

Embracing the Changing Work Landscape

By Denise Moody and Rosemary Madnick



Research administration is a complex career where we are continuously facing new federal regulations and forced to develop, communicate, manage, and enforce institutional policies with many internal and external constituents to include faculty, researchers, central and department administrators, peer institutional collaborators, sponsors, agencies, and auditors. Leaders in research administration face further challenges in hiring and development of staff, minimizing turnover, decreasing burden, and managing people. The diversity of generations in our current workforce and reflected in most research administration offices adds a further layer of complexity that must always be considered when juggling the regulations, policies, people, systems, and organizational structures. There is value each generation brings to the workforce. The core similarity across all generations is respect and trust. Leaders need to be credible and trust the people they work with directly. There is an opportunity for leadership to model the way and embrace the changing landscape.

Sharing an Appreciation for the Changing Work Landscape

For the first time in history, there are four generations in the workplace, each one bringing its own set of core values that shape how work is viewed and approached. Stevenson breaks down the four generational groupings of employees in the workplace and in the higher education classroom as follows (2014):

- **The Traditional Generation (born pre-1945; 8% of the workforce)** are considered loyal and dependable both to their supervisors as well as to the organization. They are described as appreciating formality and preferring a top down chain of command, and they are in favor of making decisions based on what was done in the past. Their core values include respect for authority, conforming and being disciplined. As a result, they are characterized as dedicated, risk adverse, least likely to welcome change in a work environment and believe hard work and sacrifice are the price to pay for success.
- **Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964; 30% of the workforce)** are competitive, prioritize work over personal life, and prefer recognition for their accomplishments. Baby Boomers are considered the workaholics and comprise the majority of the workforce. Their core values include optimism and involvement.
- **Generation X (born 1965-1980; 17% of the workforce)** are confident and self-reliant, comfortable with technology, and aspire to achieve work and life balance. Gen X'ers are typically not dedicated to

any single organization and will likely seek change and transition more often. Their core values are skepticism, fun and informality.

- **Generation Y or Millennials (born 1981-1995; 25% of the workforce)** are optimistic, entrepreneurial, and are constantly seeking to develop themselves professionally. Gen Y'ers are team-oriented, goal-oriented, and willing to work hard. Their core values include realism, confidence, extreme fun, and social.

The American Management Association provides some overall cross-generational leadership strategies that include reenergizing compensation and benefits, expanding communication strategies, making mentoring constant, and developing strategies to ensure knowledge transfer and organizational memory are captured (2014).

Leveraging Leadership Across Generations through the 3 C's

Creating an environment where multi-generations can function is essential. Leadership should leverage what each generation has to contribute in order to impact employee morale and productivity. Munro states that our goal should be to “make every communication an opportunity for a powerful connection” through “curiosity, courageousness, and cultivating leadership” (2015).

Curiosity – Rather than passing judgment or making assumptions on a colleague who might be from a different generation, approach everyone with an open mind and focus on the ultimate goal of the task at-hand. Team members should be interested in understanding the strengths all generations can bring to the table. It's up to each of us to find commonality from multiple perspectives and approaches in order to achieve the ultimate goal, whether the task might be a new system implementation, policy development, toolkits, or process checklists. For instance, a Gen X'er might make the assumption that a Traditionalist is less comfortable with a systems project. However, a Traditionalist might have historical perspective and a broad knowledge of what has or hasn't worked from the many years of experience under their belt. Baby Boomers may be better able to explain the “Why” when it comes to teaching regulations, but a Gen Y'er may be better able to explain the “Why” in training material that would be easily understood by fellow Gen Y'er.

Courageousness – If we expect colleagues not to pass judgement based on the perceived generational stereotype, then we must have the



Baby Boomers

Generation X

Generation Y or Millennials

courage to be as transparent with each other as possible. Everyone has some area in which they can contribute. However, one should feel comfortable letting their team members and leaders understand what tasks they can most likely be successful in. As leaders, we should be mindful of each team member's strengths as well as their areas in which they are not as comfortable. Assignments can be given jointly in order that balance is achieved. For example, you may partner a Traditionalist who is uncomfortable with systems with a Gen X'er who is comfortable with systems on the same implementation project. The Traditionalist will know what specifications need to be included in the system based on the regulations, and the Gen X'er can help translate that to systems capabilities and lingo that developers might understand.

Cultivating Leadership – Leaders need to ensure everyone understands the ultimate goal and foster “curiosity and courageousness” with their staff. When interviewing for new positions, it is important to pull out strengths and not pass judgement or make assumptions based on the candidate's generation. Teams should be built in order that everyone brings different strengths that are all needed. Leaders should encourage differences, whether they come from multi-generational representation and/or natural personality traits. Some of the best teams have a person from every generation, and some of the best employees might have traits that have nothing to do with the generational stereotype.

“Connection Killers”

Munro states that these “connection killers” should be avoided by both leaders and colleagues (2015):

Failure to value everyone – As part of cultivating leadership and serving as the example, leaders should support and value everyone in the group. This seems so simple, but often we find it is easier to show favor to those members who are most like us in both generational backgrounds as well as personalities. Leadership should appreciate and pull out strengths from everyone continuously. Rath and Conchie state that “If you spend your life trying to be good at everything, you will never be great at anything... this approach inadvertently breeds mediocrity” (2008). A well-rounded team with multiple strengths and skillsets, which can come from cross-generational members, is optimal.

Letting ego seize center stage – As leaders, we need to step aside at times and avoid “upstaging others”, even if unintentional. This approach will not allow members to be “curious and courageous”, so no one benefits from understanding and appreciating everyone's strengths.

Making assumptions – The opposite of being curious would be to pass judgement and make assumptions. This is sometimes unavoidable, but if we keep ourselves in check, we can improve this biasness.

In conclusion, although there might be generational conflicts in the workplace, it is important to understand that when leading a diverse group, it is helpful to look past the stereotypes. Miller provides a perfect summary for leaders to consider in this changing landscape (2013):

Appreciate the differences between the generations.

Acknowledge diverse perspectives on issues.

Arbitrate when you find yourself working across generational lines.

Adapt your style as needed to accomplish the goals of the organizations. ■

References

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Denise Moody is the Senior Director of Research Compliance in Harvard University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences Research Administration Services overseeing IRB, IACUC, and COI. She is currently serving as the NCURA National Secretary, member of regional and national program committees, magazine contributing editor, and a 2007 LDI graduate. She can be reached at denisemoody@fas.harvard.edu



Rosemary Madnick is the Executive Director of Grants and Contracts Administration for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. As the Executive Director, she oversees the pre and post award functions for the University. Rosemary is actively involved in NCURA both at the regional and national level. She has served in a number of capacities including NCURA Peer Reviewer, 2012 Region VI Chair, and NLDC. She is a graduate of NCURA's Leadership Development Institute and the Executive Leadership Program. She can be reached at rmadnick@alaska.edu