



Volume 3, No. 8 August 2006

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HR Practice

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## Younger Bosses and Older Workers

By **Elisa F. Topper**

Today's management positions are not based on chronological age and experiences as it has been in the past. Our workplace has become multi-generational and managers and employees need to take notice.

As Americans delay retirement or decide to stay in the workforce, they are most likely going to work for someone who is younger. A coming shortage of skilled labor will push employers to hire 5.3 million older workers by 2010 and 14 million by 2020, according to the National Commission for Employment Policy. This age role reversal often causes problems for managers. Older workers may be resistant about taking orders from a younger boss and younger bosses may feel awkward about managing staff the age of their parents. These new workplace relationships are creating a need for generational research and business consultants to assist companies in managing this change.

Recently a movie, "In Good Company," starred Dennis Quaid as a middle-aged advertising executive dealing with working for a boss half his age. Years ago this premise would have been regarded as a fantasy but has become a reality in the current workplace. Baby Boomers (age 40-59) are finding that they are reporting to bosses many years their junior. A report on older employees in the work place by the Families and Work Institute and American Business Collaboration found 56 percent of today's workers are 40 or older compared to 38 percent in 1977. Of this group surveyed, many are being managed by bosses who are quite a bit younger or Generation X (ages 25-39). Of those surveyed that are classified as boomers (ages 40-59), 23 percent said they have younger bosses. Of those classified as mature (ages 60 plus), 71 percent said they reported to younger bosses.

### Suggestions for Managing Older Subordinates:

- **Throw out any stereotypes you may have of older workers.** Perform an informal self-assessment if you find that you have strong feelings about older workers that may have a negative impact on your management abilities. Take into account their work and life experiences. Look to them as mentors and train them as you would any other employee that you supervise. There is a perception that older workers are less productive than younger ones but this is a myth. Numerous studies show that the productivity can actually rise due to greater worker accuracy, dependability and capacity to make better judgments.
- **Value the generational differences.** The Families and Work Institute study revealed that boomers are more likely to be work-eccentric, putting work first, while younger generations are dual-centric and striving to find a balance between work and family. The Center for Generational Studies in Colorado states that boomers tend to be more process-oriented in their supervision style, while Gen Xers are outcome-oriented. Your library can benefit from both perspectives.
- **Clearly outline hiring and promotion policies in the employee handbooks.** In order to avoid legal complications, be sure to clearly outline *and follow* policies regarding job promotions. Be sure that your policy also states that the best candidate for the job will be selected without regard to seniority.
- **Evaluate older workers fairly.** In evaluating all of your employees, always make sure you focus on results. The evaluation should not be influenced by any personal issues you have with staff, whether related to stereotypes about their age, personality or other non-performance related factors.
- **Be aware of challenges and conflicts within the multi-generational workforce.** Incorporate training for all managers (no matter the age) in preparing for these new dynamics in the workplace. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, "This mixing of generations adds valuable diversity to the workforce, but also lends itself to potential conflicts and complications as workers from different generations try to work

together.”

- **Be a part of a positive trend with younger bosses and older workers.** Despite differences between older subordinates and younger managers, older workers are overall pleased with younger bosses when it came to being competent. A 2004 study by the Families and Work Institute revealed that workers 58 and older felt that younger managers are competent, supportive and responsive. Many also feel that they offer a fresh perspective.
- **Three key factors.** The key to successful relationships are threefold: understanding, respect and a good attitude.
  - You must, as a manager, be open to different opinions. Understanding and respect between managers and subordinates no matter what the age are facilitated by effectively communicating, which involves your method of communication, frequency, tone, etc.
  - Gain the respect of your older staff members by showing your appreciation for their expertise by asking them for advice. You gain respect by showing respect. Also delegate responsibility fairly to all in the department and facilitate the decision-making process equally.
  - Attitude is another key. Heather Cannon is the 30ish year old Serials & Electronic Collections Librarian at Loyola University Health Sciences Library (Chicago) and she manages the department with an older subordinate. She says, “I don’t think that the actual age matters as much as the attitudes of the two people involved. I’ve never had a problem with the age difference between me and my assistant, and it is because she has never questioned the reason that I am the supervisor. On the other hand, I never have had a problem acknowledging that she knows her area better than I do as she has worked here longer. Age may influence what our strengths and weaknesses are, but age doesn’t have any impact on the ability to respect one another and to recognize those strengths and weaknesses.” Megan Heligas, is director of a major public library and much younger than her staff. Heligas states, “One piece of advice for letting [age] be a non-issue is acting the part. If your staff sees you in a leadership role, being assertive, making strong decisions, they will come to trust you no matter what your age. Also it is important for young managers to dress the part. Dressing professionally and acting professionally are key elements in being treated with respect. You need not spend a fortune on a wardrobe but what you wear affects how you will be treated and perceived, so dress smart.”

This generational issue is fast approaching a training challenge in the workplace if it has not already. Are you ready for it?

## Resources

[www.generationsatwork.com](http://www.generationsatwork.com), a web site created by Generation X expert and author Claire Raines. Also see *The Art of Connecting-How to Overcome Differences, Build Rapport, and Communicate Effectively with Anyone* (Claire Raines), AMACOM, 2006 and *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace* (Claire Raines), Crisp Publications, 2003. Additional publications on the topic listed on this web site.

[www.rainmakerthinking.com](http://www.rainmakerthinking.com), a research, training and consulting firm focused on the working lives of those born after 1963.

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