

The Generational Buzz

As one who teaches on personalities and how to deal with them, the current hot topic of generational differences reminds me that we cannot put people in a box and label them as just one thing when we are shaped by a number of variables. We have four generations in the workplace today; in some out-there cases, even five. Lately, I've been hearing a lot of talk about how differently generations must be managed, and I'm not sure I buy it.

We Baby Boomers currently rule the workplace. Born roughly between 1946 and 1964, our generational cohort has influenced values, parenting, marriage, government—you name it. Boomers have systematically refocused and transformed every decade of our years. When my mother was my age, she considered herself an old lady and dressed the part. Today we delight in the age-challenging beauty of women like Tina Turner and Raquel Welch. We no longer believe we're washed up at 65 or 70, because we just may live to 100.

Following us are our children and grandchildren: Generation X, Y, and the Millennials. These three cohorts have a lot of folks arguing whether or not generational differences are disruptive. How frustrating is it to supervise Xs, Ys, and Mils?

My question is: how different has it ever been? There have always been several generations in the workplace. Are young men and women today looking for radically different work experiences than Boomers?

The latest issue of the [Gallup Management Journal](#) (March 13) has an article called *What Generation Gap?* In it, the authors (Bryan Ott, Nikki Blacksmith, and Ken Royal) note that job seekers "are

looking for the same attributes and characteristics of potential organizations and jobs regardless of what generational definition they fall into. . . . interest in work, quality of management, compensation, and the opportunity to grow are considered the most important aspects of a potential job or workplace, regardless of age." Whether we are 23 or 53, we have the same concerns about "issues such as compensation, quality team dynamics, and career development—[we want] the opportunity to learn and grow, the opportunity for advancement, and promotion based on merit."

We're looking for the same things, but we come to the job every day with different expectations. This shouldn't be shocking, but I hear complaints that young people are entering the workforce clueless about a work ethic because they've been raised to believe they are special. Shortly after being hired, they're asking for a couple of weeks off to go on spring break with friends. Anecdotes abound of parents who are so involved in their children's lives they are coming to interviews with them, helping negotiate salaries, and calling HR departments to negotiate benefits on their kids' behalf. Managers gripe of young workers who seem to feel they should receive a raise for simply showing up to work each day. [continued ▶](#)



Sue Thompson is a personality trainer, an etiquette expert, and an instructor in life lessons. Her seminars on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused listeners at companies and business organizations throughout the

country to rate her presentations as "the best seminar of the conference!" She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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The Importance of History

My family moved to Los Angeles just before my eighth birthday, and within my first year there the delightful Ralph Story, early television pioneer and the unofficial historian of all things pertaining to Southern California, began his television show, *Ralph Story's Los Angeles*.

Mr. Story offered fascinating details about known and not-so-well-known episodes in the city's history. In fourth grade, I stood up every single week the day after the broadcast to tell the class what I had learned about Los Angeles (pronouncing it "loss ann-jell-LEEZE" with my West Virginia accent, which made all the kids giggle). It was my favorite TV show, hands down, and ran for six years.

This is my first memory of being completely devoted to the goings-on of the past. Perhaps Ralph Story ignited a passion with the way he explained how simple landmarks had tremendous significance, or how regular people were caught up in extraordinary events, or how the lowly sometimes triumphed over the high and mighty. I have been fascinated by the drama of history ever since.

I wrote all that to come to this: do whatever you can to watch HBO's seven-part series, *John Adams*. Most of us were taught the story of the beginnings of our country in a rather sterile way. We got the basics: the Battle of Bunker Hill, Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence, the vote in the Continental Congress, etc. In the back of our minds, it all just somehow came together and here we are, 232 years later.

John Adams gives us the inside story. Based on [David McCullough's](#) bestseller of the same name, the series does what only filmmakers can do: it allows us to experience the lives of those who lived long before us. We feel their emotions, touch their sensitivities, participate in their joys and their fears. John and Abigail Adams were real people, both possessed of enormous intellect and character, who were pulled up into the stunning conflict we know as the founding of our country with same sweeping confusion and excitement as Dorothy surviving a violent twister and ending up in the land of Oz. Who knew John Adams was going to be instrumental in the establishment of an entirely new nation, wrestling free from the most powerful government on the planet? Are any of us at all aware of how our actions may affect history? John and Abigail actually *were*, as were Thomas Jefferson,



Benjamin Franklin, and young John Quincy Adams, along with many others. They knew, and they were willing to pay the sober and frightening price of being branded traitors and facing possible hanging.



