

1 The Generations at Work in Schools

Every few hundred years in Western history . . . we cross a “divide.” Within a few short years, society rearranges itself—its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structure, its arts, its key institutions.

—Peter Drucker

From bowties and brooches to tank tops and tattoos, the canvas of the modern schoolhouse is changing. And it's not just students who look and act differently nowadays. Teachers, administrators, and parents are morphing too. Enter a campus and you might find faculty members showing off their latest nose piercings, while their ponytailed principal cruises the corridors in his Dockers and polo shirt. As older employees huddle in the staff lounge lamenting about how “things ain't what they used to be,” the twenty-something parent volunteer making copies in the workroom hardly bats an eye.

According to the bestselling book *Generations at Work* (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000), the American workforce has never been so diverse, yet so uniquely singular. No other country in the world can boast such a rich blend of race, gender, ethnicity, and age in its workplace. One of the most significant, and potentially problematic, effects of such diversity is the growing generational infusion that brings old, young, and in-betweens together in the same employment venue. Whether by choice or necessity, senior teachers are postponing retirement while those graduating from college are launching their careers. For school systems, a multigenerational workforce can be both a blessing and a curse.

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THE PERFECT STORM

As the end of the twentieth century drew near, teachers and administrators found themselves whirling inside the vortex of shifting ideology. Between 1992 and 1999, the educational community was tossed around from autonomy to accountability, from restructuring to reform, from socialization to standards, from teaching to testing, from menus to mandates, and from *every child happy* to *every child a reader*. No wonder educators cruised into the millennium feeling a bit dizzy.

Confusion in California, for example, puts the dilemma into perspective. In July 1996 the state legislature poured \$771 million into schools to lower class size in grades K–3 (CSR Research Consortium, 2002). This massive reform was tied to ten reading initiatives and 22 other programs all launched around the same time. Elementary teachers quickly became overwhelmed. Depending on their generational rank, these schoolhouse sailors either (a) decided “this too shall pass” and stayed below deck, (b) spent 12 hours a day in the eye of the storm trying to batten down their curriculum, or (c) jumped ship.

Although there is general consensus among the educational community that the shift from teaching to learning is a good thing, theories abound as to the best way to tackle such a lofty endeavor. Without looking more closely at the cross-age profile inside schools, it may be difficult to achieve and sustain coalescence—especially during the stormy seas ahead. Bridging the gap and managing the friction means employee wants, needs, hopes, and fears have to be noticed and appreciated.

WHO'S WHO? A SNAPSHOT OF FOUR LIVING GENERATIONS

Table 1.1 Who's Who? A Snapshot of Four Living Generations

<i>Generation/ Age Span</i>	<i>General Characteristics</i>	<i>Defining Moments/Cultural Icons</i>
Veterans (born 1922–1943) 38 million Americans	Formed worldview during hard times of Depression and WWII Built much of the nation's infrastructure Believe in duty before pleasure Spend conservatively Embrace values that speak to family, home, patriotism	The Great Depression Bombing of Pearl Harbor The Golden Era of Radio Superman FDR, Patton, Eisenhower

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<i>Generation/ Age Span</i>	<i>General Characteristics</i>	<i>Defining Moments/Cultural Icons</i>
Baby Boomers (born 1944–1960) 64 million Americans	Grew up in optimistic times of economic expansion Think of themselves as “cool” and “stars of the show” Covet status and power; driven to succeed Are service oriented Tend to be competitive because of their group size Pursue own gratification, often at a price to themselves and their families	Vietnam War Assassinations Civil rights movement Women's lib The peace sign <i>Captain Kangaroo</i> The Beatles
Generation X (born 1960–1980) 39 million Americans	Raised in an era of soaring divorce rates, struggling economy, and fallen heroes Are self-reliant and skeptical of authority Seek sense of family through network of friends and work relationships Maintain nontraditional orientation of time and space Eschew being labeled in any way, shape, or form	Microwaves, computer games, VCRs Nixon resignation MTV AIDS Extreme sports <i>The Simpsons</i>
Millennials (born 1980–2000) 79 million Americans	Feel wanted and indulged by parents Lead busy, overplanned lives Embrace core values similar to Veterans—optimism, civic duty, confidence, morality Are well mannered and polite Able to use technology in unforeseen ways	9-11 Columbine The Internet X Games Reality TV The Olson twins

SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Census Bureau, 2004; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000.

