

J JOSSEY-BASS

Retiring the Generation Gap

How Employees Young and Old
Can Find Common Ground

Jennifer J. Deal



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



Center for
Creative
Leadership

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*In honor of my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and
cousins from the Lost Generation and the WWII
Generation who told me and showed me that attitude,
dedication, and effort are more important than age.
I am grateful every day for their gifts.*

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Preface

People often ask why I chose to study generational conflict; some even want to know whether I chose this topic because I harbor some deep-seated anger toward people of other generations. *Did you have conflicts with your parents when you were a teenager?* (Didn't every reasonably healthy adult?) *Did you have problems with authority figures, such as your Ph.D. adviser?* (No comment.) *Do you disrespect older people?* (No!)

Actually, I have been lucky to have had my life enriched by the influence of relatives from generations that are not included in this research because very, very few are still in the workplace and, sadly, most are no longer with us—the so-called “Lost Generation” (although none I have known seemed lost) and the World War II Generation (the “Greatest Generation”). I grew up with the example of my grandmother, who, when my grandfather died too young, took over and ran his roofing company, raised two children, wore a dress and nylons to work every day, lived with diabetes for forty years, and never *ever* complained about the hand that life dealt her. As she climbed ladders to inspect roofing jobs in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, she may have become the model for the feminist saying, “As you climb the ladder of success, don't let the men look up your dress.” My grandmother (who was born in 1903) and other older relatives always told me that age was immaterial—that attitude, dedication, and effort were much more important.

So, generational conflict wasn't my primary area of interest, at least not initially. I was finishing another project focused on what makes a good global manager, and was writing a book about the results with my colleagues (Dalton, Ernst, Deal, and Leslie, 2002) when another colleague suggested strongly (on the order of “Get your backside to this meeting!”) that I come to a meeting about a new research project on intergenerational conflict. She thought I might be interested in getting involved. She pointed out that the

project didn't have a full-time researcher on it yet and that my other project was ending soon. Why not, I thought; it never hurts to gather information.

When I arrived at the meeting, I wasn't convinced that this topic was worth much time, because I honestly didn't think the issue of generational similarities and differences was important. It certainly wasn't important in my life (at the time). I also thought that any generational conflict was relatively unimportant to clients and would be (research-wise) relatively uninteresting to study. But I emerged several hours later intrigued by the research, both because of how useful it would be for our clients and because of how interesting the questions were (I'll say more about this in the Introduction).

How different are the generations, really? How important is generational conflict in the workplace? What, if anything, can people in organizations do to reduce the conflicts among people of different generations? Contrary to my initial thoughts, the issues that were driving the research were both compelling and timely. For one thing, I learned that many of our clients at the Center for Creative Leadership believed that they had ongoing problems with generational conflict. For another, the published material on generational issues seemed to be too consistent with the stereotypes to be true. (Call me suspicious if you like, but when what is published on a topic echoes the stereotypes this closely, I suspect that people are just finding what they're looking for, rather than what is actually there.) Further, too little of what had been published relied on what I considered to be good, rigorous research for me to accept the conclusions. (Although the joke among social science researchers is "data is the plural of anecdote," basing conclusions on a small number of interviews isn't the sort of "data" I am comfortable relying on.) What was written was interesting, but I would never use it to make recommendations to a client.

It also seemed likely that demographic shifts projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be coming (between 2005 and 2020) will have a much larger impact on the work world than the previously published material indicates they would. This meant that the information we hoped to discover through our research was going to be useful to clients immediately, was likely to be useful for at least a decade, and could potentially be useful for decades to come

if we continued to gather data. That seemed to me to be a solid business case for the research project.

So we began the work. The more we learned, the more intrigued we became. The more interesting trends we discovered, the more we were able to tell clients about the *realities* of the differences and similarities among the generations. The more time we spent talking with clients about what we were finding, the more glad they were to tell us about what they were seeing in their work, which helped us focus our questions even more. This research project was supposed to take three years and has now been ongoing for seven. It is likely to continue for the foreseeable future as the next generation (Generation Y/Boomerlet) moves into the workplace.

