

Intergenerational Classroom

Communication in Higher

Education for the Returning for the

Non-Traditional Aged Student

CDHS DIVISION

# **Intergenerational Classroom Communication in Higher Education for the Returning Non-Traditional Aged Student**

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I was about thirty minutes into a lecture at Buffalo State College recently when I looked out at the class and noticed about seven to eight students “texting” while I was lecturing. Two or three were busy on their laptops, one was sleeping, and yet another was throwing off *nonverbals* that said she wanted me dead!

Just a typical day in the life of a “baby boomer” professor and a mix of twenty-something students or “Gen-Xers,” and a sprinkling of students representing “Generation Y,” (aka the “net generation,” or “echo boomers.” I’m sure the student didn’t really want me dead, but I did observe a number of indisputable “truths” about our intergenerational workforce.

- Our younger generations are both technologically savvy and culturally diverse; they are in fact absorbed by and in their technology
- All generations hold misperceptions and engage in stereotypes of other generations
- The issue of the intergenerational workforce will need to be addressed in every organization, company and department for years to come

This training guide is intended to create an awareness and understanding of the implications for our contemporary “intergenerational classroom” and address ways in which five diverse generations can productively coincide with each other by incorporating key concepts of communication, perception, and stereotyping. Of special concern in this study, a continuation of analysis of the role communication plays in the Intergenerational workplace and classroom. The added variable in the *present analysis looks at the “returning” college student; those students who have been away from the classroom for an extended period of time, but decide to continue their college education and return to the classroom.* This training guide is of special interest to this group, as it addresses how to “survive” such an environment and the role that effective communication can play in achieving that objective. Research for this guide includes traditional academic research from the fields of communication, sociology, and psychology, with a special focus on group dynamics, stereotypes, and perception. Survey data and face-to-face discussions from college students and faculty is also examined and explained as an indicator of perceptions held by members of the multiple generations in the college setting today.

In addition, I’ve done a substantial amount of research by conducting numerous interviews and discussions with professional consultants, academics, trainers, students, and dozens of individuals currently participating in the intergenerational workforce today, while attending numerous seminars addressing effective intergenerational communication.

## **Who are the Five Generations in Today’s culture?**

Not too long ago, I was discussing the issue of people from different generations interacting with each other in the workplace in my group communication class at Buffalo State College. A twenty-nine year old male complained about how “lazy” and “disrespectful” some of his restaurant co-workers were. When I asked him to explain what he meant by that remark, he said he was referring

to the “younger” workers, the seventeen and eighteen year olds! In addition to making me feel *really* old, I couldn’t help but see the irony here. Isn’t that the exact perception or stereotype that “baby-boomers” have of “Generation X”?

Another example of anecdotal evidence illustrative of the generational differences facing us was a recent discussion I had with a 22-year old “millennial” bartender. He told me two very interesting things from that generation’s perspective. Keep in mind that in 2014, millennials comprise today’s 22-33 year olds. First, he believes that his generation is technologically savvy and superior to those younger than he was. He was referring to the youngest generation, often referred to as “GEN 2020” or “Generation Z.” He told me, “We (the millennials) know about technology, they (GEN 2020) know about social media. There’s a big difference.” He made his point by indicating that when he dated millennial women, as opposed to women in “Generation Y,” that the younger women “are always texting during the date.” His assertion was that, based on his personal experience, the older women (millennials) tended to talk more directly to him, be more engaging, and make more consistent or direct eye contact. In other words, they were more effective communicators, with better interpersonal skills.

I would share one last anecdotal illustration from engaging, on a daily basis, with primarily GEN 2020 and millennial students in a college setting. It is my contention that younger generations do not take criticism well and often misinterpret it to be unnecessary, condescending, and punitive. Some college professors may view such criticism as helpful, nurturing, and even a form of enabling or empowerment.

The examples above exemplify the problem facing many in the workforce (and contemporary college classroom) today. With people delaying retirement and working well past the traditional retirement age of days gone by for economic and personal reasons, we are now confronted with five very distinct generations of workers today. In fact, “according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1.2 million Americans age 75 or older were working last year (2010), up from 787,000 in 2001” (Meyer, 2011). They have different lifestyles, political beliefs, work ethics, values, experience, and technological expertise. Unfortunately, they all come to the workplace with different attitudes, beliefs and values, or what group communication researchers call “baggage.” As a result, the five generations all hold common perceptions and stereotypes of each other. Before examining these perceptions and stereotypes, the following is a general, but commonly agreed upon, breakdown of the intergenerational workforce by academics, researchers, and consultants in this area.

*“The Matures”* (also known as the “Silent Generation” or “The Marines” or “The Traditionalists” or the “Builders”; were born before 1946)

*“The Boomers”* (commonly referred to as “Baby Boomers”; born between 1946 and 1964)

*“Generation X”* (also known as “Gen-Xers”; born between 1965 and 1979)

*“Generation Y”* (the children of the baby boomers; also known “echo-boomers” or the “net-generation” or the “millennial generation”; born between 1980 and 2000)

“Generation Z” (also labeled “Generation 2020”; born 2001- )

Now that we’ve looked at the “landscape” of the current intergenerational workforce from a *demographic* perspective based on age, a far more significant perspective in understanding this dynamic is based on the *attitudes, beliefs, and values* that each of these generations is said to represent. However, it is important to keep in mind that these generational characteristics and attributes can be very subjective and will be discussed at length later.

