

Tips for Working with a Younger Boss

TIP #1: Your boss doesn't want a parent

You won't score any points by approaching a younger boss as a protective parent. As a matter of fact, this generation has a name for parents or pseudo-parents who hover: helicopter parents. It is not a term of endearment.

It's an interesting dichotomy. Gen X and Gen Y interviewees told me they want a family-type atmosphere at work, but they don't want co-workers or managers acting as their mother or father. Gen Y's especially want a collegial workplace in which they're comfortable talking about work or personal issues with the CEO, peers, and direct reports. They want friendliness and a family atmosphere. Mom and Dad as their direct report – they don't want.

TIP #2: Your boss wants you to listen

I mean really listen – engage those active listening skills you learned back in your first supervisory workshop. Dust them off and put them to use with the younger boss. If the boss is a Gen X-er, he or she is likely to be very engaged and involved with your organization's core values. Their ideas and approach will directly relate to those values. The younger boss will be intent on insuring that his or her actions, and those of her direct reports, reflect the mission, vision, and values of the company. When the younger boss shares perspectives on achieving the business objectives, he or she is serious. A lot of thought has gone into the perspectives offered. Even if you disagree, listen attentively and don't discount suggestions immediately with statement such as "We've done that before and it didn't work."

TIP #3: Expect a laid-back management style

The Gen X-er supervisors I interviewed said that a big source of discomfort with their older direct reports is the amount of supervision requested. Surprisingly, the Gen Xer managers indicated they like to "back off" their direct reports and just focus on the end results. Often, the older worker said they'd like to have more direction and input along the way. Baby Boomers especially told me that they prefer decision-making as a team effort, but their boss was more comfortable with direct reports working autonomously and then reporting their results.

If you are a Baby Boomer or Radio Baby, consider sending email updates to the boss periodically, just so you have a paper trail to satisfy your need to commit your activities to writing, and the boss receives some input he or she can read or store for future reference. You can of course request face-to-face meetings when an issue requires that richness of conversation; however, I suggest you also get comfortable with leaving voice messages and email follow-up messages.

TIP #4: Do not call the boss after hours

Your boss may not yet have a family; however, that doesn't mean he or she does not value personal time away from the office. If the office closed at 5 pm, it is very likely that your boss will be leaving within a short time afterwards. The boss has a life to live and fully expects that the job will not interfere with it!

If the office opens at 8 am, don't look for the boss at 7:30. If the boss gives you his or her cell phone number and asks you to call outside work hours with critical questions or issues, then by all means take advantage of this offer. Get proficient with sending emails or leaving voice messages as well.

TIP #5: Demonstrate your reliability early and often

The Gen X or Gen Y boss will not be particularly impressed with your years of experience or the degree you earned 10 years ago. You will need to demonstrate your current skills and competencies as they relate to the department's mission, vision, and objectives. In other words, the younger boss wants to know "what have you done for us lately?"

This is the primary recommendation I made for my friend John mentioned earlier in this chapter. If you have had successful, profitable ideas and job enhancements within the past year, make sure that is what you share with the boss. If he or she has a pet project, think of ways to make it work rather than reasons it won't work. Or if the idea simply is unrealistic, you can offer alternatives ... as a colleague rather than the "voice of wisdom."

The younger boss wants mentors. Demonstrate how you can help him or her be a hero and you will find that the boss comes to you more often. Then you won't have to pursue the boss to offer your suggestions.

TIP #6: Talk the talk

No, I don't mean that you have to learn Gen Y slang. You will need to pursue a careful balance between understanding age-appropriate jargon and using it, however. I have observed that Gen Y's feel that older people are being condescending when they use their "pet phrases."

When I suggest you "talk the talk," I mean that you should be aware that the media influence in the young person's world. If you occasionally read the same periodicals, listen to the same talk shows, and listen to the same music, you are more likely to understand what topics appeal to this age group. Then you can provide analogies and ideas that grab their attention.

Tips on How to Manage Older Direct Reports

TIP #1: Make the right impression

Do you want to be the boss because you need a few minutes of fame or because you feel qualified with a vested interest? If it is for a moment of fame, please spare the rest of the younger generation the humiliation and get fame another way. To "be the boss" does not mean come in being bossy, but rather setting the example for others.