You'll see in the rest of this book the distillation of what we think are the most applicable and interesting results of the research. By necessity, the book doesn't contain everything. (Is anyone except my coworkers interested in 1,000 pages of minutiae, dozens of spreadsheets, and a plethora of chi-squares, Fs, Ts, and the other fun symbols that brighten a statistician's day?) What it does contain are the results of the research we hope will be most interesting and useful to people working in organizations that employ people from several generations—and that's almost everybody!

Why This Book Says “We”

You'll notice that I say “we” a lot, even though my name is the only one on the cover. The reason I do this is because I didn't do this work all by myself. Not even close. I was research scientist and project manager, but in truth, the research and the book itself were completed only because many people were willing to do a lot of work.

It's amazing to me how many people's work goes into the production of a book—or at least went into this one! In the past when I've read authors' notes saying, “This book couldn't have been written without the work of a number of people, yada, yada,” I've always thought, “How gracious, but not necessarily true.” I was really *really* wrong. Really. The number of people who were kind enough to spend their personal time commenting on my work rather than doing something important to them was incredible. It is a gift that I'll never be able to thank them for enough . . . and that I'm sure

they'll be reminding me of forever . . . especially when it's time to pick up the check!

Seriously though, this book could not have been written without the efforts of an almost endless number of people, many of whom are listed in the acknowledgments.

Why We're Writing to Everyone and Not Just to Managers and Leaders

One question we wrestled with was whether this book should be written for people in positions of authority (managers, leaders, and the like) or aimed at a more general audience. Given that we are the Center for Creative Leadership, we began with a definite "leader" tilt. However, I think of generational conflict as an issue everyone experiences, not one that only people in positions of authority encounter. After all, everyone has parents, and many people have children—and through those relationships people experience the most volatile generational conflicts there are. So when I was writing I found that I was writing for everyone, not just for the people who have "VP" or "director" (or whatever) next to their name. After the editors read the first draft, we decided that we should make a conscious decision to go with the "everyone" orientation, rather than try to twist the whole thing back in the direction of people in executive positions.

So this book is written for everyone who has to interact with people from other generations (at work or at home) and occasionally finds himself or herself confused, annoyed, ticked off (or worse!) by the behavior of people of a different generation. And again, that is obviously . . . everyone!

However, people in management positions don't have to deal with generational conflict only as individual people; they also have to deal with other people's generational conflicts. Therefore, we've included special sections for those people who manage others (at any level) or who are anticipating moving into managerial positions.

A note on style: you've probably already noticed that I'm not writing in anything approaching a standard academic style. Rather than write with the (academically) obligatory dense prose, page-

length sentences, and copious footnotes, I have opted for a more conversational tone. I hope for your sake that it makes the book easier to read!

September 2006

Jennifer J. Deal
San Diego, California

Introduction

Do Not Pass Go Without Reading This Chapter!

*Children today are tyrants.
They contradict their parents, gobble their food,
and tyrannize their teachers.
SOCRATES (470–399 B.C.)*

If you read no further than this paragraph, we want you to leave knowing two things:

1. Fundamentally people want the same things, no matter what generation they are from.
2. You can work with (or manage) people from all generations effectively without becoming a contortionist, selling your soul on eBay, or pulling your hair out on a daily basis.

Got that? Good. You've got the essence of what we'll be talking about. Now (if you must) go check your e-mail, take a call, whatever. But then come back, because there's more to the story. . . .

"But what about the generation gap?" you may ask. "If you knew the old farts/young slackers (choose one—or more!) I work with, you'd know that the generation gap is alive and well!"

Well, appearances can be deceiving, whether it is gray hair and wrinkles, or jeans and pierced body parts. In fact, as we'll explain, the so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout—which includes control, power, authority, and position.

How We Got Here

This book introduces and explains a set of principles that come out of an extensive research project conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) on managing and leading across generations. Why principles? Because they are the easiest and most intuitive way to explain thousands of results from our research. (We presume you don't *really* want to read through a 25-page spreadsheet that contains all the statistical results.)