## **The Matures**

**Born between 1901-1945**

**aka “The Veterans,” “The Traditionalists,” “The Silent Generation”)**

- Constitute 11% of the workforce
- Grew up during the turbulent times of World War II and the Great Depression
- Patriotism was a core value for this generation, who grew up with shortages and sacrifice during much of their lifetime
- Tend to be frugal and cautious about spending money
- Tend to work hard at a single task or job until completion
- Often put their own interests asides for the common good
- Plan ahead, are reliable, dependable and disciplined
- While possessing vague experience in the workplace, may be too cautious with resources and lack spontaneity or flexibility

## **Baby Boomers**

**Born between 1946-1964**

**(aka “Boomers”)**

- Constitute 46% of the workforce; it is projected that they will dominate the workforce until the year 2015
- Early Boomers tend to be more secure financially than late Boomers, while late Boomers tend to be more sarcastic and cynical
- Were influenced by television, the Vietnam War, the Pill, political assassination, the civil rights and women’s movements, the sexual revolution, and the sheer size of their generation
- Sex, drugs, rock and roll
- Believe in the “good life,” materialistic values, and are major consumers
- Tend to be “self-absorbed” because they believe they are “special”; refer to themselves as the greatest generation

- Tend to see “work” as an end to itself; not a means to an end; they expect to be fulfilled at work and by their jobs
- Value education and see it as a requirement for success
- Are confident in their abilities, will devote as much time or effort as necessary to complete a task or job
- Will challenge “old” or outdated ways of doing things in the workplace
- Will take on big “causes” or movements
- Think they’re “right” all the time
- Expect others (other generations) to hold similar beliefs and values to theirs
- May break ethical or moral rules if they feel it will benefit them
- Motivated to be successful in life and in the workplace
- Often refer to themselves or their ideas as “old school”

## **Generation X**

**Born between 1965 and 1979**

**(aka “X-ers”)**

- Constitute 29% of the workforce
- Often perceived as “disloyal job-hoppers” who don’t want to pay their dues, want to start at the “top” in an organization or company, and want everything their own way
- Far more technologically sophisticated and comfortable with technology in their personal lives and in the workplace
- Are influenced by MTV, divorce, Watergate, “McJobs,” political and government corruption
- Are willing to take risks, strive to increase their knowledge, and believe strongly in the benefits of “innovation” in the workplace; they believe that personal and job security hinges on staying “cutting edge” in the workplace, especially as it relates to technology
- “Gen X” responds best to leaders, managers, and trainers who spend time coaching, teaching, and clarifying the day-to-day tasks in the workplace; this is often referred to as “telling behavior” in research on group communication and leadership
- They also believe in what researchers call “reward power” from authority and management; they want to be told their did a “good” job in the workplace
- They distrust institutions, especially government

- Are a very diverse and tolerant generation; they are also comfortable with “change” in the workplace, while older generations value “stability” and certainty
- They view work or employment as a “means” to an “end”
- They value the concept of “family”
- Often appear negative and pessimistic
- Unlike the “boomers,” they are unwilling to put other aspects of their lives aside for the sake of work; their jobs are only a part of their lives
- May seem unmotivated and alienated to older generations and co-workers
- Often consider older generations as “bossy” or “pushy”

## **Generation Y**

**Born between 1980-2000**

**(aka “The Millennials”)**

- Constitute 14 percent of the workforce and represent the second youngest generation in the workforce
- They are the children of the “baby-boomers”
- They exude what sociologists refer to as a high “self-perception” or self-esteem; they feel good about themselves
- Influenced by AIDS/HIV, technology and the internet, video games, and the Death of Princess Diana)
- Raised by overly-protective and overinvolved “helicopter” parents
- They value diversity, tolerance, and family
- Are major consumers in our economy
- Are completely technologically and media savvy
- Tend to be optimistic and innovative
- Appear to be lack motivation and initiative in the workplace
- Seem to need constant praise and do not accept criticism very well
- Do not link or connect rewards, such as grades, performance evaluations, pay raises, promotions, etc.) to performance
- Are very comfortable with collaborative work (groups, teams, co-workers) and enjoy “networking” with others socially and professionally
- It is predicted that they will be the most capable, yet most demanding generation in the workforce



- Leaders, managers, and trainers will need to keep them “engaged” in the workplace, emphasizing speech, customization, and interactivity

## **Generation Z**

Born between 2001-  
(aka “GEN 2020”)

- The 5<sup>th</sup> Generation of 23 million members and growing and will join the workforce in 2020
- Typically children of older parents, born into small, dual income families
- Influenced by 9/11, Facebook, the election of Barack Obama, the first black president in the history of the United States
- The youngest generation, yet most technologically savvy; they are “hyper- connected” through technology and often multi-task with email, iPods, cellphones, etc. Tend to embrace diversity and inclusion
- Prefer to “text” rather than talk (Facebook vs. Face-to-Face)
- Prefer computers and the Internet to books and outdoor activities
- Tend to have short attention spans and are poor at interpersonal and face-to-face communication situations
- Appear to have a balanced focus on work and personal life
- They tend to mature or grow up faster because of access to more mature media content and social networking
- They tolerate and accept the changing nature of life and the workplace; change is the norm, rather than the exception
- They process information as lightning speed and need to share information on demand
- They will experience significant economic turmoil in their lifetime and tend to be more fiscally conservative, especially regarding spending
- Tend to be loyal to themselves, rather than their company
- Work to live and not live to work
- Appear to be somewhat self-centered and narcissistic
- Tend to be flexible, but want immediate and honest feedback
- Expect their leader, managers, supervisors, and trainers to collaborate with them and view them as equal partners in the workplace