To begin with, your first impression is absolutely crucial. You do not get a second chance to make a first impression. Although it may seem superficial, you need to dress the part. If you are the boss, you should be dressed one step up from everyone else, which means no sandals, t-shirt, raggedy jeans, piercings, unnatural hair color, or skin-showing. Dress to impress.

Be prepared – as in, have a plan, and do not show up so filled with caffeine that you can't function. Really get to know what your job will be and how the individuals are who will be working on your team. Prepare how you are going to present yourself to the team.

TIP #2: Do not try to make a 50 year-old think the way you do

Although you may think 50-plus-years-olds are prehistoric dinosaurs, you don't need to make them feel that way. You need to lose the slang (for example, LOL, awesome, and so on) in the workplace so everyone is on the same page. Slang only frustrates and/or intimidates older workers and definitely does not gain their respect. Avoid making statements such as "before your time" or "they are as old, or older than my parents." Remember members of each generation are at a different point in their lives; therefore, values are very different. For a Gen

Yer, time with friends on Sunday afternoon may be just the ticket, but for a Baby Boomer time with family is priceless. Try to keep a frame of reference for how your values and lifestyle may differ from that of older workers working for you, and don't try to make their lives changes to mirror yours.

TIP #3: Listen to the guidance of mature employees

One very positive strength the older generations have on the younger generations is "experience". We don't need to reinvent the wheel or make mistakes that have already been made. So use your teams (Baby Boomers especially like this) for brainstorming and creating solutions. The older generations are not trying to knock down your ideas, but rather they have a good reason for why they do things a certain way. Listen to their reasons and show respect for their experience and expertise. Together you can learn from their reasons and integrate your ideas to come up with an even better solution

People in an older generation may appear "stuck in their ways," but it behooves us to listen and try to understand the reason behind their position. There are always at least two ways to skin a cat.

TIP #4: Do not lower requirements or expectations

Oftentimes, the stereotype is that older workers are not capable of doing the same level of work as younger employees. This is not true. In our research, older workers insisted they didn't want to be treated as though they were less intelligent or less able to contribute. From an employer standpoint, customers will be lost and productivity will suffer if any employee is allowed to work at a level lower than standard (regardless of age). Younger bosses need to be sure they don't get caught lowering the requirements or expectations of older workers. This will cause friction and impact the output of the organization.

TIP #5: Do not make assumptions

The old saying that "old dogs can't learn new tricks" is far from the truth. First of all, is 51 really "old?" OFolks are living much longer than they ever have due to advances in healthcare, which means that 60 really could be the new 40. When we interviewed the older generations, both Radio Babies and Baby Boomers were looking for jobs that gave them an opportunity to grow

and learn new things. As a young boss, don't assume your older workers can't or don't want to learn something new.

Another assumption you should avoid is that your older workers are not receptive to change. Actually they are quite the opposite of this. They are very willing to change but don't want to make changes for no logical reason. The change needs to produce a result that will have a positive impact on the company, employees, and/or customers. To successfully get them to accept the change, involve them in the solution, communicate with them, and provide them with the appropriate tools and resources to ensure a smooth transition. Definitely do not arbitrarily implement a change without including them or getting their thoughts.

TIP #6: Respect differences in communication style

The key to any successful relationship rests on communication. We all have different styles and ways we prefer to communicate that are based on many factors, including age. Gen Y's and Gen Xers tend to rely heavily on technology for communication, whether it is emails, voice mail or even instant message clients such as AOL's AIM. At the same time these younger generations are also very comfortable with key communications being shared over an informal, casual atmosphere such as lunch. These methods of communication can be extremely infuriating to the older generations, who were raised to communicate face-to-face in the office when you have an issue because it was the right thing to do (technological options didn't exist).

As a younger boss, you need to respect this difference and balance your communications with your older direct reports to include more face-to-face conversations, even if it takes more time, and carefully select the right place for communication to ensure that everyone is comfortable. It really isn't all about you. The result will be more productive communication all around.

Remember: the older generation was young once, and you will be old someday too. Individuals from different generations working together is an opportunity for everyone to learn. Your best solutions are going to come from learning from older workers' experiences and applying those experiences to your fresh new ideas. It is a give and take – don't forget to give a little too.

Gravett, L. & Throckmorton, R. (2007). *Bridging the generation gap: How to get Radio Babies, Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers to work together and achieve more*. Franklin Lakes, New Jersey: Career Press.