kids	Merged families
<b>Education</b>	A dream	A birthright	A way to get there	An incredible expense
<b>Communication Media</b>	Rotary phones One-on-one Write a memo	Touch-tone phones Call me anytime	Cell phones Call me only at work	Internet Picture phones E-mail
<b>Dealing with Money</b>	Put it away Pay cash	Buy now, pay later	Cautious Conservative Save, save, save	Earn to spend

(fdu.edu)

The characteristics displayed above are a sample of the common trends that have been studied and reported. Not every person in a generation will share all of the characteristics shown, however these are examples indicative of general patterns in the relationships of individuals. Individuals born towards the end of a generation are more likely to have overlap in characteristics with following or preceding generations. Understanding these characteristics about individuals makes it easier to look at workplace characteristics and how they manifest themselves in business. The chart below displays workplace characteristics according to each generation:

<b>WORKPLACE CHARACTERISTICS</b>				
	<b>Veterans (1922–1945)</b>	<b>Baby Boomers (1946–1964)</b>	<b>Generation X (1965–1980)</b>	<b>Generation Y (1981–2000)</b>
<b>Work Ethic and Values</b>	Hard work Respect authority Sacrifice Duty before fun Adhere to rules	Workaholics Work efficiently Crusading causes Personal fulfillment Desire quality Question authority	Eliminate the task Self-reliance Want structure and direction Skeptical	What's next Multitasking Tenacity Entrepreneurial Tolerant Goal oriented
<b>Work Is ...</b>	An obligation	An exciting adventure	A difficult challenge A contract	A means to an end Fulfillment
<b>Leadership Style</b>	Directive Command-and-control	Consensual Collegial	Everyone is the same Challenge others Ask why	*TBD
<b>Interactive Style</b>	Individual	Team player Loves to have meetings	Entrepreneur	Participative
<b>Communications</b>	Formal Memo	In person	Direct Immediate	E-mail Voice mail
<b>Feedback and Rewards</b>	No news is good news Satisfaction in a job well done	Don't appreciate it Money Title recognition	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing? Freedom is the best reward	Whenever I want it, at the push of a button Meaningful work
<b>Messages That Motivate</b>	Your experience is respected	You are valued You are needed	Do it your way Forget the rules	You will work with other bright, creative people
<b>Work and Family Life</b>	Ne'er the twain shall meet	No balance Work to live	Balance	Balance

\*As this group has not spent much time in the workforce, this characteristic has yet to be determined.

(fdu.edu)

When looking at the varying differences among generations, it is apparent that leaders should learn about how different employees from different generations best communicate. Identifying and participating in effective communication will help to create a healthy, successful learning and working environment.

There are more pronounced differences between the generations today than ever before. What can one expect with the dramatic changes in our world in the last 60 years? Being aware of these differences can help individuals tailor their message for maximum effect, regardless of the task, or the relationship: family, friends, workplace peers. Good business is based on understanding others. The majority of us think that our way is the correct way or the only way. In

business as well as in personal life, all employees must realize this is not always the case. To work effectively and efficiently, and to increase productivity and quality, leaders need to understand generational characteristics and learn how to use them effectively in dealing with each individual.

Demographic changes have also led to the talent challenges companies face today. Baby boomers are heading towards retirement, generation x is often feeling tired or overworked, and generation y doesn't seem aligned to the values of previous generations. Before the 1980s, employees valued stability. However, the great downsizing and corporate transformation of the 1980s destroyed employee loyalty to companies. So, when the dot com boom of the 1990s produced a surge of job opportunities, job-hopping became a standard part of a person's career. With this change, the stigma of failure was eliminated as opposed to the era of lifetime employment. Previous generations were raised with principles such as commitment to the company, promotion from within, and the idea of a job for life. The table below summarizes the main features and events that shaped each generation:

Main characteristics of generations over time:

