

# Understanding Generations

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## Is there really a “generation gap”?

Generational differences are becoming easier to identify. The “generation” a person belongs to can greatly affect many aspects of his or her life. The term “generation gap.” was coined to mean the empty space in which people born of different times do not understand each other because of their differing attitudes, values, communication, and interests. But the “generation gap” term is no longer a true reflection of the attitudes among generations. With people living longer and communication increasing, we are developing relationships with all generations. We spend much of our time personally and professionally dealing with people of many generations.

## What makes a “generation”?

A generation is based on the range of birth years of a group of people. Generations can span many years; since people are individuals, not all members of a generation exhibit the same traits. Generational traits develop during the formative growth years of that generation. Someone born in 1954 would be influenced by an early-1960s childhood and a 1970s young adulthood. These influences affect people’s values and attitudes throughout their lives. Largely, a generation is formed by the environment experienced in the early to middle years of its members.

## Why do we need to understand generations?

Understanding generations can help people discover the values of each group of people. This understanding can help different age groups relate to one another and share ideas. This understanding will not result in a magical solution to break down generational differences, because each difference is also influenced by individual behavior. However, understanding different generations will help people have more appreciation for the concerns and issues of each era.

## How should we “manage the mix”?

Knowing what motivates the members of each generation and developing operational practices can help any business or civic group. The key to reaching a group’s goal is found in cooperation. A leader must understand the group to help the group accomplish its task. This can be managed by understanding the values people have and putting people into their “comfort zones.”

## Generation and values

One of the special things people own is their “value system.” Knowing your own priorities and values is important in achieving career success, setting goals, and developing relationships with others. Value systems are formed by the direct effect of outside forces and how a person reacts to them. This can be an environment, method of parenting, education, and events during one’s younger years.

The same is true for groups of generations. Each generation has its own influences that affect its value system. People do

not have to agree with the values of another generation, but they can strive to understand the mind-set of that group and how it sees the world.

Anyone who lived in America of the 1960s could see a generational split or gap. Political issues divided people, and individuals questioned the old ways. The “don’t trust anyone over 30” believers concluded that differences between young and old would never be resolved. The American family today still experiences the effects of that time. Recently, however, we have been able to understand societal upheaval and use that awareness to bring about improvement. We can better understand the strengths each generation brings to the table. By examining the values of different generations, we can better understand interpersonal relations and learn to cooperate with others.

## Types of generations

In the book *Generations*, the authors identify 18 distinct generations, beginning with the Puritans born in 1584. The generations express definite differences in outlook toward family, religion, politics, and the roles people play. A recent



## Types of generations *(continued)*

study of the period since the 1920s reveals the evolution of four or five generations. We will assume that these groupings include the people we deal with today. It is important to note the periods of birth of these generations, who were influenced by factors of later years.

These can be summarized as:

- The Silent or Traditional Generation (1922-1945)
- The Baby Boomer Generation (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Generation Y (Why) / Millennial Generation (1981-present)

The following describes some specific traits of each generation. It is important to remember that these are generalizations. Each individual has his or her own values and beliefs. These descriptions do help us see how each group gained its core knowledge and beliefs.

### **The Silent or Traditional Generation *(born 1922-1945)***

This group values privacy and sharing inner thoughts may be challenging. Members believe in hard work and “paying their dues” before their achievement is recognized. Their word is their bond and they value honesty. Communication, propriety, and procedure are formal. This generation was raised in an orderly society having clearly defined roles and functions. Because they survived the Great Depression and World War II, this group is not wasteful and values saving and making do. They are hard-working, economically aware, and generally trustful of the government. They are optimistic and willing to sacrifice. Patience is a virtue.

### **The Baby Boomers *(born 1946-1964)***

This group grew up in a time of economic prosperity against a background of rebellion. They value peer competition and strive for challenge and change. Boomers, like Traditionalists, value hard work because they view it as necessary for moving to the next level. Traditionalists value it because it is the right thing to do. Boomers enjoy climbing the ladder of success. This is a show-me generation, and body language is important. Boomers work well in teams and do not like having rules for the sake of rules. This group will fight for a cause they believe in. Health and personal growth are important. Boomers thought their parents’ world needed an overhaul so they saw their role as one of questioning, justifying, and creating change. The workplace will be dominated by this generation until 2015.

### **Generation X *(born 1965-1980)***

This is the first of the “tech” generations. This group may be economically aware because members grew up with double-digit inflation and unemployment stress. Unlike their predecessors, they do not trust institutions for long-term security. This group can be discouraged about society, but they are adept, clever, and resourceful. They are comfortable with change and clear about the meaning of balance in their lives. They work to live, not live to work. They introduced diversity, thinking globally, and “fun” into the workplace. They work hard and, like Boomers, want to rise on the ladder of success, but they do it mostly to be in control of balancing their lives. This group wants plenty of information. They value loyalty in

the workplace, but loyalty can also mean giving “two weeks notice.” They like to manage their own time and solve their own problems.

