

## FOUR GENERATIONS LEARNING TO WORK BETTER TOGETHER

Today, for the first time in history, there are four generations in the workplace: traditionalists (over age 60), baby boomers (42 to 60), generation Xers (26 to 41), and millennials (25 and under). This new phenomenon is affecting employee relations in city and county governments as well as in the corporate world.

### GENERATIONS WORKING TOGETHER WITHIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rachel Lechuga, a human resources assistant who has worked 17 years for the city of Odessa, Texas, population 97,000, has seen the impact. "The older generations struggle more with paperwork and technology but often their 'good ol' boy' connections help them get things done effectively," she explains. "By contrast, the younger generations are more interested in what specific actions they can take and how they will be evaluated."

Because of major differences among the generations, clear communications can be an issue. That has been the case in Richmond, California, a city of 100,000 in the San Francisco Bay area. Lisa Stephenson, labor relations manager, says, "Workers may not perceive words the way they were meant. In addition to age differences, we have a racially diverse workforce, so people need to be sensitive to others or feelings can get hurt."

So what happens when, for example, a longtime 50-something city worker suddenly has to report to a new generation X supervisor who is two decades younger? "Baby boomers are team oriented and process driven," says Troy Campbell, trainer with Rockhurst University Continuing Education Center/National Seminars Group and Padgett-Thompson, based in the Kansas City metropolitan area. "Generation Xers, on the other hand, are results driven and totally pragmatic. When the

two work together, there can be serious communication problems."

When managers and employees in different age groups have to work together, learning to understand each other's core values and beliefs is a good place to start, Campbell notes. To conduct an assessment, some localities use standard tools such as Myers-Briggs, which identifies personality types and helps employees work together more effectively. Another popular assessment tool, DiSC™ (dominance, influence, steadiness, compliance), indicates whether employees are more task oriented or social oriented.

"Older workers find that it doesn't matter what someone younger listens to on their iPod," Campbell says. They can still gain an appreciation for each other and learn to communicate in the best mode for the coworker, whether it's in person, by phone, or by e-mail.

"Coworkers need to learn to be open to different personality types," adds Lisa Walker, who also conducts training for government employees at all levels through Rockhurst. "It's not just what employees are saying but how they are saying it that is important."

To deal with generational differences that affect team efficiency, both Odessa and Richmond have turned to on-site training. Odessa's supervisory training for new, younger supervisors also serves as a refresher course for older managers. Communications training is also offered to help bridge the generation gaps. "Whether it's verbal or written communications, everyone needs to get on the same page," Lechuga says.

The city of Richmond is working to improve communications by providing on-site diversity training plus instruction in customer service, grammar, and business-writing skills. "We have employees who started at age 25 and have worked together forever," Stephenson says. "Now they need to be able to work with younger employees as well as with new workers in their mid-40s, many of whom had been in the private sector."

Through training, government workers are gaining respect for other generations. "They learn from each other," Walker says. "Traditionalists are more formal and want to hear 'Sir' or 'Madam.'

They have good experience and can tell how things worked in the past, but they also need to be open to fresh ideas from younger workers. Generation X supervisors need to learn to value the experience of these older staff members and their deep knowledge."

### CUSTOMERS COME IN DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, TOO

Generational differences also have an impact on how government employees deal with the taxpayers who are their customers. Walker has seen increased interest among governments in scheduling training in customer service, dealing with difficult people, and communicating with "tact and finesse."

"Some government workers don't believe they have competition, but actually we are in competition with anyone who provides customer service," she says. "Not only do we get compared to private industry, but we have to deal with residents who come in to demand service, saying, 'I'm paying your salary!' It's easy to get defensive, but, if you're a government worker, you should remember that the way you treat residents will determine what they say about you. And the word spreads. If their neighbor had a bad experience, you'll hear about it."

So it's clear that to deal with generational differences, much of the solution lies in improving communications. As Strother Martin's character observed in *Cool Hand Luke*: "What we have here is failure to communicate." Of course, some generation Xers and millennials working in city and county government may not be familiar with that 1967 movie. But with effective training, all four generations really can learn to work better together—and to communicate more effectively with each other and with the taxpayers they serve.

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