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Younger Bosses Managing Older Employees

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By Jo Renee Fine

Question: Young managers who supervise older employees might find themselves facing major challenges. What work style changes can younger managers make to improve their interaction with their older employees, and how can older employees work more effectively with younger managers?

Answer: The answer depends on the individuals and the specific situation. For example, does the older employee believe he or she should be the manager? Is the younger manager a good communicator and leader? What are the conflicts about?

Conflicts between older employees and younger bosses might not have anything to do with intergenerational differences, but it is important to understand some generalities about each generation when evaluating the source of any such conflict.

For example, people born before 1945 (often known as the Great Generation) may be more conservative and less comfortable using computers. Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) tend to be more comfortable with technology. Both groups tend to value punctuality and behaving in a way that they perceive as "professional," and may hold strong opinions about the way employees should dress and communicate.

Those from the Great Generation, and many Boomers, might assume that age ensures seniority, even though that is not necessarily the case in today's work environment. As such, older employees may feel they aren't getting the respect or the perks they deserve. They may even feel, or convey an impression, that they know more than the younger generations.

Younger employees aren't brought up with the age = respect formula. They value skill, talent and character—but don't necessarily assume that such characteristics are associated with age.

Younger employees may have a completely different definition of what it means to be professional— one that focuses on the work that gets produced rather than the behavior exhibited in the office. Gen X (those born 1965 to 1980) tends to be very comfortable with technology, to value independence, and to challenge authority. And the Millennials (also known as Gen Y and born after 1980) are so used to technology that they may not understand how anyone could have trouble with it.

Given these general differences which may exist between colleagues in a workplace, there is plenty of opportunity for misunderstanding. For example, Joe Younger might find Sally Older too rigid, and might think her lack of ease with technology indicates a lack of intelligence or stubbornness. In contrast, Sally Older may find Joe Younger too casual and may be annoyed that she has to report to someone the age of one of her children. She also may think that she is not getting enough acknowledgment for her years of experience.


When conflict occurs between a younger boss and older employee, the first step is to talk to the parties involved and to identify the specific issues. A discussion of generational differences might help the individuals clarify their situation.

The individuals should be guided toward treating each other with respect – but only after each person is encouraged to describe the behaviors they believe demonstrate respect since these may differ considerably by generation. A good way to start is to ask them to make a commitment to listen to each other without interrupting. The use of simple manners, such as "please" and "thank you" is equally important.


Joe Younger should be reminded to make sure to let Sally Older know when he's pleased with her work. He should also, as much as possible, treat her as a colleague rather than a subordinate, asking for her opinion and letting her decide how to do the work she is assigned. And Sally Older should remind herself that Joe Younger is her boss and that it is appropriate for her to treat him as such.

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