But you should know that we were not in search of principles per se when we began our research. We were instead driven simply to explore the working world in search of answers to a number of questions our clients had asked, including these:

What do we need to do to retain younger employees?

Why is there so much conflict among the generations?

Why do older employees hate change so much?

What do younger people want to learn?

Do younger people want all development through their computers?

Why do younger people dress so informally at work?

What can we do about the feeling of entitlement among younger employees?

What can we do about the feeling of entitlement among older employees?

Why are younger people so disrespectful, and what can we do to fix the problem?

Why are younger people so disloyal?

Do older people have any interest in learning?

Why don't our employees trust us? Is it a generational thing?

Who wants coaching?

What do younger people want in their leaders?

As it turned out, the answers to these questions—and dozens more—can be effectively summed up by ten principles that apply across all generations. And, as the research revealed, dealing effectively with people of other generations can be pretty straightforward.

In all matters of opinion and science . . . the difference between men is . . . oftener found to lie in generals than in particulars, and to be less in reality than in appearance. An explanation of the terms commonly ends the controversy, and the disputants are surprised to find that they had been quarreling, while at the bottom they agreed in their judgement.

—DAVID HUME (1711–1766), *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, 1875

So this book explains (when possible) what you can do to retire the generation gap and why you should. In each chapter, you'll find

- A description of the issue
- A description of our research on the issue
- The principal conclusion of the research expressed as a principle
- Our best take on how to apply the principle to make cross-generational work life easier for you

By the end you should know what your employees and colleagues at work are really saying when they cry “Generation gap!” and what you can do to “retire the gap” so you can address the real issues.

We don't promise that you're going to like everything we say—in fact we're sure that just about everyone is going to object to something in this book. But when we say things that offend you, please understand that it is not our intention to offend; we are simply trying to understand how one part of the world works, and good science sometimes leads to unexpected—and sometimes uncomfortable—conclusions.

About the Research

When you're reading about the conclusions of any research project, it is often difficult to know what you should believe and what you shouldn't.

There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.

—ATTRIBUTED BY MARK TWAIN TO DISRAELI

Sometimes it is nearly impossible to tell when people are manipulating data to sell their theory (or their product or their political agenda). Therefore, we promise the following:

- Our results are as accurate as we can possibly make them; we aren't playing games with the statistics to support a particular position. If the data had shown that older people are fossilized and younger people are slackers, we would have reported that result.
- Our conclusions are drawn from our best understanding of the results as a whole. We aren't taking one result in isolation and building a whole theory around it.
- Our recommendations are based on our best understanding of the results and include knowledge gleaned from many other researchers, consultants, and organizational scientists.
- The quotations we use are entirely accurate and are drawn from our database. We have not altered the quotations for effect, though we have corrected spelling when the original was difficult to read.
- The stories we use are *all* true. We couldn't believe that people would actually do some of these things, but they did.

We also need to take some time to tell you about the people who participated in this survey, because they are not representative of everyone everywhere in the United States. Understanding who filled out the survey will help you understand how far you can generalize the results, so please bear with us for the next few pages.

As of the publication of this book, more than 5,800 people have participated in this research. Of that number, 3,200 who were both born in and are currently living in the United States were included in the research for this book. Those who either were born outside or are currently living outside the United States (the other 2,600) were not included because explaining every similarity and difference of generations for the rest of the world in addition to the United States would have made the book far too long. We may be using their data for another book in the future.

Although the database comprises 3,200 respondents, not every one of those individuals filled out every part of the survey. The results we report are based on the total number of people who responded to an item (not necessarily the total 3,200). For example, only 2,732 people responded to the question about retention, so those results are based on 2,732 respondents. Also, we didn't ask specific questions about change or respect in the workplace, so the

results in the corresponding chapters are based on the comments of those people who volunteered information on those topics—a small subset of the total number of respondents. Nonetheless, we have reported only those results for which we believe we have ample evidence.