Now that I've offended everyone from seventeen to ninety-two years old, let me continue! It is very important that we keep in mind that any attempt to describe and categorize the give generations in the workforce is necessarily subjective and open to argument. For example, any discussion of generational differences and classifying people demographically is difficult. There is no agreement on terminology in this classification based on age. It has become somewhat confusing when generations are given multiple labels. For example, most demographers list the years representing "Generation X" spanning the years of 1965-1979, while *The Population Reference Bureau (PRB)*, a private, non-profit organization that examines trends in population, health, and the environment, sees "Gen X-ers" as those individuals born between the years of 1965-1982. The same generation may be called the millennials, echo-boomers or the net-generation, while others today call the youngest generation Generation Z by some and GEN 2020. Moreover, even when we formulate these generational categories, there are differences among the youngest and oldest members *existing within each generation*. Common sense tells us that the youngest members of any generation will tend to be more similar to, and identify more closely with the older members of the generation that follows it. Similarly, the oldest members of any generation tend to identify more with the younger members of the generation, which came before them. Birds of a feather flock together. The lesson here is that these categories of generations tend to be somewhat arbitrary; as do the stereotypes and perceptions we have about them. However, the next chapter will examine the "reality" of these perceptions and stereotypes that exist in society in general, as well as in the workplace or college classrooms specifically.

We will then examine the role of communication in such a diverse intergenerational classroom. Finally, recommendations for survival in the intergenerational classroom will be presented for nontraditional and returning college students to improve the communication and efficiency of students attempting to navigate the intergenerational classroom and contemporary educational environment

According to the Bureau of labor Statistics, in 2014, we are now experiencing the first time five generations are working side by side. In five years, the latest generation will extend that reality to the college classroom. "Generation Z" (born in 2000), will be graduating from high school and beginning their college careers.



## Intergenerational Perceptions and Stereotypes in Our Society and Culture

*“Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that came after it.”-  
--George Orwell”*

The role of perception and stereotypes in understanding the intergenerational workplace is crucial. In fact, it is how we perceive ourselves and others that establishes and guides our communication with others.

### The Role of Perception and Communication

*Perception* may be defined as the process of gathering sensory information and assigning meaning to it. Our eye, ears, nose, skin, and taste buds gather information. Our brain then selects, gathers organizes, interprets, and evaluates this information; the result is what we call perception.

Perception also influences what stimuli or messages you take in and the meanings you give to them. It should also be noted that perception is not passive and objective; it is actually a very active process that is both subjective and creative. Moreover, perception is *selective* in nature. This means we tend to accept some stimuli and messages, while ignoring others. Researchers and sociologists refer to this act as *selective perception* and this affects how we perceive and communicate with others.

The process of perception involves three stages:

1. Selection: We ignore some stimuli and messages, but pay attention to others
2. Organization: We organize and categorize stimuli and messages
3. Interpretation: We give meaning to stimuli and messages to “make sense” of the world around us

Since perception is “selective” in nature, it can also lead to one of the most common, yet potentially harmful, aspects in society today; *stereotyping*.

*Stereotyping* may best be defined as the process of placing people and things into categories, and making judgments about others when we tend to overgeneralize (i.e., Polish people, jocks, or blondes are dumb, Jewish people are frugal, all Irish people drink heavily and often, all men are “pigs,” baby-boomers are greedy, gen-xers are lazy and self-absorbed, and all Muslims are terrorists.

Now as troubling as these above stereotypes may be, we must agree that they dictate and guide our communication. They are problematic because when we stereotype we tend to put people into blocks or categories. This also explains how perception is selective. For example, let’s say that you



believe all baby boomers are greedy. If you happen to meet a “boomer” who is very generous or shows no indications of being greedy, you tend to ignore this because of cognitive dissonance. All of those “generic” characteristics of each generation outlined above can certainly lead to stereotyping. We need to be aware of this and how dangerous it can be.

Perception affects our communication with others. It determines with whom we communicate and decide not to communicate with. Our first impressions (perceptions) of others may or may not be accurate. How often have we made an initial impression about someone, only to find out after coming to know them better, that these initial perceptions were not true. Perceptions should ideally not get in the way of genuine communication, but preconceived notions of other people, groups, cultures, religions, and nations often hinder effective communication because of

bias, prejudice, and stereotyping. Certainly the process of categorizing individuals according to generational characteristics and perceptions is both an oversimplification and overgeneralization.

Adams and Galanes state that, “We can all see characteristics of each generation in ourselves. We also know people who display few or none of the characteristics that are supposed to exemplify their generation. However, the point to remember is this: Our early influences from family, friends, and institutions such as the media affect the way we perceive the world around us and the way we communicate, which in turn affects our behavior in small groups. Understanding something different from yours---what their hopes and fears are, what pressures operate on them, what the formative events were in their lives---will help you make the most of your differences in small groups instead of bogging you down” (Adams and Galanes, 2012).

It is apparent that the better we can recognize and be sensitive to the ideas, beliefs and values of other generations, and their differences, the more effective and productive we will be in the intergenerational workplace.

## **Diversity and Generational Differences**

*Diversity* is a double-edged sword in any group, company, organization, or institution, as well as the classroom. While it should be welcomed and celebrated in our culture and workplace, it can also pose significant challenges and obstacles, whether in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation, or age.