The current public school workforce comprises four distinct groups: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules about where one generation ends and another begins, demographers such as Neil Howe and William Strauss, who have studied generations dating back to the colonial period, note that specific life events tie a group together through shared experiences, hardships, social norms, and turning points. These common threads create self-sustaining links that cause people of a given era to maintain similar attitudes, ambitions, and synergy. Consider the profile of Veteran superintendents as a case in point. In their minds, age correlates with rank and status in the organization. Employees move up the ladder one rung at a time through perseverance, loyalty, and hard work. Older leaders tend to be formal, steeped in tradition, and have difficulty with change or ambiguity.

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Generation X, on the other hand, came of age in times of corporate downsizing, a struggling economy, and an explosion of technology that allowed work to be done differently. Self-reliance, an impatience for bureaucracy, and the ability to change directions on a dime can make them seem irreverent to a Veteran. Generation X is not interested in working around the clock or keeping score of who has paid their dues. While a Veteran might ask, “How did he become a superintendent at age 35? He’s just a boy!” the thirty-something superintendent is likely to respond, “Send me an e-mail if you have a concern. And, take a little time off if the pressure is getting to you.”

Today’s living generations span roughly 80 years. People born within the same general timeframe—about every 18 to 25 years—are referred to as a *cohort* (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Key life experiences from entering school, reaching puberty, graduating from high school, starting work, getting married, and having children define the core beliefs among each cohort. Although every human being has his or her own unique personality, many people underestimate how similar they are to their generational counterparts. Despite one’s race, gender, socioeconomic status, and moral or religious views, the music, politics, heroes, headlines, scandals, and world events shared by an age group cannot be weaned from one’s system. No matter how different individuals may be in mind, body, or spirit, they are age-bound in perceptions, passions, and pleasures. Common exposure breeds common thoughts.

To get a glimpse of who’s who, let’s examine the generational landscape of today’s workplace:

Veterans (born before 1943): Described by Tom Brokaw as “the greatest generation,” this cohort won a world war, rebuilt the nation’s economy after a debilitating Depression, sent a man to the moon, and coined the phrase *American values*. Veterans come from a mold of honor and dedication. If they commit to something, you can take their word to the bank.

Throughout their formative years, Veterans had to make do or go without. After decades of frugality, they’ve amassed a whopping 75 percent of the financial assets in the United States (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Despite entering their golden years with money to burn, Matures—as they are sometimes called—think nothing of driving across town to save ten cents on a gallon of gasoline. If you remember VJ Day, you are probably a Veteran.

Largely responsible for creating the infrastructure of American schools, Veterans are convinced that students need to be taught in a disciplined, orderly, and standardized fashion. To them, the hierarchical nature of the military and manufacturing—with a strong leader in charge—made perfectly good sense in schools too. Careful spending is another Veteran

trademark. If you don't believe it, check out the supply cabinet of your oldest teacher or peruse the end-of-year carryover of your most senior principal. After all, one never knows when eight staplers or thousands of unencumbered dollars might come in handy.

Baby Boomers (born 1944 to 1960): The post-WWII baby boom era marked a reversal in the declining population trend that had stymied American growth for decades. Baby Boomers were the first generation in which child rearing was considered a pleasure rather than an economic or biological reality. Not only were these babies wanted, Dr. Spock implored parents to love and cherish them. His book instructed adults to go light on punishment and heavy on reason, with the main objective to make children happy.

Such overindulgence likely explains Baby Boomer patterns of excess, self-absorption, and insistence on getting their way. As trendsetters, Baby Boomers have made turning 50 fashionable and transformed fitness, spirituality, and cosmetic surgery into billion dollar industries. From Bill Clinton, to Martha Stewart, to Madonna, their ability to reinvent themselves is legendary.

Because there were so many of them, Baby Boomers were the first group of school-aged children to be graded on cooperation and "shares materials with classmates" (Raines, 1997, p. 27). Hence, teamwork is in their blood. They also grew up being told, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but instead what you can do for your country." As a result, these overachievers devised the 60-hour workweek with the hope that a better life was just around the corner. Those who recall the day President Kennedy was shot are likely to be members of the Baby Boom generation.

Many school systems are managed by Baby Boomer principals and superintendents, which helps to explain why reforms and innovations never cease. This is the cohort that has a hard time saying no and can't quite grasp the concept that less is more. Baby Boomers remain the dominant force in education today, first, because of their sheer size and second, because they are not all that anxious to retire. Their influence over what happens in schools is expected to continue for several more years.