People began filling out the survey in 2000, and we stopped adding people to the database for this book in 2005. (An interesting aside: we have been unable to find any differences in responses between the people who filled out the survey before the events of September 11, 2001, and those who did so after.)

People who filled out the survey were born between 1925 and 1986. As of this writing, they are between the ages of 19 and 80. We assigned them (based on birth year) to a generation with this terminology and distribution:

<i>Generation</i>	<i>Percentage of Survey Participants</i>	<i>Description</i>
Silents (b. 1925–1945)	7.5	This group is called the Silent Generation because it tends to be quieter than the Baby Boomers and isn't discussed as much, but if you look at the organizations controlled by people in this age range, you will see how powerful the members of this generation are.
Early Boomers (b. 1946–1954)	27.9	These were the children born following World War II. There was a massive increase in the birth rate, known as the Baby Boom, that began shortly after the end of the war.
Late Boomers (b. 1955–1963)	29	This is the second half of the Baby Boom.
Early Xers (b. 1964–1976)	30.1	The group identified as Gen X began when the birth rate decreased after the end of the Baby Boom. The term <i>Generation X</i> became widespread

after the publication in 1991 of Douglas Coupland's book of the same name. Coupland's book followed Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson's 1964 novel, also titled *Generation X*, which described the generation of people who would come of age at the end of the 20th century as apathetic and materialistic.

Late Xers 5.5 This group includes the youngest
(b. 1977–1986) part of Generation X.

People who filled out the survey came to us from a variety of places and types of companies, and they participated for a variety of reasons:

- Their organizations agreed to participate.
- They saw us speak about the subject and wanted to find out what was going on in the research.
- It was part of the work required before they came to a CCL program.
- They read about the research in a news article and wanted to put their two cents in.

We welcomed everyone who wanted to participate; all a person needed in order to become part of the research was a password from one of the research team, and we gave these out freely.

Of these 3,200 respondents, 41% were men, and 59% were women. Why so many women? Because we had a large sample from nonprofits, and more women worked in the nonprofits than worked in the for-profits. And no, there were no significant differences between for-profits and nonprofits regarding anything we'll be discussing.

Of the people who identified themselves by race, 88% self-identified as white, 6% as black, 1% as Asian, 2% as multiracial, and 3% as other. Why did we choose these categories instead of the ones that are used more commonly to describe race in the United States? Because we were conducting the study simultaneously on other continents, and we had to use racial categories that

were as applicable in Timbuktu and Thailand as they were in Topeka; the racial categories generally used inside the United States are not commonly understood outside the country. Why were there so few nonwhites who participated? We have no concrete explanation, but we guess it is because the organizations that participated did not have a large percentage of nonwhites at the levels in the organization that participated. Where we were able to, we ran analyses looking for differences by race, but there weren't any of note.

Figures I.1, I.2, I.3, and I.4 illustrate other characteristics of the survey respondents. In addition to the information provided in the figures, 60% of the respondents had children, and 82% owned their own homes.

So, is our sample representative of everyone everywhere? Of course not. How about everyone in the United States? Again no. The participants are an excellent sample of what they are a sample of: mostly people working in larger organizations (both for-profits and nonprofits), with educational levels higher than the average of the general population, who are willing to spend their energy—and often their own time—pursuing free personal development that can help them in their careers.

Figure I.1. Level of Education Reported by Survey Respondents.