### **Generation Y (Why) *(1981 to until next generation is identified)***

Called “Generation Why,” this group has a firm desire to know the reason behind what is happening and what they do. This is a generation of mass world and interpersonal communication. Members are rarely impressed by new technology. They are optimistic about the future and realistic about the present. They have a good work ethic and could be close to the Traditional Generation when it comes to work.

However, the motive for working hard is different.

For example, they like to know why they are doing something and do not like to take blind orders. They like to see how

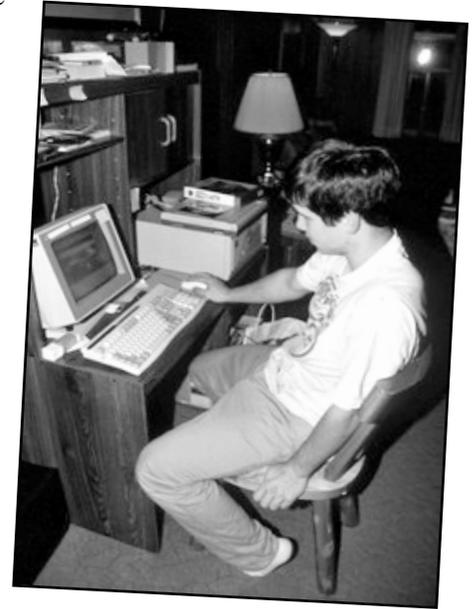
they made a difference in others’ lives or in their own personal life. This group questions “starting at the bottom” and feels the best person for the job should be the one who does it best. Seniority has to be justified and people have to earn respect; it is not automatic.

“Straight-line thinking” is a challenge for them because they believe it’s okay to skip certain steps to achieve what they want. Having patience is really a challenge; they want to see immediate results and action. This is the group that will be impatient with the speed of downloading a document that would have taken weeks to research 10 years ago. It is important to note that this group includes present-day teenagers and those in their early 20s. Therefore, what’s happening right now are the things that will influence this generation’s future behavior.

### **Talkin’ about my generation: Communication skills**

*“‘Generation myopia’ is the mistake we make when we apply the values and attitudes of our own generation to someone of a different generation.”*

Throughout history, a common discussion is to compare and contrast generations. The tale of “I had to walk to school barefoot 20 miles up hill both ways” has been used by each generation to promote how different it was in “their time.” In many cases, it can cause a problem when people try to apply one generation’s values and attitudes to another’s. There are differences in generations, but these differences can be a source of creativity in a workplace, community, or leadership setting.



Groups may find more similarities than differences when they explore the options. By combining their traits, those of different generations can be more efficient in reaching common goals. When a person understands a generation, he or she can better relate to and communicate with a person of that generation.

### Get the word out

Each group has a favorite way to communicate. Remember that these are generalizations and vary among individuals. But these hints can help you reach people in each generation.

**Traditional generation** likes formal communication and tradition. Clear, concise messages are good, but short, curt messages may seem rude to them. Mailed letters or face-to-face contacts work well. Phone calls are OK also. This group may even read a newsletter or a newspaper article. Many have e-mail and cell phones, especially those living in urban areas.

**Baby Boomers** like messages that explain clearly what is happening without sounding like someone is controlling them. They like to be invited to share rather than watch. They want their questions answered without too many conclusive, direct statements. They respect letters, but they get overwhelmed with mail so they probably prefer e-mail. They like phones and answering machines.

**Generation X** likes their messages in short, understandable bites. They may not deal too well with letters because they are not a writing generation. E-mail is perfect and chances are they have it. They like places for feedback and want to feel a part of whatever they are asked to do. Informal communication style is preferred. They use cell phones and depend on answering machines or voice mail. They may not read mailed newsletters, but they may scan electronic ones.

**Generation Y (Why)** likes concise action words. Emphasize that whatever you ask them to do is fun and worth their time. Humor can be used with this group to get a message across, but this group's humor may not be understood by other generations. This group likes all senses to be stimulated with colors, movement, and music. They want to respond quickly so e-mail is fine. Instant messages on computers are a communication choice of this group. Although they are the youngest group, many have cell phones. Regular telephones are fine, too. Many in this group have never used a postage stamp.

### Something to think about:

A community activity is coming up that your group hopes representatives of the entire town will attend. In what ways could you "get the word out"?

### We are what we are . . .

Each generation has its influences. Everything around us forces us to make a decision or have an opinion. Following are some fun facts about the four generations and what may or may not have influenced their values and attitudes. Remember, the dates are when the person was born and may not be the period when actual events took place.

### Traditional or Silent Generation (born 1922-1945)

**Most popular names:** James, Robert, John, Mary, Barbara.

**Cost of living index:** A 1942 dollar would buy \$11.25 worth of goods today.

**Popular toys:** Doll babies, tin cars and trucks, wagons, homemade wooden toys, books.

**Entertainment:** Movie musicals and conservative love stories. Fantasy and optimistic hopes in the movies. Media messages of a better future ahead and patriotism. Radio music and soap operas popular. TV beginning.

**World influences:** The Great Depression (these were children of it), World War II, Korean War, beginning of the Atomic Age, the nuclear family.

