

Workforce Diversity Network

Review: Training Program



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Mixing Four Generations in the Workplace

No diversity and inclusion initiative is complete without understanding and addressing the generational differences in today's workplace. Stereotypes and labels abound when it comes to the subject of age, and age is one dimension of diversity that impacts all of us. It is inescapable.

When I was hired years ago, fresh out of college, my boss saw me as eager and enthusiastic but a little "green" and "wet behind the ears." I had a lot to learn you see, and I hadn't paid my dues yet. Sound familiar? Now, many years later, in the view of some younger people, I've matured to the status of, "stuck in my ways" and, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." What's going on? I think I'm basically the same person I was when I started, with the same values and the same work ethic. I know a bit more and I've gained some wisdom over time but I'm still willing and interested in learning new things.

So how did I come to this place in my career, or more accurately, how did we come to this place? The answer has a lot to do with generational differences. We all see the world from our unique vantage point, and that is profoundly shaped by our life experiences growing up.

Cam Marston has been studying the impact of generational differences in the workplace for some time. His programs and concepts are the result of over a decade of research inside businesses of all sizes and sectors. His newest video, "Mixing Four Generations in the Workplace" is a compilation of his findings that can be used by any organization to gain a greater understanding of the subject and take actions to tap the full potential of all employees. Materials that provide the design for both two and four hour engaging and interactive workshops accompany the video.



Cam defines the four generations in the workplace today as:

Matures – born between 1909 and 1945. Driven by the ideals of duty and sacrifice. Often measure a work ethic on timeliness, productivity and not drawing attention to oneself.

Baby Boomers – the first "Me" generation was born between 1946 and 1964. One of the largest generations in history, they dominate today's workplace with 80 million members. Their work ethic is measured in hours spent on the job. They are team oriented and consider relationship building skills as critical for success.

Generation X – born between 1965 and 1979. Taught to question authority. Productivity on the job matters more than time on the job. They invest loyalty in people, not companies and have embraced a carpe diem attitude

New Millennials – born between 1980 and 2000. They have been coddled since birth, protected by their parents. They are technology gurus. They seek open, constant communication from the boss and seek personal fulfillment from their jobs, not necessarily financial security yet. They are torn between individuality and fitting in.

I found the program enlightening and instructive from both a professional and personal point of view, and looked forward to a conversation with Cam to gain a deeper understanding of his work.

WDN: A primary goal of managing diversity in the workplace is to attract, develop and retain the best talent wherever it comes from. How do your programs and research enable this?

Cam: This is one of the most pressing issues for employers today. If it's the focus of a workshop, typically the audience is going to be full of recruiters or management of some sort. I point out to those managers the differences between the people they are trying to attract and themselves, and how to use that new understanding to attract and keep the talent they need.

For example, in a recent workshop for a client, the audience was composed of almost 80% Baby Boom managers and their challenge was, "How do we attract and retain Generation Y, aka New Millennial, candidates?" I spent some time showing them their profile as Baby Boomers; who was typically in the audience; what they valued about

their workplace; what they felt they brought to it and what would attract and retain them. Then we looked at the target group they were trying to recruit to understand the gap between them and us. How are they different and what they are looking for? This is a major diversity issue. This is how they are different from you. They have not chosen to be this way. They have simply evolved based on the world around them. The next step was to work with the managers on how to bridge the gap through developing and refining recruiting processes and incentive programs.

I explained to the audience that, "There is an assumption that the new recruits will want what you have. There is an assumption that they will be on an "apprentice to master" track because that is how you, as Baby Boomers, rose through the organization. However, the youth today are often pushing back on this "apprentice to master" track. They will eventually get on it, but at a much later date in their careers. Therefore, what is needed is to create a program that works for them today. Not one that should work for them, but **will** work for them.

WDN: Have you observed differences between the generations that are influenced by race, ethnicity or gender?

Cam: About two years ago, I would have said there are no gender differences but more recently I have observed that there are differences, primarily among young women. When I say young women, I mean child bearing ages and below. They differ greatest from the Baby Boomer females because it was the Baby Boomer female who said, "I can do both. I can be both a professional or a working woman as well as a mother." We're finding that the X'er females and the Millennials, mostly the X'ers because they are of childbearing age these days, are saying that they want either one or the other. It's very few who want both. As a result, they are much more likely to seek part time work, flexible schedules and similar accommodations in the workplace.