Groups usually benefit substantially from diverse membership and participation (Gastil et al., 2007). Member diversity is defined as proportional representation by culture, ethnicity, gender, and **age** (Karakowski & Siegel, 1999; McLeod et al., 1996). It should be noted that the individuals in these heterogeneous groups each bring different backgrounds, experiences, perceptions, influences, and stereotypes. Rothwell examines the challenges that diversity may cause in relation to age or generational differences when he states:

“Consider challenges posed by just diversity in age (Timmerman, 2000). Generalizations based on these categories (Matures, Boomers, Generation X, etc.) should be embraced cautiously, but generational differences do pose significant challenges for groups. Older members (Matures or Boomers) in college groups composed mostly of teens and 20-somethings (Gen-Yers) may have a tough time identifying with younger members, and vice versa. Older members may feel isolated and become nonparticipants, or they may “take charge” as in a parental role without the willing acceptance of younger members. Those individuals fresh out of college who join the business and professional world may find it intimidating working with more mature experienced group members. Issues associated with following rules, respect for authority, and attention to task and details may trigger clashes. **Despite these challenges, diverse membership in groups is generally a positive influence**” (Rothwell, 2010).

Thus my earlier contention that age or generational differences can be a blessing or a curse in the workplace and the college classroom. The popular CBS reality television program, *Survivor*, has often illustrated the intense conflict and antagonism between the younger and older members of a “tribe”

and the distrust that may result. It is not unusual in reality television, or in the workplace, that these differences often result in factions of “young” and “old” members merge together for protection and safety in numbers.

## **What Does The Generational Divide Mean for the Future?**

It should be obvious to all of us that the intergenerational workplace is here to stay. The question now becomes, “What should or can we do about it”? The perspective here is that the *field of communication*, especially key concepts and theories of group communication and leadership, may be used as a vehicle to address this five generation phenomenon in the workplace. Up until this point, we have explored the categories and characteristics of the five intergenerational workforce, the role of perception and the dangers of stereotyping, when comparing these different generations, and how diversity can be a “catch 22” or double-edged sword as we work with co-workers, administrators and fellow trainers.

The remainder of this training guide will focus on the nature of communication, its characteristics, functions, types, and goals. Of special significance will be the principles and foundations of *group communication*, *styles of leadership*, and what communication scholars call the concept of *identification*, or the act of establishing “common ground” between diverse groups in our culture, society, and the workplace. By incorporating a communication perspective to the intergenerational workforce, we will attempt to provide a better understanding and appreciation of how different generations of college students can more effectively navigate the contemporary world of higher education.

We will conclude with a series of recommendations and advice on how to enhance the complex and diverse relationships that can develop in the intergenerational workplace in general, and in the modern college classroom specifically. While these suggestions may be applicable to all organizations, businesses, and groups, special consideration will be given to trainers and the specific content of the social services training environment.

# A Communication Perspective for the Intergenerational Classroom

*‘I’m a great believer that any tool that enhances communication has profound effects in terms of how people can learn from each other, and how they can achieve the kind of freedoms that they’re interested in.’*

--Bill Gates

**C**ommunicatin is a term that has become a part of our everyday lexicon. We talk about it all the time and lament the fact that we can’t “communicate” with each other, or that we have a “lack of communication” in our family, or that there has been a “communication breakdown” within the organization.

Unfortunately, we usually refer to communication in a negative way, such as a “miscommunication” or a political candidate being a “poor communicator” on the campaign trail. The approach taken here, however, will be to demonstrate how communication may be used as a useful method or tool for the trainer in the intergenerational workplace and in our democratic society in general. We will conclude with a series of recommendations on how major principles of communication may be used to enhance the workplace environment for trainers and administrators alike.

## Communication Defined

*Communication* may be defined as “a transactional process in which people create, send, and receive symbolic messages to construct and interpret meaning in a variety of situations and contexts (Bryski and Brown, 2011).

There are also seven characteristics of communication:

- Communication is symbolic
- Communication is the construction of meaning
- Communication is process-oriented or circular
- Communication is irreversible and unrepeatable
- Communication is complex
- Communication involves the total personality
- Communication is situational or contextual
- Communication is the basis of change



### **Communication is Symbolic:**

When we engage in communication, we use symbols to construct meaning. **A symbol** is an object that represents something abstract. We use symbols such as words, icons, images, tone of voice, and facial expressions to represent ideas or concepts. However, remember that when we use words, our words are not the actual idea. Instead, our words only *represent* our ideas. Ultimately, words contain meaning. When we interact during a training session, or carelessly refer to those of another generation in the workplace as “lazy,” “unmotivated,” or “greedy,” we run the risk of alienating or and angering those around us. Words can hurt and we need to remain sensitive to the ideas, beliefs, and attitudes of others, especially those who are different from us.

### **Communication is the Construction of Meaning:**

The idea of communication as a symbolic process leads into another characteristic of communication, that communication is the **construction of meaning**. We use symbols through verbal and nonverbal messages to construct meaning. This characteristic emphasizes how meaning is constructed through the sending and receiving of messages, ideas, and values through verbal and nonverbal communication. The exchange of ideas in a context or situation, be it a departmental meeting or consultation with a client. Think about how those younger generations may send nonverbal and symbolic messages by sporting a tattoo, a “nose-ring” or tongue- piercing. Differences in generations may also be reflected by dress or clothing, hairstyle, and rude behavior while texting during a meeting. Everything we do sends some sort of message or idea. There is an expression in the field of communication; “One cannot **not** communicate.” It is imperative, especially in the workplace, we remain aware of the messages we are sending each day, verbal or nonverbal!