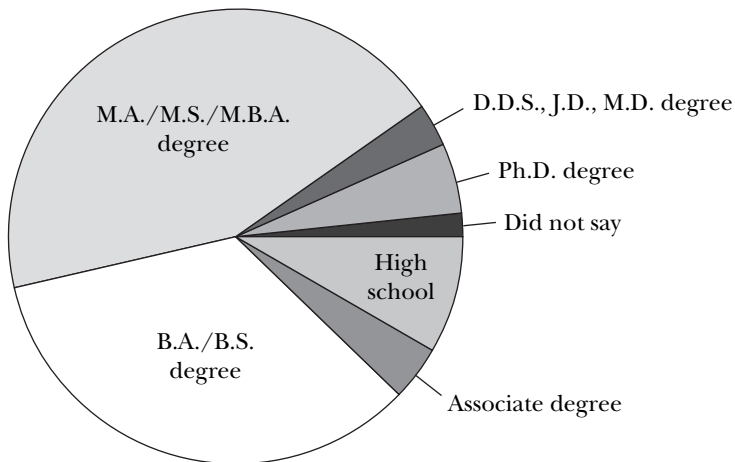


Figure I.2. Management Responsibility Reported by Survey Respondents.

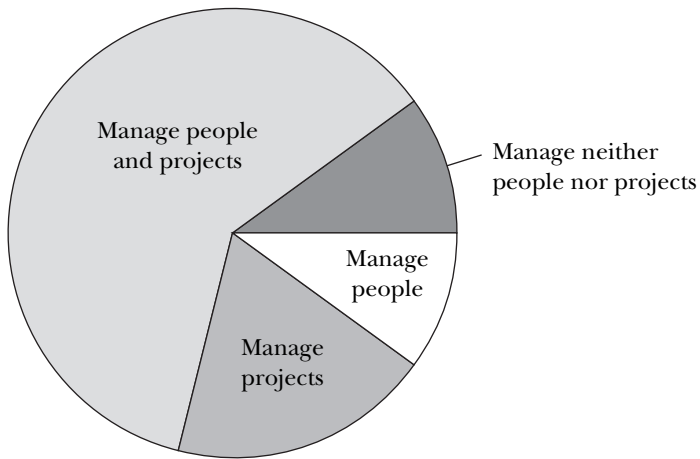


Figure I.3. Time Spent in Management Reported by Survey Respondents.

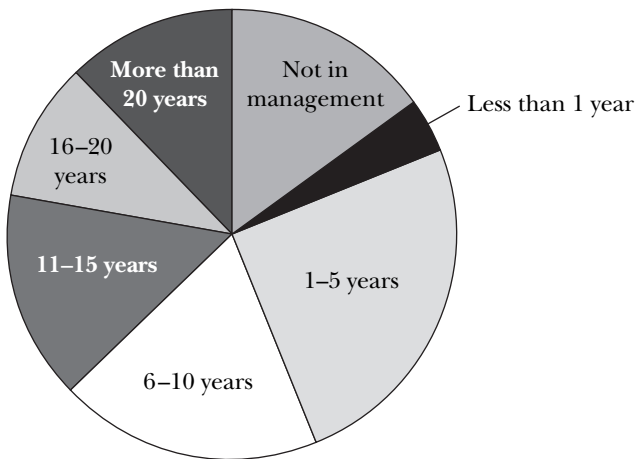
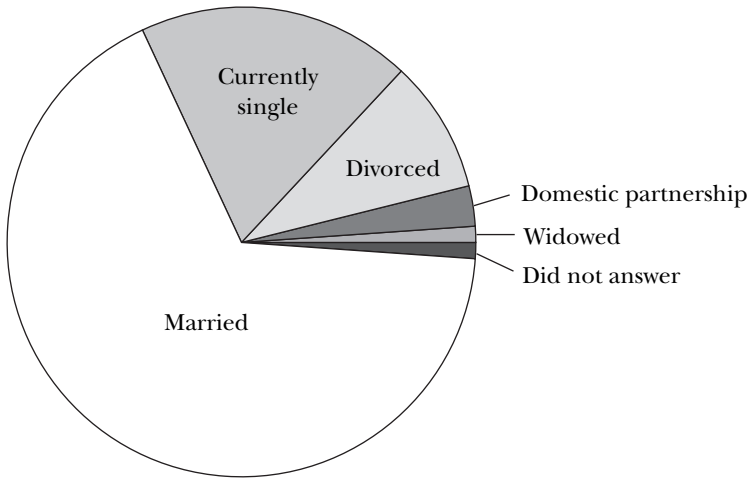


Figure I.4. Survey Respondents' Marital Status.