As far as ethnic differences, there are some, though that is not an area where I have tremendous expertise. What I like to tell people is that if I can create a bulleted list of the characteristics of the Baby Boomers, or a bulleted list of the characteristics of any of the four generations, that list will encompass most people. However, for an African American, the bulleted list might be twice as long in order to include specifics of their race and ethnicity. Likewise, the lists of other racial or ethnic groups would have a number of different things on them. But I "paint with a wide brush" and I include the bullets that are most common to all the members of each generation, so though there are clearly differences related to race and ethnicity, it's not an area where I have done significant research.

WDN: Your work seems to be US-focused, but many of your clients are multinational organizations. Has your research looked at generational differences in other countries or cultures?

Cam: I have and it's becoming a greater issue. The generational issues, as I have defined them, require a history of affluence to emerge as challenges. I'm not speaking about individual affluence, but rather a history of affluence as a nation. For that reason, these generational components are often confined to western civilization or the western European world. My work is still primarily U.S. based but I have been active in arranging interviews for organizations in Europe as they are beginning to discuss issues around Generation Y, or the Millennials, and they are seeing these differences emerge in ways

that they had not anticipated. So it's also a western European phenomenon though my work is primarily focused in the U.S.

WDN: Stereotypes and labels are among the biggest barriers to creating an inclusive workplace. Are there any in particular that you have observed in your work that are more common, persistent and difficult to overcome?

Cam: The stereotype that comes to mind for most people when they think of generational differences is the "slacker" image of Generation X. They got labeled with it early on and you still hear people make reference to it. It is simply not true. The feeling was, "They're slackers because they don't work like us." The fact is, they get the work done, but they do it a bit differently than the Boomers would.

The stereotype of the Millennials is being more social than work focused. The social component of the workplace is something they are very interested in but it doesn't mean they don't work. They certainly do work. They work hard but, as with the X'ers, they just do it differently.

The workaholic attitude of the Baby Boomers is a stereotype that I hear frequently. The Boomers do work hard but they are undergoing a great transition right now, particularly in the older elements of the generation who are beginning to slow down, step back and catch their breath a little bit. They're seeing the attitudes of the X'ers and the Millennials paying off in what they see as a balanced life style, and are interested in adopting that.

So all these stereotypes, upon closer scrutiny, don't hold up. However they are still very strong and I hear them frequently.

WDN: While we're on the subject of stereotypes and generational differences, have you encountered much ageism as you work with different organizations?

Cam: When I hear ageism, the first thing that comes to mind is a coaching strategy that has become more and more prevalent over the years, mentor programs. They are most frequently found in corporate America, and are often counter-productive. They don't work very well.

In terms of ageism, it's usually someone saying, "I am senior here. I have history. I am older than you, therefore I know more than you." Trying to advise young employees based on that attitude or that approach to the workplace, simply doesn't work. The young employees don't want to be told, "This is what to do because I'm older than you." They want to be advised, "This is how I think you should consider this based on a similar situation I've had." The ageism attitude that I'm senior, I have tenure, therefore listen to me, often doesn't go very well.

The reverse can be true too. In many cases the youth may come in saying, "I know how to do things better and faster because of my ease and familiarity with technology and you senior people just don't quite get it." But often what the youth don't understand is the difference between knowledge and skills versus wisdom, which is the most important part of how and why we do what we do. So there are ageism barriers and they require those that are interested in overcoming them to examine their own attitudes and actions, to make sure they are valid and then proceed forward very carefully.

WDN: In spite of all the differences between the generations, are there areas of common ground on which to build strong and effective working relationships?

Cam: I think there is common ground actually. Common ground in that we all like stimulating work, work that matters, that contributes and makes a difference. That's not generational, that's just human. People like that.

When I work with groups we focus on where these differences are, why they exist and how to bridge the gap. I like to equate it to a handshake. Once I understand the differences in people that work with me, I can "extend a hand" and they will reply by extending their hand, but I've got to reach out first so that they'll reach back.