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Main Events</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<i>Veterans/ Traditionalists</i>	<i>The Great Depression, World War II</i>	<i>Conservative, disciplined, sense of obligation</i>
<i>Baby Boomers</i>	<i>Witnesses of the Cold War, Civil Rights Struggle</i>	<i>Patient, committed, loyal</i>
<i>Generation X</i>	<i>Technological development, fall of the Berlin Wall</i>	<i>Empowered, optimistic, practical/pragmatic, adaptable/responsive to change, self-reliant, individualistic</i>
<i>Generation Y</i>	<i>Witnesses of the war on terrorism, technological boom</i>	<i>Ambitious, creative, emphasize work-life balance, informal, technologically savvy, pro- teamwork</i>

(rtc.edu)

When considering the way that generational traits and biases impact the work place overall, organizations today are faced with an increasingly diverse workforce and are forced to adjust and accommodate their individual needs and preferences in an effort to remain competitive. Specifically, generational diversity has become a concern for several reasons. The aging workforce and generational shifts have been creating new issues for organizations as they attempt to mitigate the risks associated with these current trends. Today's workforce consists of individuals from four unique generations: the silent generation or veterans (1925-1945,



comprising 10% of the population), the baby boomers (1946-1964, comprising 44% of the population), generation x (1965-1981, comprising 34% of the population) and generation y (1977-1992, comprising 12% of the population). Most of the studies on inner-generational interactions in organizations are based on the theory that “generation is a meaningful psychological variable, as it captures the culture of one’s upbringing during a specific time period” (Twenge & Campbell, 2008)

Research indicates that more than 50% of business and HR executives expect severe to moderate shortages in executive leadership within the next few years. Over 75 million workers will retire and be replaced by a younger individuals; thus, organizations will have to adjust their recruitment and retention strategies in an effort to attract this segment of the population. In order for companies to remain competitive, they need to gather a clear understanding of different work values of each generation and incorporate that knowledge into their organizational behavior management tactics, and recruitment strategies.

The following study examines the attitudes of three generations of high school seniors as they make decisions regarding their employment future at three different time periods (1976, 1991, and 2006) in order to compare and contrast differences in workplace attitudes and preferences. Five different research questions were asked with the purpose of gathering attitudes and responses across five categories: leisure rewards, intrinsic rewards, altruistic rewards, social rewards, and extrinsic rewards. Students were asked to respond to these questions with the purpose of exposing their work values and opinions to the aforementioned ideas. The study is essentially determining what motivates individuals to perform in the workplace, and if there are differences created by membership to a unique generation. Several theories and definitions are utilized within the study to delineate among these rewards:

- Leisure: Whether individuals “work to live” or “live to work”
- Extrinsic Rewards: notion that states pay, material possessions, and prestige are the primary factors that motivate individuals to work
- Intrinsic Rewards: notion that individuals work for work’s own sake rather than to obtain or secure external stimuli or material items.
- Altruistic Rewards: to what degree an individual is motivated to work by their desire to help others or their society
- Social Rewards: To what degree an individual needs to feel a sense of belonging or connection in order to be motivated to work.  
(Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010)

With each of these rewards taken into consideration, some very interesting findings regarding generational differences were determined.

The data for this study was collected from a larger data collection effort known as Monitoring the Future. This survey has collected data from a nationally representative sample of high school seniors each year since 1976. An estimated 15,000 high school seniors are sampled each year. This is the first study, which has used this data in order to assess generational changes in work values. Furthermore, the study utilizes a “time-lag” method in order to measure values of students at three different times and capture accurate data.

Empirical evidence for generational differences in work values is limited. What is known of the subject matter is gathered from anecdotal accounts and qualitative interviews. Also, most workplace interviews and surveys have a difficult time determining whether or not the high expectations of employees are due to an actual generational “shift” or because they are expressing the “idealism of youth” that all generations have expressed to a certain extent (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). If companies want to make a clear and concise business case as to why it is important to conduct research on generational differences, then having empirical data is essential. As stated in the case, the most ideal design for a study measuring generational differences would be a sequential cohort design, which begins collecting data at a young age and follows these individuals longitudinally as they age.