### **Communication is Process-oriented:**

The process-oriented nature means communication is an ongoing and continuous process. One way to understand communication as process-oriented is to simply conceptualize communication as an evolutionary process that develops and grows. For example, communication does not start and stop with each conversation. Instead, it evolves. How we end a previous conversation will influence how we begin the next conversation when we meet that same person.



When we talk about the process of communication, the element of feedback becomes a key ingredient in our understanding of how communication works. **Feedback** is any verbal or nonverbal response to a message. In other words, communication does not simply travel from “Source A” to “Destination B” and end there. It is the element of feedback that makes communication a never-ending process, with no beginning, middle or end. It is this verbal and nonverbal feedback we send when interacting with each other that makes human communication process-oriented. For example, when a trainer is conducting a training session and notices that half of the audience is falling asleep and the other half is “texting” rather than listening, the audience is providing negative feedback (not to mention a lack of respect). On the other hand, the trainer is receiving positive feedback when there is an attentive audience, talking diligent notes, and nodding affirmatively during the session.

### **Communication is Irreversible and Unrepeatable:**

Inasmuch as communication is constantly changing and evolving, we can argue that it is **irreversible**; once it occurs, you can’t “take it back” or “undo” communication after it takes place. If a “Baby-Boomer” refers to a “Gen-X” co-worker as “lazy” or “unmotivated,” the damage is done! It is impossible to take it back no matter how much you apologize or say, “I really didn’t mean what I said.” Similarly, in a courtroom, when the prosecuting attorney makes a statement about the defendant on trial and the defense attorney objects, the judge might then tell the court stenographer to “strike that last remark from the record.” The problem, of course, is that everybody in the courtroom heard it; including the judge, the jury, the media covering the trial, and the public observing the trial. These examples illustrate the irreversible nature of communication.

To say that communication is **unrepeatable** is a bit different than noting its irreversibility. There is an expression in the field of communication that states, “You can’t step in the same river twice.” This means you can never repeat the same message in the exact same way. If you see a movie, really enjoy it, and then see it for a second or third time, the movie (message) is different each additional time you see it. It is different for many reasons. Time has elapsed since you last saw the movie, or maybe you’re seeing it with different people than you did before. More importantly, you are seeing the message from various perspectives and maybe even seeing different aspects of the movie every time you see it. In the workplace, we often complain that messages or ideas become too repetitive or boring. I would argue that the term *reinforcement* is far more accurate (and positive) than *repetition* because often times others do not hear or understand a message the first time around or need clarification and reinforcement down the road.

Like a river, communication is constantly flowing and changing; it is irreversible and unrepeatable

## Communication is Complex:



Perhaps no characteristic of communication is reflected more in the intergenerational workplace than complexity. Since communication involves human beings, it is necessarily **complex**.

We all have different attitudes, beliefs, and values. People tend to communicate and perceive others based on those beliefs and values; this is where potential problems begin to emerge. When people discuss and debate such issues as politics, the death penalty, abortion, the legalization of marijuana, or animal rights, their beliefs and values conflict with each other. Such variables as age, gender, race, and social status all affect our communication with others. That is why communication is so complex. For example, younger generations might have a totally different perspective on their jobs than the older generations in the workplace. The Matures and Baby-Boomers may see their jobs or careers as the most important part of their lives, while younger generations only see it as one aspect of their existence or simply a necessary evil to survive. These differences can cause clashes in the workplace and affect communication negatively. It is imperative that these differences be addressed if genuine communication is to take place in the intergenerational workplace.

## Communication Involves the Total Personality:

Everything that we have learned from our parents, our teachers, siblings, and peers affects our communication; this is what we mean when we say that communication **involves the total personality**. This is how we develop our attitudes, beliefs, and values about ourselves and the world around us. It makes sense that age or inherent generational differences will affect our personality. Each generation develops what group communication researchers call **cohesiveness** or a sense of unity. It provides protection or safety net as a group. It also causes each “generation” to literally establish an “us against the world” attitude. This certainly extends into the workplace. While cohesiveness is a key factor in providing security of those with similar interests and demographics, the intergenerational workforce must learn to become less isolated and share common beliefs and experiences, rather than use them to divide.

## Communication is Situational and Contextual:

When we say that communication is **situational and contextual** what we mean is that the environment, setting, or context will affect or determine our communication behavior. For example,

CDHS trainers and supervisors are expected to engage in a particular type of behavior or protocol at work or during a training session. The situation or context requires a sense of professionalism and decorum in the workplace. However, those same co-workers may exhibit a totally different type of behavior at a football game or while socializing at a party. Roles, status, and workplace rules are no longer as important because the situation or the environment has changed. A more informal or casual behavior is acceptable than it is at the office. While the intergenerational workplace is the focus here, one way in which members of different generations can gain a better understanding and appreciation for each other is to get together outside of the workplace environment. Different surroundings and a less work-intensive environment can work wonders for allowing co-workers to unwind and let their hair down in a more casual or social context or setting.