Generation X (born 1960 to 1980): Sometimes thought of as detached, morose, and unmotivated, Generation X has had a tough go of things. Conceived in the shadow of the Baby Boomers, this smaller cohort has struggled to compete. Consequently, their psyche is shaped by a survivor mentality. They survived the divorce of their parents. They survived joint custody and life as latchkey kids. They survived college on student loans and Top Ramen. They survived oil embargos, real estate plunges, and stock market crashes. And they continue to survive the roller coaster ride of dot.com meltdowns and outsourcing.

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While the parents and grandparents of Generation X stuck with the same employer for most of their career, the average tenure for today's 25- to 34-year-old is 2.9 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004, September 21). At this rate, an "Xer" could change jobs as many as ten times before retirement. Such overexposure to hard knocks puts their distrust of authority and disdain for bureaucracy into perspective. As a cohort, they have lower-than-average expectations of what work can offer and aren't motivated by rewards that require perseverance or longevity. If you watched the *Challenger* disaster on a classroom TV, odds are good you belong to Generation X—although you dislike being labeled or lumped in with any mainstream group whatsoever.

What Generation X lacks in loyalty, they more than make up for in technical savvy and talent. Left alone to hook up their Atari and manipulate the microwave, this is the ingenious generation of eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, Larry Page and Sergey Brin of Google fame, and Michael Dell of Dell Computers. Their nontraditional approach to solving problems is an asset, especially in places such as schools, where it took twenty years to move the overhead projector from the bowling alley into the classroom. Although they don't always buy into the teamwork manifesto of their Boomer bosses, they are able to work on teams if given the discretion to complete tasks, make decisions, and implement solutions their own way.

Millennials (born 1980 to 2000): Also referred to as Generation Y, Echo Boomers, and Nexters, Millennials are expected to surpass Baby Boomers in size and achievement. Unrivaled as a consumer group, they average \$100 a week in disposable income and influence \$50 billion in annual family purchases (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). In 1999, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that 11 percent of the nation's 12- to 17-year-olds owned their own stock (Howe & Strauss, 2000). With unbridled spending power, America's youth exude a level of sophistication and tenacity that is sure to set any workplace on fire.

Adults are often surprised to learn that Millennials tend to subscribe to a strict moral code in which abstinence and zero tolerance hold sway. Most American teens actually enjoy spending time with their family and have glommed on to many of the same civic values embraced by the Veteran generation. Children who have the Columbine shootings and the morning of September 11 firmly etched into their young memories are Millennials.

With unlimited technology connecting them to people and places around the globe, today's youth have done and seen more than their parents or grandparents did in an entire lifetime. Thought to be the most open-minded generation in modern history, Millennials embrace group dating, biracial friendships, and study-abroad programs with a nonchalance that makes them color blind.

As the oldest Millennials graduate from high school and complete college, they are blossoming at a time when jobs are fairly abundant. For twenty-somethings arriving in our classrooms as the newest teachers, principals should be ready to satisfy their craving for ongoing learning experiences, include them in decisions, and assign them to supportive teams.

As with any label or generalization, not all peer groups fit into the same box. Certainly, stereotypes can interfere with performance and cause resentment. Therefore, a commonsense approach is necessary when hiring, mentoring, directing, or evaluating employees based on their generational coding. Knowing the underpinnings that bind colleagues together or set them apart is beneficial in establishing collaborative teams, building capacity, and bringing out the best in people.

Table 1.2, “The Generational Footprint of a Workplace,” depicts the manner in which the different age groups perform on the job, integrate into teams, and lead others. As the portrait of each cadre unfolds, school leaders can hone in on strengths, make weaknesses irrelevant, and foster greater appreciation for diversity. Without such awareness or sensitivity, it is impossible to cultivate professional learning communities that are results based and improvement driven.