Why No Generalizations Are True, Including This One

All generalizations are dangerous, even this one.

—ALEXANDRE DUMAS, 1824–1895

Now that you know who participated in this study, it is important to explain that no matter how many people you survey or how good your statistics are, there are always going to be some people who don't fit the general description. In other words, *no principles are always true, including the ones you will read about in this book.*

The easiest way to think about this is in terms of distributions, and an example. The generalization: men are taller than women. Most people would agree that men are, on average, taller than women. Is every man taller than every woman? No. Is every man taller than most women? No. Are some women taller than most men? Yes. We can almost always think of some individual who does not fit the generalization, but that doesn't mean the generalization is nonsense. What it does mean is that any generalization that asserts it is correct every time for every person everywhere is definitely

incorrect. (Except that all people breathe air . . . thus no generalizations are true, even the generalization that no generalizations are true!)

One of the issues with social science research is that we can almost never make statements that are hard-and-fast “rules” the way hard scientists can. Hard scientists have basic rules of science that work every time—and they know that on the rare occasions that the rules don’t work, either something new has been discovered or the person running the experiment messed up. To take a standard example from chemistry, if you burn 1,000 grams of methane (natural gas), you’ll get 2,743 grams of carbon dioxide and 2,246 grams of water every time you do it—unless the sample is contaminated. Our confidence isn’t quite as high in social science because people are much less predictable than chemicals in a beaker, and we can’t predict with a greater than 99% level of certainty what any individual is going to do or know or believe.

What that means from a practical perspective is that there are always people who are exceptions to the standard pattern; there are always a few men who are shorter than almost all women, and a few women who are taller than almost all men. So what happens is that as you do this type of research, you automatically add in “weasel words” almost every other sentence because you understand that what you are saying, though true on average, is not true for everybody everywhere. And you know that if you don’t insert caveats constantly, someone is going to convert an unweaseled statement into a universal truth.

So in an attempt to avoid (1) readers’ taking anything said in this book as absolutely true of every person in a particular category, and (2) having to put conditional statements around every comment we make in this book (which would be as tedious to read as it would be to write), let me say the following now, and please insert it (mentally) every time you see a generalization or principle:

**This is true for many—perhaps most—people,
under many—perhaps most—circumstances,
but it isn’t true for everyone, everywhere,
in every circumstance.
And just because we can all think of someone
who doesn’t fit perfectly with this explanation
doesn’t invalidate the principle.**

Before You Proceed . . .

This book presents ten principles. But in the course of our research, we also discovered an underlying theme that informs each and every principle we'll present. This theme doesn't spring from any individual piece of data we collected; rather, it becomes clear when you look at the pattern of results as a whole. It is the most parsimonious explanation for the generational conflict we hear people talk about and see at work. We alluded to it earlier; here we'll describe it so that you can identify it more clearly when reading through the principles:

**Most intergenerational conflict shares
a common point of origin: the issue of
clout—who has it, who wants it.**

As we were doing our research, it became clear that fundamentally, generational conflict and comments about unacceptable behavior on the part of another generation often stem from a particular group's notion that it gets to make the rules and that the other group has to follow these rules. If the rules are being challenged, so too is the superior position and stature of the people who believe they get to make the rules that others then have to follow.

Our research revealed that in the U.S. workplace, older people generally think they should get to make the rules, and they think that the younger people should follow their rules. No surprises there. For example, people often complain about how some younger person wears casual clothes to work. The criticism is that the clothes are "inappropriate" or "unprofessional." In whose opinion? Obviously in the opinion of the people who are doing the criticizing. Have you ever noticed people seldom talk about how odd the workplace behavior of the older generation is in comparison with the younger generation? What would happen if masses of people in their 50s wore jeans and T-shirts to work? Would it suddenly become acceptable, or would the people in their 20s start complaining about the "unprofessional" attire? It is possible, but it isn't likely. Though younger people have opinions about other generations and make negative comments about older people, the behavior the older generation accepts is considered the standard. So younger people's comments (in the example above) about the

older people's "unprofessional" attire would be seen as illegitimate griping and a grab for control rather than as legitimate complaints about inappropriate workplace behavior.

