

Published TMG Articles

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AGE DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

I'm a baby boomer. Born in 1954 in the heart of American pride. That's right, I've got the work ethic, the "can-do" attitude, and the grown up toys to prove it. I remember where I was the day that Kennedy was shot. I know what it means when there's white smoke coming from the chimney at the Vatican. I was watching when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon's surface. I can even remember when the outer banks were much the same way Orville and Wilber left them. I'm a baby boomer.

Increasingly, however, I am seeing fewer and fewer of us in the work force. We've been joined by Generation X, Y, and whatever generation comes after that. I can see that we work along side each other but have a different set of values, ideals, motivations, and background. We're different.

I attended a strategic planning meeting with the Great Escape in Greenville, SC, last week. Of the seven people in the room, only one of them was under the age of 35 — Morgan, a store manager in his early 20's. As we were considering their company's Mission and Vision, he commented that he didn't want our experience to be like another "Office Space". Because a teenager lives in my house and regularly watches Comedy Central, I knew that he was talking about a hilarious movie that pokes fun at the corporate culture. Everyone else in the room blinked uncomprehendingly. He had to explain what he was referencing — what he meant by "Office Space". Fortunately for Morgan, Mr. Norm Pace, the owner of the Great Escape, is highly committed to a work environment that values diversity. Not only does his working environment reflect racial and gender diversity, but also, he considers age diversity.

Diversity is an interesting concept in the American workplace. There are employment laws that require the fair and balanced treatment of all employees. But, let's take the law out of the consideration for a moment. We live in a diverse culture. Irrespective of the basics that include race, gender, and age, we are all different. We were raised in various ways and in diverse locations. We come from different places; we believe different things. Words have differing and subtle meanings, depending on your background, your formative environment. We are different.

A wise leader considers this diversity in all things. Communication channels must never be taken for granted. Assumptions about intent can create havoc in your work environment; attitudes are affected, effectiveness declines, and productivity drops dramatically. What should we do?

Listen to everyone with an open mind. Don't interpret, interrupt, ignore, or assume. **DON'T TUNE OUT AND TURN OFF!**

Learn about your co-workers, your team members. What makes them "tick"; what's important to them, and what they add to the team's overall tool chest for success.

Get regular feedback from your team. Whenever there's a difference of opinion, there's an opportunity for growth — or for conflict. Either and both are very valuable if properly managed.

Always remember that age diversity is just as crucial as every other issue of employee rights to your work force.

Everyone can contribute if given the opportunity to be heard and understood.

Creating an environment in which others will succeed is the task of a business leader. Doing so enhances productivity and effectiveness. Of course, this directly affects profit and success. Managing the differences among us can be interesting, fun, educational, and productive. It's your job as a leader to make it so. Just be aware, and you can make it happen!