### **Communication is the basis of Change:**

The final characteristic looks at the primary function or goal of communication. When we say that communication is the **basis of change**, we simply mean that we communicate for a reason. All communication is purposeful and based on motive. We engage in communication to change other people's attitudes, beliefs, and values. This is not as sinister as it may sound. We can change people by empowering or teaching them. Parents guide and reinforce positive values in their children, teachers teach, and role models empower. Similarly, we also use communication to influence, motivate, persuade, and even manipulate others. For trainers, supervisors, and administrators in the give generation workplace, this is of utmost importance. As we will see later, it is imperative that the experience of the older generations (The Matures and the Baby-Boomers) be shared and used to educate and empower younger coworkers. In much the same way, the technologically savvy and sophisticated Generations X, Y, and Z need to share their expertise with technology and social networking with their more experienced (notice I didn't say "older") colleagues. This is a "win-win" situation for the entire department, organization, or company. Ultimately, it is only through **purposeful communication** that we can achieve this.

### **The Three Goals of Communication:**

We will end this section by briefly looking at the **three goals of communication**, or stated differently, three reasons why people communicate. This gets to the heart communication and why it is so vital in the intergenerational workforce.

It is imperative to look at the practical aspects of how communication serves as an important part of our daily interactions. Since communication is purposive and always has a reason or motive, it is worthwhile examining just exactly *why* we communicate with others. There are three distinct reasons for engaging in human communication.

#### **To Increase Our Personal Awareness:**

First, we communicate to **increase our personal awareness**. Communication is essential in our efforts to gain knowledge and understanding. Most people attend college to receive a general education, as well as a more intensive knowledge about a specific discipline or field of study. More

importantly, when we interact with others, especially those from different cultures, races, backgrounds and ages, we learn valuable information and lessons from these encounters. The more any generation can learn from or about other generations, the more effective subsequent communication will be between them.

### **To Establish Our Social and Professional Relationships:**

Another reason we communicate is to **establish and improve our social and professional relationships**. That is, we communicate to make friends and acquaintances and establish relationships that hopefully will last a lifetime. Communication is essential for our personal, social, and professional relationships with others. Whether we consider the interaction between a group of close friends, in our family, in a successful marriage, between business associates, or with prospective clients, it becomes obvious that communication is the element required to make those relationships successful and fulfilling.

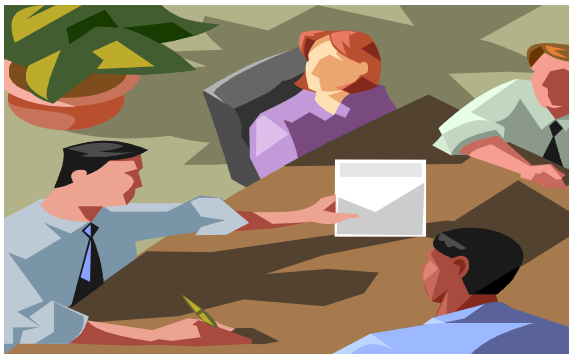
### **To Influence Other People's Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values:**

Finally, we communicate to **change or influence other people's attitudes, beliefs, and values**. Once again, we must stress the persuasive nature of communication as an attempt to influence others in a variety of personal, social, and professional contexts or situations. In the complex intergenerational workplace, those individuals who are most influential and persuasive in changing others attitudes, beliefs, and values will be invaluable to any organization, department, or group. While the Matures and Baby-Boomers may be hesitant to incorporate new technology and social networking to publicize a new departmental website to potential clients, those younger coworkers may need to convince them of the advantages and benefits in doing so. Similarly, more experienced trainers and supervisors need to share their expertise and experience with younger co-workers (i.e., to show them the ropes) to avoid pitfalls and negative consequences.

The final issue to be addressed will be to answer the question, "Now what?" Up to this point, the five generations of the workforce have been expanded upon and the unique demographic characteristics, influences, and attitudes of each generation have been examined. Perception, stereotypes, diversity, and the nature of communication have been introduced as concepts and potential tools for enhancing the working relationships in this complicated, yet very real phenomenon in the workplace.

The remainder of this guide will present some specific recommendations for the contemporary, intergenerational classroom, which is not unlike any other workplace environment, where interpersonal and group communication between a diverse audience engages in purposeful communication activity. The perceptual differences of race, gender, and age, as well as the attitudes, beliefs, and values associated with those perceptions and stereotypes, will be a focal point for these recommendations. The explicit purpose of this endeavor is to provide a primer for the

intergenerational college student in today's changing world of higher education.



## **Strategies and Recommendations for Academic Survival in the Intergenerational Classroom**

“It is precisely because neither individuals nor small groups can be fully self-sufficient that cooperation is necessary to human survival and flourishing.” ---*Tom G. Palmer*

**I**t's a jungle out there! To survive this intergenerational classroom will require a skill set for each and every member. Race, gender, sexual orientation, and age are all variables that need to be taken into consideration for this survival. Those individuals armed with a solid understanding of communication will thrive.