The study showed that the largest change in work values is the increase in the value placed on leisure. Increased value in leisure has led to the decrease in work centrality, and reflects the realities of the current workplace. Organizations are moving from a hierarchical, rigid structure to a more collaborative, flat lattice. Interestingly enough, although there is a large global movement to be more philanthropic and sustainable, generation y values altruism just as much as the other generations.

In conclusion of this specific study, values have long been recognized as important determinants of behavior (Maslow, 1943). These values have the propensity to influence workplace attitudes and performance. Organizations would benefit from this research in order to adjust their practices to better accommodate and serve their employees. From a human capital perspective, employees will work more efficiently and effectively if they are being properly managed and their needs are aligned with those of their organization.

Findings gathered from a Society for Human Resource Management study indicate that there are three main areas where generations exhibit noticeable differences: work ethic, managing change, and perception of organizational hierarchy (Glass, 2007). Each generation has a distinct perspective on working hours, work/life balance, working remotely, communicating, and receiving feedback. In order to overcome these differences, Glass suggests that, "There are four areas to focus on for overcoming generational conflict at work and ensuring that mixed demographic workplaces can survive and thrive-- changing human resource policies/corporate philosophies, ensuring an environment of effective communication, incorporating collaborative decision making, and developing internal training programs that focus on the differences" (p.101). In sum, Glass asserts that it all boils down to finding the right communication method to reach each generation, and encouraging employees to be more open minded about

generational differences. Achieving these two goals would help to eliminate many of the pains caused by generational differences in the workplace.

To help employees overcome generational biases, organizations must first help them overcome mental models. The largest concern for employers is retention rather than recruitment. Putting employees in an environment where they hope to remain begins with ensuring that they get along with coworkers. Some suggestions for organizations that hope to create this healthy environment are based on creating open communication between generations through what are considered to be best practices. The organization should provide frequent and informal feedback, institute policies that allow for a flexible and casual work environment, keep work-life balance a priority, incorporate technology into processes, and offer employees opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge discusses an organization called Pioneers for Change when looking at generational differences within an organization. In regards to young employees' approaches to leadership in large-scale organizational change, Senge explains,

First, young people saw their lack of knowledge as an asset... As we talked, many of the more experienced managers at the conference began to see how their past knowledge and accomplishments could actually be an impediment in leading change... Second, these young leaders are remarkably connected around the world... By continually sharing and helping one another, they develop eclectic views of problems and can draw forth surprising resources for change... Lastly, the young people work at remaining unattached to their views (Senge, 371).

This is only one example of the way that generational differences are apparent in a professional environment. Senge points out that although today's young people are often ignored in regards to holding leadership roles, they hold what is likely to be the largest stake in the future of organizations.

Because generation y is currently causing a need for much change in the work place, an organization's way of thinking about change must be based around their characteristics. Generation y must be made aware of their own traits and biases to help other employees overcome them, and to gain perspective on how to better work with current employees who may hold differing values or mental models. While they should be introduced to the biases of their own generation, they should not be made aware the biases of other generations. This could actually create negative mental models, which ties into the normative theory. The normative or prescriptive theory states that when a group of people holds a common opinion on something, their opinion becomes a norm or becomes reality. Alternatively, giving employees perspective on how others may look at them, and telling them that this is not the reality, may encourage these employees to work to overcome these biases.

Giving generation y employees tips along with the information on the biases towards their generation may help them to better function within the company. Organizations should let them know to be patient to overcome the negative biases that are held against their generation. Patience could help other generations see that generation y does not have a negative attitude, unrealistic expectations of coworkers, and are not too opinionated. When a coworker from a different generation is not as connected with technology for example, a generation y employee must consider that they aren't as comfortable with it and may need help getting accommodated. Teaching, but not forcing, this new technology can move the organization forward and give employees a better perspective on generation y.