### Baby Boomers (born 1946-1961)

**Most popular names:** John, David, Michael, Linda, Mary, Susan.

**Cost of living index:** A 1966 dollar would buy \$5.66 worth of goods today.

**Popular toys:** Barbie dolls, Hula Hoops, electric trains, Hot Wheels, sleds, bicycles.

**Entertainment:** Movie musicals in decline; more realism in movies. Unhappy endings OK. Movies and TV begin to push limits. Traditional family life portrayed in TV shows but this was changing in real world. First real influence of "teenagers" in society as people with ideas and opinions.

**World influences:** Nuclear bombs, space race, Cold War, Sputnik, man walking on moon, civil rights, hippie movement and Woodstock, Vietnam War, Watergate, Salk polio vaccine.

### Generation X (born 1965-1980)

**Most popular names:** David, Michael, Jason, Jennifer, Lisa; beginning to use ethnic and heritage names.

**Cost of living index:** A 1982 dollar would buy \$1.90 worth of goods today.

**Popular toys:** Rubik's Cube, Cabbage Patch Dolls, hand held video games, early TV video games, new Barbie, theme toys based on TV characters.

**Entertainment:** Adventure movies, hero movies, happy endings making comeback, still pushing limits with TV and movie censors, MTV. Representation of family units changing in entertainment world.

**World influences:** Space shuttle explosion, Berlin Wall comes down, fall of communism, Persian Gulf War, AIDS, wide use of computers and the Internet.

### Generation Y (Why) (born 1982-2003)

**Most popular names:** Michael, Christopher, Jennifer, Ashley, Jessica, traditional names spelled in new ways, creative and ethnic names.

**Cost of living index:** A 1995 dollar would buy \$1.58 worth of goods today.

**Popular Toys:** TV game systems, video and computer games, skateboards, in-line skates, Barbies, toys that make little girls seem grown up, toys based on themes from TV and movies.



## Generation Y (Why) *(continued)*

**Entertainment:** Rebirth of Disney and family movies; teenage-specific movies; home video/DVD movies; children's classics re-released or remade. Rating system emphasized. Superstars in movies, like old Hollywood. Reality TV everywhere, with average people becoming household names.

**World events:** Clinton impeachment try, death of Princess Diana, scandals in the government, the Middle East wars, breakup of Soviet Union, terrorist attacks, war in Iraq.

## Sharing ideas

Sharing in fun exercises can help a group understand generational concepts. Finding creative ways to understand generations can be helpful to all groups who work with others. Arrange activities in a way that's easy to participate in and be sure no one is put on the spot to share if they choose not to. The following are some exercises that can help people understand generations.

**GENERATION MUSEUM** – Arrange 15 to 20 objects from 1930 to present day on a table. Have participants guess what each may be, guess what generation it is from, and share something about the object. Or make a game of matching dates with objects. Older participants can share with younger and vice versa. Examples could be clothes, kitchenware, food item or box, photograph, book, club memorabilia, toys, or household goods.

**THAT'S ME** – Make a list of traits of different generations and read to the group. When persons feel they fit the statement, they say "that's me" and stand up. Remember, not everyone is comfortable with revealing their age, so this is good with a group whose members know one another well.

**GENERATION TRIVIA** – This can be played as a team or in a group. Make up questions about generations and have groups answer like a game show. Questions can come from similar games, books, or the Internet. Participants can share answers verbally or on paper. Give a small prize to ones with the most correct answers.

**GENERATION FOOD** – Every generation had its traditional foods. If preparation time is available before a meeting, have each person bring something from his or her generation to the meeting. They can comment with stories, memories, or observations and share the food as refreshments. This would also be a good time to discuss nutrition and how food has evolved over time. This activity can also be carried out with certain clothing articles, books, or specific objects from an era.

**GENERATION PANEL** – If a group would like to look deeper into personal feelings of generations, a panel can be set up with one person from each "generation." Certain key words can be given and individuals can share how they think each topic affected their generation. The audience can add to the panel's comments. Key words could include marriage, childrearing, leisure time, education trends, family roles, and business. An alternate way would be to break into small discussion groups of generations and then share ideas with group as a whole.

**BACK-TO-BACK** – Have two people sit back-to-back on stools or a chair. One is the positive, one is the negative. Choose a generation and have each person in turn make a specific comment on a specific topic. Emphasize the positive in a summary, but let the group know that negatives are helpful to look at when each person sees his or her generation as "best."

**ENTERTAINMENT AND SOCIETY** – We have always modeled our society after the entertainment industry. Chose movies from different times and discuss things like moral standards, relationships, families, level of life satisfaction, and desires of that particular generation. Or do the same with political events, famous people, popular music, and television and radio shows of the time.

Understanding different generations can help with group dynamics. The leader can do further research and share with others the many benefits of understanding people and working together toward a common goal.

## Resources

AIER Cost of Living Calculator, American Institute for Economic Research ([www.aier.org](http://www.aier.org)).

"Connecting the Generations," Leadershipjournal.net ([www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)), Spring 2002.

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Sago, Brad. "Uncommon Threads: Mending the Generation Gap at Work," *Business Credit*, June 2000, pg 57-59.

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