**\*\*Note: Research findings and results from the two separate surveys conducted in this current study will be discussed and examined here.**

(\*\*Approx. 3-4 pages)

## **Recommendations for the Intergenerational Classroom**

- **Each generation in the academic workplace or intergenerational classroom must make every effort to understand as much as possible about the attitudes, beliefs, and values of other generations in the workplace**

The younger generations in the academic workplace need to seek advice from the experienced senior Matures and Baby-Boomer co-workers. Similarly, the technological knowledge and social networking savvy of the younger generations needs to be admired and welcomed by the older generations in an attempt to improve the training environment and workplace. Just as Generations X, Y, and Z can benefit from the experience of an organization's Matures and Baby-Boomers, the older generations can certainly benefit from new and innovative approaches in technology and social networking. Adams and Galanes agree when they assert that, "Working with diversity does not come without **mindful communication**. We have to be alert, open, willing, and reflective if we are to bridge differences. You simply cannot stay stuck in your routine ways of doing things, unwilling to experiment, listen, learn about others, or be open to new possibilities" (Adams and Galanes, 2012). This can be accomplished through "brainstorming sessions," formal meetings, and with the help of communication and image consultants focusing on communication skills and group dynamics in the workplace.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Every effort must be made to expose and identify the stereotypes and misperceptions that students, faculty, and college administrators may have about co-workers from other generations**

Earlier we looked at those perceptions and stereotypes that are commonly held by and toward the five generations of the contemporary workforce. Unless these stereotypes are addressed and exposed, they will potentially hinder effective communication and productivity in the college classroom and academic workplace. It will be up to all members of any organization or department to address and show empathy towards other's attitudes, beliefs, and values.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Appreciate the value of diversity in the college setting**

Diversity, including differences in age, is a reality that will be a part of our culture for the rest of our lives and careers. It is imperative that we look at the positive side of diversity in the college classroom for the returning, non-traditional student as a means to become more cohesive, rather than as an issue that separates and divides us.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Openly acknowledge differences concerning race, gender, and age**

Rather than ignore differences and avoid directly addressing them, it is imperative that we recognize and discuss differences between co-workers, especially age or generational differences. Differences in the attitudes, beliefs, and values among the five generations can become the "800- pound gorilla" in the room. Issues of work ethic, motivation, technology, and the value of experience are all potential topics for further discussion and training.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Talk openly about how diversity and differences may actually positively help the group**

Most researchers in communication and sociology agree that for groups to be effective, negative conflict caused by diversity and different attitudes, beliefs, and values must be addressed and resolved. It is best to be as candid as possible when talking and interacting with co-workers and clients representing the five different generations in the workplace.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Use communication strategies and skills to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each generation and what they can contribute to the overall group**

A better understanding of communication, perception, diversity, and the dangers of stereotyping can be useful in assessing the strengths and limitations of each generation and how each generation or “sub-group” can contribute to the greater good of the group. Different generations of students possess both strengths and weaknesses as they enter any classroom setting. For example, younger students and workers seem more comfortable and adept with technology and social media than older generations of students and professors. In many classrooms today, course assignments and projects will require some sort of “group” or “team” presentation. While older, more experienced students may have structural, organizational, and leadership skills, younger students and classmates may contribute with the familiarity and expertise of how to design and produce a “PowerPoint” presentation, use of social media, or downloading a “YouTube” video from the Internet to enhance a group presentation or incorporate visual aids into that presentation.

Moreover, teachers, professors, and supervisors, regardless of age, should consider using the latest technology for teaching, instructional, and managerial purposes. Younger students and workers tend to be more comfortable with this approach than “old school” teaching techniques. For example, the old-fashioned classroom chalkboard, flipchart, or antiquated overhead projector, seem archaic to the generations that were raised on fast-paced video games, smartphones, and social media. Classroom and workplace technology should be updated for a more dynamic and interesting classroom environment. Electronic readers such as the Nook and Kindle are rapidly replacing the traditional textbook for many college students, not to mention the technological advancements with “tablets,” iPhones, and iPads. As an educator, if utilizing the latest technology will assure that my students are reading the textbook, newspapers, news magazines, and other assigned readings, I have no objections to the latest electronic advancements in the classroom. In fact, electronic textbooks and “eReaders” are more than welcome, if it means that students are doing the assigned reading. In addition, the use of PowerPoint presentations and video are rapidly replacing the “handout” in the classroom and the workplace. Conference calls are being succeeded by video conferences and streaming video, while face-to-face communication is being phased out by social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram) and “texting.”

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here for final report**

- **Use the principles of “rhetorical sensitivity” and “devil’s advocate” to address generational conflict and differences in a positive way**

Scholars and researchers in group dynamics and leadership on something called **rhetorical sensitivity** in groups and teams. It should come as no surprise that generational differences can cause conflict and tension in any group context or environment. Since different generations will tend to express different opinions, it is importance to establish a “climate of tolerance” and sensitivity in the workplace. For example, if a Gen-X co-worker or classmate expresses a personal opinion or perspective on a given issue, it would be somewhat insensitivities for a Baby-Boomer or



Mature to blurt out, “That the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” A more strategically sensitive response would be, “Well, I see where you’re coming from, but have you considered the potential consequences to that idea.” The strategy of playing **devil’s advocate** is an excellent way to “disagree without being disagreeable” in groups. I have found playing devil’s advocate is especially useful for those group members who have little experience and power in the organization, company, or department. It allows them to question a viewpoint or opinion of another group member, without appearing confrontational or disagreeable. They can also be seen as “contributing” to the discussion, while offering their own ideas and opinions.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations to be added here in final report**

- **Appoint “leaders” or spokespersons to represent subgroups or generational viewpoints and perspectives**

One possibility would be to form an “Intergenerational Workplace Committee” to address any concerns or conflict that may arise in the workplace. Ideally, the committee would consist of at least one member from each generation that is employed in the organization, company, or department.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations will be added here for final report**

- **Learn to become more accepting to “newcomers,” including their ideas, strategies, and differences**

Research tells us that the ability and willingness to accept “newcomers” into a group has a direct correlation to group development and efficiency. This is especially true when the new hire represents a minority generation in the organization (Rothwell, 2010).