In another example, when does conflict between parent and child stop being attributed to typical disagreements that any people have when living in close quarters, and start being attributed to a generation gap? The gap appears when the children (typically teenagers) begin to see themselves as having opinions that are different from those of their parents but no less valid just because they are younger. In essence, the generation gap appears when the younger people stop accepting everything the older group tells them and starts believing that their own opinions, perspectives, and attitudes have validity equal to those of their elders. The result of this belief is that the generation gap exists only when the younger generation ceases to follow the rules set down by the older generation. As long as the younger generation complies, no gap exists.

But (theoretically) everyone in the workplace is an adult who is being paid to do a job and is therefore equal except for positional authority assigned by the organization (that is, his or her level in the organization). But, as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some people believe they are more equal than others, and they use what attributes they have (for example, age, political acumen, organizational tenure) to increase their clout within the organization. As organizations increasingly promote younger people over older people (thus increasing the positional power of the younger people), older people naturally work to maintain the balance of power—in their favor—by using their greater age and experience. One way they do this is to comment negatively about the bad behavior of younger people (thus making specific individuals look bad by association). Another way they do this is to use the behavior of their own generation as the model for appropriate behavior (thus making themselves look good by association).

People of the older generation also maintain their clout by emphasizing the value of their experience. Experience is perceived both by people and by organizations as valuable because it is believed to be synonymous with knowledge. But it isn't. Now, don't misunderstand us—we think experience is critically important. We also think that on average, people with more experience (older people)

know more than do people with less experience (younger people). However, *what is important about experience is how one processes it and what knowledge one gains from it, not just having it.* Just having existed through experiences doesn't make someone more knowledgeable or more successful.

For example, organizations have been trying to figure out for decades what makes a person successful as an expatriate. One of the most interesting findings from all the research on expatriates is that past experience as an expatriate is not a good predictor of future success as an expatriate. Success actually depends on how well the individual processed the experience and how much he or she learned from it. So experience is important, but only in how much is learned from it—and that skill is not related to age.

Similarly, younger people criticize older ones for being resistant to new ideas or unwilling to embrace technology. “The number of gray cells goes down as the number of gray hairs goes up,” some say. Others claim that older people are “out of touch” (and therefore less attuned to the client). Although the argument is about trying new things rather than about experience, what underlies the criticism is still the desire to increase clout.

Thus the generation gap enters the workplace, getting blamed for conflicts that really have nothing to do with fundamental generational differences (bad behavior exists in people of *all* ages) and everything to do with the natural desire of older people to maintain their clout and the desire of younger people to increase their clout.

So as you read the chapters that follow, and as you consider the conflicts that arise between people of different generations in the course of your work, take the time to consider the clout factor. Often the accusatory language you hear directed at one generation or another has its roots in broader issues of confidence and security. Often the complaints about “not being taken seriously” or about “behaving as if they’re entitled” (whether directed at the young or the old) are actually masking fear of potential loss of clout, *not* reflecting significant fundamental differences among the generations.

Principle 1

All Generations Have Similar Values; They Just Express Them Differently

Many people talk about enormous differences in values between older and younger people as if these differences were an established fact. They say things like

- The younger generation has no values.
- The current lack of values among young people in the workplace is contributing to the general decline of organizations.
- The value system is different than it used to be.

In fact, when we were formulating our research plans, we heard people say such things so often—and with more conviction than evidence—that we set up a line of inquiry just about values.

The idea that generations have fundamentally different values is obviously a commonly held belief. But, we asked ourselves, is it true? Are there significant values differences among the generations? If there are, what are those differences? And if there aren't major differences, what is causing the "generational values gap" at work?

Research

To evaluate what values people said were most important to them, we set up a computer program that presented people with 40 values in such a way that they had to prioritize some values over others.