Table 1.2 The Generational Footprint of a Workplace

<i>Generation/ Age Span</i>	<i>How They Perform on the Job</i>	<i>How They Integrate on Teams</i>	<i>How They Lead Others</i>
Veterans Age Span 63 and older	Driven by rules and order Strive to uphold culture and traditions Able to leave work at work Need more time for orientation Find technology intimidating	Are okay with the power of collective action, as long as a central leader is in charge Respect experience Want to know where they stand and what's expected of them Eager to conform to group roles	Value dedication and loyalty Equate age with status/power Impose top-down structures Make most decisions themselves Keep work and personal life separate View change as disruptive and undesirable
Baby Boomers Age Span 45 to 62	Have a strong need to prove themselves to others May manipulate rules to meet own needs	Enjoy and value teamwork Expect group to stick to the schedule and agenda	Shy away from conflict Tend to lead through consensus Generally apply a participatory

(Continued)

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Table 1.2 (Continued)

<i>Generation/ Age Span</i>	<i>How They Perform on the Job</i>	<i>How They Integrate on Teams</i>	<i>How They Lead Others</i>
	<p>Deferential to authority Focus on product outcomes Can become political animals if turf is threatened Work long hours</p>	<p>Willing to go the extra mile Good at building rapport and solving problems Embrace equity and equality Want credit and respect for accomplishments</p>	<p>approach, but may struggle with delegation and empathy Embrace leadership trends and personal development Expect people to put in their time Less flexible with change</p>
<p>Generation X Age Span 25 to 44</p>	<p>Strive for balance, freedom, and flexibility Strong dislike for corporate politics, fancy titles, or rigid structures Expect to have fun at work Prefer independence and minimal supervision Good at multitasking Value process over product</p>	<p>Like to work on teams with informal roles and freedom to complete tasks their own way Do well on projects calling for technical competence and creativity Work best with teammates of their own choosing Detest being taken advantage of Struggle to build rapport with other group members</p>	<p>Drawn to leadership for altruistic reasons—not power or prestige Casual and laid-back Try to create an environment that is functional and efficient May lack tact and diplomacy Able to create and support alternative workplace structures Willing to challenge higher-ups Adapt easily to change</p>
<p>Millennials Age Span 24 and younger</p>	<p>Anxious to fit in Respectful of authority, but unafraid to approach their boss with concerns Value continuing education Exceptional at multitasking Drawn to organizations with career ladders and standardized pay/benefits</p>	<p>Accepting of group diversity Determined to achieve team goals Respond well to mentoring Enjoy working with idealistic people Expect to be included in decisions Need a bit more supervision and structure than other groups</p>	<p>Open to new ideas Able to work with varying employee styles and needs Prefer flattened hierarchy Hopeful and resilient Display more decorum and professionalism than Xers Lack experience handling conflict and difficult people</p>

SOURCE: Adapted from Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Raines, 2003; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000.

ROAD MAPS AND ASPIRATIONS

Although we share the same profession, our career road maps may differ significantly. For Veterans, and Baby Boomers to a lesser degree, the end of WWII and the GI Bill prompted large numbers of men to migrate into teaching. The idea was to find a district in which you could establish roots and, if desired, move up by becoming a principal or superintendent. Job security was determined by virtue of one's accomplishments and tenure. This thinking worked fine when schools were more insular and lifetime employment was an unconditional guarantee.

On the other side of the coin is career security, a work ideal more aligned with Generation X and Millennial thinking. The premise here is that you build up a bank of knowledge and experiences so that no matter what bad things might happen, you are able to bounce back. Limitations on the portability of service credit prevents teachers from job hopping to the same degree as contemporaries in the private sector; however, young teachers today are far more nomadic than their Boomer colleagues. Loyalty to a school district doesn't resonate with Generation X in particular because they aren't convinced the system is committed to looking out for them over the long haul. While Veteran educators focused on building a legacy, and Boomers aspired to build stellar careers, Generation X and Millennials replacing them are more interested in building portable and parallel careers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

As generational variances are examined, the catalyst for turbulence in schools becomes obvious. A typical clash of occupational values versus workplace reality is featured in Table 1.3, "Storyboard." The sagas of Doug and Evelyn demonstrate how cross-age dissent can bruise egos and wither relationships.

In Doug's case, he has used a communication style that is completely distasteful to the Generation X principal. Since this cohort sees things from a more cynical lens, clichés and hyperbole don't sit well with them.

A better strategy is for Doug to set expectations that define the right outcomes and then give the principal latitude in formulating steps to get there. Through weekly or biweekly conversations, Doug can offer constructive feedback that spotlights the principal's progress, rather than her failure. Members of Generation X often complain that their Boomer bosses are wishy-washy and give lip service to concepts such as *teamwork* and *empowerment* without practicing what they preach. So the most sensible way for Doug to guide the principal in laying out her plan is via a direct, yet individualistic, approach.