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations will be added here for final report**

- **Students, faculty, department chairs, and administrators need to become aware of what the most effective types of leadership are for each generation in the college setting**

Supervisors, senior trainers, and management serving as “leaders” in any group, team, or department, need to recognize which **style of leadership** is most appropriate and effective for each generation represented in the workplace. For example, research tells us that members of “Generation X” tend to respond best to leaders and managers who spend time “coaching” and “clarifying” the day-to-day tasks in the workplace, and more importantly, leaders and supervisors who reward and “give credit” for results achieved. On the other hand, the even younger co-workers in “Generation Y” prefer leaders and supervisors who keep them constantly engaged and interested with speed, customization, technological innovation, and interactivity. Interestingly, while these

younger classmates and co-workers adapt well to working in groups or “teams” in both the classroom and the workplace, they also demand “autonomy” or freedom, independence, and “space” to do their work and perform their tasks without a professor or supervisor “hovering” over the group and constantly looking over their shoulder.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations will be added here for final report**

- **Establish levels of “bonding” or “common ground” between the five generation workforce**

One of the oldest strategies in political campaigns or even the world of advertising is what speech and rhetorical scholars call **the concept of identification**. This concept refers to any attempt by an individual or group to find “common ground” with your audience. The principle of identification can also be applied to the intergenerational classroom and academic workplace. It is important for members of any group to look for “commonalities” and similar interests or concerns. This group bonding has been called **symbolic convergence**, in which “human beings create and share meanings through their talk, a central element of the communication process” (Adams and Galanes, 2012).

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations will be added here for final report**

- **While bridging “differences” make sure to use the concept of “autonomy” with each generation and not stifle the ideas, strengths, and innovations each generation brings to the workplace**

**Autonomy** means freedom or independence, and is an “ideal” we strive for in any group situation or environment. Nobody wants somebody constantly “looking over their shoulder” in the workplace setting. Think about the implications for the intergenerational workforce. One perception (stereotype) about the older generations is that they tend to be overly “bossy” or controlling, especially when interaction with those from younger generations. It is important that Boomers and Matures give those younger coworkers their “personal space” in the workplace. In the classroom setting, older generations will be much more effective as leaders and managers if they spend time “coaching” younger students and colleagues, clarifying day to day tasks, and giving credit for achieving results.

**\*\*Specific examples and recommendations will be added here for final report**

It is my hope that this guide will serve as only a “starting point” in understanding the complexity of the intergenerational college classroom and academic workplace for students, faculty, department

chairs, college administrators, as well as trainers, supervisors, and administrators. Much more research and treatment of the issue is called for by academics, communication experts, consultants, and those trainers who comprise the intergenerational classroom and workplace. With that in mind, one thing is already crystal clear. Communication will be the key to addressing the issue for years to come.

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## Conclusion and Future Research

*“A declining institution often experiences survival of the unfittest.”* --- John McCarthy

**T**he intergenerational classroom (workplace) has been examined through the lens of communication, including the role of perception, stereotypes and diversity. It has become abundantly clear that workers today must learn to adjust to each other in relation to gender, racial, cultural, and now “age” differences.

I have been actively associated with trainers and organizations such as CDHS for nearly three decades now as a professor of communication and consultant. I have interacted with trainers, supervisors, and administrators in face-to-face, small group, and workshop or seminar settings during that time. I have always known them to meet the challenges of our culture and society, while adapting to the economic and social environment in meeting the challenges that they encounter on a daily basis.

They have always met those challenges and then some. However, this latest set of circumstances may be one of the greatest challenges of all, for them, and for all institutions of higher education, organizations, companies, and departments in the contemporary workforce. With the advent of the five generation workforce in contemporary society, how will nontraditional students in particular, and multi- generational organizations in general, meet the expectations and demands of this generational assimilation? How can communication be used as a method for more effective interaction with students, co-workers and clients?

The issue of the intergenerational classroom and workplace is relatively new. Academic attention and research on the topic has barely scratched the surface. In fact, when I first started research this project, there was discussion of only four existing generations comprising the workforce.

My treatment of the issue is similarly an early and an admittedly initial attempt to get a handle on just how the non-traditional student can adapt and thrive in the intergenerational workplace. How

do different generations of students, faculty, and administrators work together more efficiently and with less conflict in contemporary higher education? How can students, co-workers, and faculty take advantage of the different strengths and experiences of multiple generations to their advantage? How do we deal with different levels of technological expertise and savvy of the younger generations, versus the experience and wisdom of the older generations?

This guide has stressed the vehicle of communication as an initial response. When students, faculty, co-workers, supervisors, and administrators have a better understanding and appreciation for the role of communication, perception, stereotyping, and diversity in the college classroom, as well as the broader workplace, a more efficient and productive environment will result. Future research needs to delve further into the tendencies of younger generations of students and workers. They differ from the classic adult learner in that they have shorter attention spans, expect to be entertained in the classroom and the workplace, tend to be collaborative, team players, and see technology as their friend. On the positive side, younger students are more motivated by education, ask frequent questions, need constant attention, love challenges, and face both pressure and desire to excel in the classroom and the workplace.

There is little doubt that the current and changing economic landscape, as well as advances in technology, is changing the face of higher education and the workplace in general. Increasing numbers of older students are returning to the classroom for both second careers and advanced training. Much more research is needed to focus on specific behaviors for the returning, non-traditional age college student as they navigate the contemporary intergenerational classroom.

**\*\*This section will be expanded upon significantly for the final report**

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