Organizations can also encourage generation y employees to focus mainly on assigned tasks. This would help other generations realize that generation y does not always have a sense of entitlement. These younger employees should still be encouraged to be creative and to work to

improve the organization as a whole, but they should also provide data to instigate any changes. Providing data gives higher-level employees, who are likely from other generations, to see that a generation y employee's suggestion is not only opinion based but is empirical. It also shows that they took initiative to back up their ideas, which shows that they are not in constant need of stroking. Last, to again overcome the perception that generation y requires a lot of attention or help, they should only ask for help when necessary. Unless their task can have a detrimental impact on the company, generation y employees should do their best on a task, have a supervisor look over the work, and then make changes if necessary.

To determine other ways to meet the needs of varying generations, organizations also have the option of surveying employees. While it is unlikely that an organization will be able to meet all requests, and while not every employee in each generation will express the same needs, organizations can do their best to make compromises. Changes based on employee wishes will strengthen the environment of the organization, and will give employees more motivation because their wishes are important to their organization. When employees have a sense of ownership in their job, they perform better. When considering that this ownership can come from changes instigated by generation differences, the generational gap may begin to close.

Jared Klien, in Vanderbilt's Organizational Leadership program, is experiencing the pressure of generational differences in the work place. He was able to provide some insight on these differences and the way they have impacted his professional experiences. Jared is right on the cusp of generation x and generation y, however he views himself more as a generation x employee. His boss is a baby boomer who reports up to another baby boomer. Jared has wanted flextime for quite a while, but his boomer boss was skeptical; she liked having face time and seeing her employees in the office every day from 8-5. For her it was a comfort factor, she

believed if they were in the office their work would get done. Over the summer, Jared's company went through a major acquisition; as the company was growing, the corporate office had run out of space. The solution: flextime. Jared would now share a cubicle with another associate but they would alternate days so they were never actually in the cubicle together at the same time. Jared now works 2 days in the office and 3 days at home, and he couldn't be happier. He feels that he is more productive in his three days at home than he is in a 40-hour workweek in the office. When asked why, Jared answered that at home he doesn't have any distractions, however, in the office there is always something going on and coworker continually want to chat. All of those 15-minute trivial conversations add up to productivity time lost.

Jared's company is striving to be considered an "employer of choice," and in order to do this they must start planning for generational differences. Jared and several others are members of a group of pilot employees, who are the first to try out this trial period of flex time schedule. In Jared's opinion, the upper management (mostly boomers) is split 50/50 in regards to continuing with flex scheduling or going back to the traditional schedule. Within the company, field operations and management recruiters have already adopted a flexible schedule completely. New hires are not currently being offered any options for flex time, however, Jared is hoping that in the future options to support generational preferences will become a norm.

While there is limited quantitative information available, qualitative data suggests that problems which arise from generational differences in the work place can be defeated. Incorporating all generational needs into "best" practices is a start to creating generational balance. Mentoring programs, virtual learning and training environments, advisory councils, external on-boarding, and corporate universities are some of the most well recognized and

commonly utilized “best” practices, which can be used to conquer generational biases. These practices should be taken into the utmost consideration when building a learning organization

Mentoring programs allow for cross-generational collaboration. When a generation y employee starts within an organization, he or she may be uncomfortable in the new professional environment. Having a mentor from a different generation as a steady resource will cause new employees to see that employees from other generations can be dependable, knowledgeable, and capable. This will give new employees new mental models of their own, and if the organization implements the program correctly, these will be positive mental models toward other generations.

Virtual learning and training environments get employees who are not as connected with technology to become a little more comfortable with it. As employees become more and more comfortable with technology, they are not only in a place where they are more capable in the organization, they are also better able to relate to generation y employees or those who are very comfortable with technology. This improves group work greatly, as well as the overall functionality of the organization.