Taking a Veteran teacher like Evelyn by surprise is bad business. Maybe it's been convenient for this teacher to do her own thing because

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Table 1.3 Storyboard

<i>The Saga of Doug</i>	<i>The Saga of Evelyn</i>
<p>Doug, a 52-year-old assistant superintendent, is anxious to see test scores improve at an underperforming elementary school. Doug isn't convinced that the principal is doing all she can to push her staff and ratchet up the learning.</p> <p>During a meeting, Doug tries to pump up the Generation X principal by urging her to "win one for the Gipper." The principal immediately scoffs at the metaphor. While Doug writes the principal off as uncooperative, the principal is convinced that everyone at the central office is self-righteous. It's obvious that Doug and the rest of his cronies don't have a clue about the challenges this overworked principal is facing!</p>	<p>Evelyn, a 64-year-old English teacher, is asked to see the principal during her planning period on the last day of school. The Generation X principal matter-of-factly explains to Evelyn that declining enrollment has created a staffing surplus.</p> <p>Despite Evelyn's senior status, the principal believes her refusal to collaborate with colleagues is incompatible with the school's mission of working as a professional learning community. Thus, Evelyn is being transferred to a cross-town high school. Evelyn's response is laced with hurt and anger. "How can you do this to me?" she cries. "I opened this school in 1972 while you were still in diapers. This is my home!" Evelyn stomps out of the office and immediately contacts the union president. Her next step is to file a grievance.</p>

no one has asked her to do otherwise. Before writing Evelyn off, the Generation X principal should slow down and look deeper into what is actually going on. She may be willing to contribute more and share her knowledge, but simply has never been asked. Outlining objectives that emphasize the experience and historical perspective of seasoned staff like Evelyn enables principals to pair them with younger faculty who see things through a different lens. Without checking up on Veteran faculty regularly and respectfully, administrators may unwittingly be permitting them to check out.

If leaders hope to load the big yellow bus with the right people and get the wrong people to move on, the career desires and distinctions of staff have to be considered. As aspirations are understood, forks can be drawn in the road to provide various routes for each employee. Asking teachers, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" "What kind of committees and projects do you prefer to work on?" "How would you like me to support you?" and "Is there anything that might get in your way of achieving these goals?" gives administrators insight into workplace ideals while also honoring age-based ambitions.

CONCLUSION: A CAUSE CÉLÈBRE

For the first time in the history of public education, four distinct age groups are working elbow to elbow. School systems require new tools for dealing with employees in age-sensitive ways. If intergenerational planning isn't embraced as a cause célèbre, the educational community may find itself on a demographic collision course. Consider why. First, schools are vulnerable to a mass exodus of employees entering their golden years. Yet, as Baby Boomers live longer, they aren't all that enamored with retirement. Older teachers and administrators, whose knowledge may not be as current as those coming straight out of the university, are inclined to have conflicting opinions about what's best for students.

Another cause for concern is that the working population between ages 25 and 54 will decline by 4.3 percent in the next five years, while the number of people age 55 and older will grow by 4.8 percent (BLS, 2004, June). A shrinking pool of job prospects will necessitate an even more aggressive recruitment campaign of immigrant and minority workers. Such an influx of diversity in the workplace certainly hastens the potential for conflict. Employers must openly acknowledge that other ages, other cultures, and other voices have as much claim on the world as they do.

Finally, escalating demands from parents have created a growing chasm between what is expected of local schools and what teachers may be willing or able to give. Veteran parents like Ward and June Cleaver considered it taboo to question authority. But now they have been replaced by Boomer dads and Generation X moms who see their obligation to their offspring as all encompassing. Clearly, such opposing personalities can drive a wedge into the core mission of building and sustaining collaborative learning communities.

The generational force orbiting schools is both powerful and subtle. Unlike other diversity factors such as race, gender, or ethnicity, cross-age differences affect every school employee every day. Unresolved discord leads to biases, dysfunctional relationships, and toxic cultures—all of which stand as a huge impediment to achievement.

Unfortunately, public institutions lag behind private industry when it comes to initiating harmonious, student-centered work environments. Educators have been accused of supporting mediocrity, being behind the times, and failing to accept the evolving needs of constituents. Through an emphasis on job flexibility, respectful relations, and appreciation for generational differences, exceptional school districts are turning the corner. Leaders who focus on their human capital as the blueprint for success can bridge the gap by knowing what makes their employees tick.