In addressing these differences, the point that I try to make is that these differences are real. They're going to exist and they're going to be around for a long time. If your primary goal is to make others be like you, you're going to fail. You must understand the differences and work with them.

WDN: What trends do you expect to emerge in the future with regard to generational differences in the workplace?

Cam: There is a trend for organizations to stay connected with former employees from the World War II generation to retain their institutional wisdom. They've done their jobs so well for so long, and now that they are leaving, organizations are beginning to realize how much wisdom they had and are working hard to keep them nearby to draw on their expertise.

There's also a trend with the Baby Boomers to move to a more balanced lifestyle and, in addition, there's a growing attitude of entitlement, particularly with the senior Baby Boomers, who have said, "I have given you many years of hard work. You owe me now." This shift in work ethic, which can cause employees to slow down a bit, presents a dilemma for organizations that have come to expect and need them to work as hard as ever.

Over 50% of X'ers are now parents, so we'll soon be seeing new demands in the workplace around child care, flex time and related issues. There also seems to be a push back to old school parenting by Generation X'ers, who are largely responsible for raising the children born since 2000. "Go outside and don't come back till it's dark", or "Turn off the TV and go find something to do", are mantras that are coming back into favor and it will be interesting to see how the new generation responds.

The Millennials are now adults in their mid-twenties so we are watching closely to see how their work ethic will evolve as they mature. Indications so far are positive and employers dealing with the older elements of the generation are encouraged.

The next generation to follow the Millennials, according to my research, is comprised of those born since the year 2000. While we don't yet have workplace information on them, clearly, technology will be a major factor. We have to assume that "plugged in" will be a big part of their lives and my belief is that those with the best people skills will do better than their peers, but that remains to be seen.

WDN: Do you feel that your video, *Mixing Four Generations in the Workplace*, is a product that can be used in an organization without the benefit of special expertise in the subject? In other words, can untrained facilitators deploy it effectively?

Cam: We tried to make it accessible to everyone who watches it. In other words, typically everyone who watches the video, regardless of their generation, can see themselves in the content somewhere. What happens is that everyone in the room watching the video has a common interest because they have been described in it. It enables everyone to take a position and begin a dialogue. It allows them to engage one another, not from some consultant's stereotype, but through some information they have seen that resonates within them that says, "Yes indeed, I am like the person described in the video and therefore I have some footing in this and can engage in this discussion." The video does a good job allowing people to take a position that says, "My point of view or my attitude is not wrong, incorrect or bad. It's simply different than yours. I can now understand both of our positions more clearly, so let's have this debate."

The leader's job is only to start the debate and it usually flows quickly once it's begun. It's very accessible for both the leader and the audience in that it's very easy to get things going. They don't have to be experts or fully knowledgeable in the generations.

I agree with Cam that the study of generational differences is a subject matter that continues to grow every year with more and more demand. For a while it was a trendy subject, but now it's a serious issue that people are struggling with in their workplace. Not only is it growing, the challenges are becoming more pronounced. In today's business world, you are more likely than ever to be managing, coaching and leading people who are nothing at all like you.

Successful management of generational differences in the workplace has a lasting impact on team effectiveness and is a key competency for today's leadership. "Mixing Four Generations in the Workplace" is a tool that will help any organization develop the understanding and skills required to do so.

About Cam Marston

Consultant, author, and speaker Cam Marston has worked with Fortune 500 companies and small businesses throughout the world to improve multigenerational relations and communications. He has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New Zealand Herald*, *Entrepreneur Magazine*, *Charlotte Observer*, *HR Management Today*, *Money Magazine*, *Fortune Small Business (FSB)*, on the *BBC*, and in and numerous trade journals and city business journals across the United States.

Cam's programs and concepts are the result of more than ten years' extensive research and study inside businesses of all sizes and sectors. In the course of his work, he has interviewed hundreds of representatives of the various generations. Their answers are interesting - sometimes surprising - and always valuable.

Marston began his generational-focused consultancy after several years selling for Nestle Brands Foodservice Company. While at Nestle he discovered that he developed closer relationships with his customers when he talked to them about subjects that appealed to their value systems. He soon learned that his customers had many different

values but the values were roughly the same in each generation.

In 1996 he founded Marston Communications. He is the author of the best selling program *Mixing Four Generations in the Workplace*.

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