The Declaration of Independence is presented to Congress

The book was exciting enough, but we all know how seeing it makes it real. You have no idea how riveting history can be until you've seen this series! My husband and I have been on the edge of our seats during the last three episodes, and we've watched them again, and we'll purchase the DVDs and watch them yet again. We are consistently struck with how morally principled and focused were men and women of that tremendous time in our history, and it makes us sad to compare what our politicians put their energies to today. Not that politics hasn't always been a nasty business—and the series showcases this truth as well—but there was undeniably a foundation existing somewhere in the mix that is so disappointingly missing today.

Get *John Adams*. Watch it. It will change you, as all epic stories do.

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The Generational Buzz (con't)

I don't doubt the anecdotes and I acknowledge the changes in worldviews each new generation brings to the table. It's true we may be seeing more of certain behaviors, but managers have always had their hard cases. Any number of us could tell stories of the IT professional of any age who acts as though the world revolves around him. Or the arrogant executive who comes to work when he or she feels like it. Or the middle-aged staffer who requests a day off every month during her probationary period, prompting one to wonder what she believes "probationary" means.

I work with many Gen Xers, Yers, and Millenials whose approach to work doesn't appear to be one bit different than mine; they have a strong work ethic and a desire to please their bosses. I've also worked with a few fellow Boomers who are disrespectful, rude, and full of themselves. Isn't behavior far more indicative of rearing than age group classification? It's our temperamental proclivities and the influences built upon them that characterize all our interactions. That we hold particular

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Teddy Bear Says . . .



Etiquette has to do with courtesy. The definition of courtesy includes "excellence of manners or social conduct." We want to show respect and consideration and leave positive impressions.

Here are some courtesies to practice when you are visiting someone's office. These practices are important particularly when you are meeting a contact for the first time, but always when you are a guest. Make them a habit! I've made it a habit to allow children to pet me, adults to scratch my ears, and everyone to tell me how beautiful I am, and people remember me fondly!

Always arrive on time, and if you really want to make a good impression, be a

few minutes early. If you're unavoidably late, you have approximately five minutes of "grace" in American business offices; we tend to be lenient. But if it's clear you will be detained for more than five minutes, it is imperative that you call and find out if your host can still see you, especially if you will arrive more than fifteen minutes late. Many people have very tight schedules and it is courteous to acknowledge their time constraints.

Keep this in mind: the moment you enter the office you are making an impression, so don't chew gum or eat that last bit of granola bar. Give the receptionist your card so she can announce you properly, and state your name clearly, especially if others have difficulty pronouncing it.

Turn off your cell phone! (If you absolutely must leave it on, inform your host that you are expecting a call that cannot be avoided and step out of the office when taking it--*and keep it brief.*)

When the person you are visiting (or his or her assistant) arrives to receive you, stand up to greet him/her. When you are ushered into the office of your host, shake the hand of the most important person first. Wait until you are told or indicated where to sit. If you have a briefcase or bag, place it on the floor next to your seat.

If you requested the meeting, get to the point after three or four minutes of small talk. Have a clear agenda in mind so there is no wasting your host's time.

When you are done, shake your host's hand first and then the hands of others who may have been in the meeting. Thank the administrative assistant and/or the receptionist when you depart.

See how easy it is to show gracious manners? Keep practicing and make a Greyhound proud!



The Generational Buzz (con't)

beliefs that must be challenged and perhaps shattered, well . . . that's life, isn't it? We grow. We all have to learn we won't always get our way; some must learn it far later than others! Life has a way of presenting challenges that test us, and we don't get to opt out.

What's constant is this: we'll always be able to spot the natural born leaders and drivers, the folks who need clear structure and order, the men and women who brighten up the place with laughter and never meet a stranger, and the peacemakers who just want to do their work and go home on time. Whatever unprofessional behaviors an employee brings to the job must be addressed, and that's the work of managers. Nothing lights me up like the thrill I get when training new employees how to be good and valued employees, and managers how to apply their talents to supervise the people they lead. These are skills that can be learned, and they transcend generational influences. They're the lessons of life, and we can all impart the best of what we've learned to young men and women who have ears to hear.

Sue Thompson



I'd like to hear from you about your experiences working with different generations.

- Do you see more positives than negatives in what young people are bringing to the workplace?
- Are you a young man or woman who values Boomer modeling?
- Are you a manager frustrated by immature behavior that you feel is particularly generational?

I'm presenting on this issue later in the summer and your experiences and thoughts will be helpful.

Write me at sue@setfreelifeseminars.com.

Contact Sue today to
learn how she can meet
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— Credits —

Painting of John Adams - Gilbert Stuart

Presentation of the Declaration of Independence - John Trumbull