A third “best” practice that benefits the generational gap is having advisory councils. Those on an advisory council work together to ensure that proposed changes are being followed through on. Having an advisory council can help employees with varying views based on generational mental models reach an agreement. This council can bring perspective to all employees, and can help those with differing views learn how to work together to reach their final goal. Advisory councils alone can help team learning run more smoothly, and can help groups reach a shared vision. Cross-generational advisory councils could be even more



beneficial because it is likely they would better be able to understand and explain what various employees are thinking.

External on boarding encourages a work-life balance. A given examples of external on boarding is a dinner party in honor of new employees. Those who are true work-a-holics are given the opportunity to better understand generations other than their own who feel the need to have a personal life, and to share that life with colleagues. This makes the work environment more personal and more comfortable. Having events like these also meet the generational needs of many newcomers, and showing them that the company recognizes their needs makes them feel instantly more at ease in their new atmosphere. This could even improve retention rates, if implemented correctly.

Last, corporate universities are a more recent revelation in the world of best practices. They are increasing nationally within companies to improve the training and professional development of employees. Methods of corporate universities bring mental models and shared vision together to give employees the big picture through an experience that all employees share. These universities could use what they know about generational differences to train employees in a way that eliminates biases

In consideration of each of these practices, if implemented in the appropriate way, generational biases could be reduced. These practices should also be considered when incorporating Senge's five disciplines during the creation of a learning organization. Unfortunately, there are numerous reasons why organizations do not become learning organizations. There are a few major barriers to building and sustaining learning organizations. These barriers are as follows: substituting talk for action, employees ill equipped to have difficult conversations, and a lack of systems thinking in the approach to the learning organization. These

three barriers are each identified in one of the books we have read throughout the course of this class.

Often times, people come up with a plan for action and they talk extensively about it, get people excited, and explain how it will help the organization; yet, they never actually implement the plan or make the change. While talk is necessary for getting people on the same page, motivating employees, and getting buy-in, it does not actually make the change or implement the new system. After the talk, there must be clear action and steps in making the change. In relation to substituting talk for action is the notion that employees are ill equipped to have difficult conversations. If an employee realizes that her company is talking about change and moving in the direction of becoming a learning organization but is not taking any action, then she may find it acceptable to have a difficult conversation with a co-worker or a leader in the organization regarding this. However, if she is not well versed in difficult conversations, then this may prevent her from doing so and having a productive conversation. Lastly, if an organization does involve itself in systems thinking, then it will not understand how the entire organizational system needs to be involved in becoming a learning organization. Without this understanding, an organization is sure to miss some important steps in reaching learning organization status.

In order to overcome these barriers, organizations must have a culture where it is acceptable to question ideas and approach one another (regardless of status) when concerned with something. Likewise, the organization should welcome difficult conversations, as they can help to get the real issues and concerns out on the table and then the organization can begin to effectively handle and approach those issues. Finally, the organization should take a systems thinking approach; it should build a shared vision, encourage team learning, get rid of mental

models preventing good performance, and reward personal mastery. If an organization can take these steps forward, it will have much better success at becoming and sustaining as a learning organization.

In conclusion, after considering all of this data, organizations can reduce generational gaps by catering various practices to meet all generational needs. Implementing these practices successfully requires that biases based on mental models, characteristics, and historical events are all considered regarding each generation. Organizations should also consider the differences between generations and how to bring them together to achieve a shared vision. Practices should bring each employee new perspective regarding generations besides their own, without forcing these biases on them. There is a risk of potentially creating biases while trying to eliminate them, so organizations must be contentious in their tactics. Overall, when creating a learning organization, considering generational needs could lead to improved retention rates, better overall communication, the ability for employees to learn from other generations, and the chance for employees to gain a better sense of each of Senge's five disciplines.

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