

Conquer the Generational Divide

Young project professionals must learn to bridge the gap and work effectively with older generations.

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Young project professionals are storming the project management profession. But just as older generations must adjust to the working styles of Generation Y, what can young professionals do to effectively lead their older comrades?

“It’s common for experienced project managers to have team members from Generation Y, but it also works the other way,” says Elizabeth Harrin, head of applications and program delivery for Spire Healthcare in London, England. “Younger project managers have to manage older project team members, too.”

But effectively leading multigenerational project teams is not always easy. In fact, intergenerational conflict ranked as a workplace problem for 72 percent of 434 U.S. human resources professionals in a February 2011 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

In Australia and New Zealand, just 4 percent of younger workers wanted to work with older team members, according to a 2011 survey of 774 professionals by Leadership Management Australasia.

Part of that reticence is because Gen Y, born roughly between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, are considered to be dependent on technology.

More than 40 percent of Gen Yers said they prefer to communicate electronically at the office, according to a 2011 PwC survey of 4,364 university graduates from 75 countries.

But according to the SHRM study, 38 percent of older respondents said younger workers’ “inappropriate use of or excessive reliance on technology” was a problem.

“Baby boomers typically value relationships and prefer verbal dialogue and face-to-face interaction. Gen Yers prefer short-form communication, like texting and instant messaging,” says Kris Reynolds, PMP, project management practice leader at The Persimmon Group, a project management consultancy in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.

To effectively lead baby boomer project team members, Gen Yers should **be sensitive to the idea that newer technology can ostracize the boomer generation**, says Mr. Reynolds, who frequently presents on generational diversity.

But “don’t assume boomers are rubbish at technology because they were born before Facebook,” adds Ms. Harrin, who has written about generational differences on her blog, “A Girl’s Guide to Project Management.”

Gen Y project managers can overcome this issue by setting communication guidelines with older team members, says Valli Swerdlow, president of Valli Associates, a Vienna, Virginia, USA-based company that specializes in career coaching for boomers.

“Ask them about their preferred method of communication,” she says. If older colleagues prefer in-person communication, Gen Y leaders should tailor their leadership style accordingly.

Gen Y project managers also struggle with establishing credibility and gaining the older generations’ respect. Since Gen Y has less experience, peers may not consider their views as reliable as those from an older worker.

The best way to gain respect from your elders is to show confidence in your work and ideas. For example, Joe Garretson, PMP, a project manager with Line 6, a Calabasas, California, USA-based manufacturer of digital music equipment, doesn’t back down when confronted by older project professionals.

“I work with a very outspoken project manager with 30 years of experience. When we disagree, I always hear him out first, but I also make my point, calmly and assertively,” he says.

This helps alleviate concerns about his age and experience, Mr. Garretson says, and his older colleagues respect his confidence to defend his ideas.

Patrick Smiley, PMP, a Gen Y contractor overseeing projects with the Food and Drug Administration in Washington, D.C., USA, shares “war stories” with veteran project managers to gain credibility.

“If a veteran project manager is frustrated with shifting requirements, for example, I may tell him, ‘I’ve dealt with this before, and we found it best to use a more agile approach,’” he says.

But, Mr. Smiley also stays open-minded to other solutions from veterans — a smart move, says Ms. Harrin.

“Value their experience and find constructive ways for them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge on the project,” she says. This will help them feel that they are still getting respect for their knowledge.

“Each generation brings a wealth of information, and each person has his own unique experiences,” Mr. Reynolds says. “It’s an opportunity to learn from and understand each other.”