Age-Related Conflicts:
The Generational Divide

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Some health care leaders discount reports of tensions between the generations represented on their work force. If they think about it at all, they view it as the normal transition of newer, younger employees acclimating to the culture of the workplace. They rationalize that young employees will learn what is expected of them and that they will adjust accordingly in order to be successful.

They — and you — shouldn't count on it.

As the 20-somethings are joining the workforce for the first time, bringing along their generation's attitudes that challenge traditional notions of "the way we do things here," there is little evidence to suggest that they are changing their ways. Instead, generational researchers propose that we are in the beginning years of a workplace sociodemographic change the magnitude of which has never been experienced. Managers who are alert to these generational issues in the workplace are beginning to ask, "Are they living in our world or are we living in theirs?"

WHO IS IN THE WORKPLACE?

Americans are living longer and working longer than at any other time in our nation's history. As a result, there are four distinct generations in the workplace, each bringing its own set of values, beliefs, life experiences and attitudes.

A generation is a group of individuals born within a 20-year time period during a certain era. Individuals in a particular generation share similar values and attitudes based on their shared experiences during their formative years. This generational personality reflects the era's important events and cultural trends, its celebrities and its everyday way of life.

Individuals who share a particular generation and generational personality frequently have similar views on many issues such as religion, politics, family, work-life balance and work ethic. Differing views on these topics exist across generations, causing clash points or conflicts in the workplace that affect recruitment, retention, training, productivity, customer service and organizational morale. By understanding generational differences, managers will be better prepared to

GENERATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Nickname	Birth Years	Age Range Now
Traditionalists	1925-1942	69-86
Baby Boomers	1943-1960	51-68
Xers	1961-1981	30-50
Millennials	1982-2000	29 and younger

address individual employees' needs and interests and be more alert to potential clash points between members of different generations. Helping employees head off generational clashes in their interactions will not only improve the workplace environment, it will improve productivity and customer service.

TRADITIONALISTS: UNCONDITIONAL LOYALTY

Traditionalists are a generation of 75 million who grew up during the Depression and World War II, and today they represent 5 percent of the workforce. Though their numbers as employees are limited, health care organizations have a special stake in understanding this generation because they comprise the Medicare population.

 As a generation, Traditionalists believe in sacrifice and patriotism. Their experiences during war years and in the military taught them a top-down approach to management, and this translated into a respect for authority. Traditionalists are not comfortable with change; they prefer stability and rules. They expect younger individuals to show respect for their elders; they often view an approach that is too informal as disrespect. Traditionalists are hard workers and they expect that good work will be rewarded. Their loyalty to their organizations is unconditional.

BABY BOOMERS: WORKING HARD FOR ME

Known as the "Children of the Sixties," the Baby Boomers are a cohort of 80 million members. Today they represent 45 percent of the workforce, and, while they have begun to reach retirement age, the current economic downturn may slow down their departure from the workplace.

 The Boomers grew up in a thriving postwar economy and were an optimistic generation. Due to the size of their cohort, a competitive spirit was a fact of life. The Boomers inherited their parents' hard-work ethic with one key difference: Their focus was often on themselves, leading them to be labeled the "Me Generation."

 The last generation to face the military draft, the Boomers saw flaws in ways the world was being managed and took action to make a difference. Through causes such as the peace movement, civil rights and feminism, they believed they could change the world around them.

 As the Boomers joined the workforce, their careers became their priority. Working long hours and sacrificing family and personal time is a hallmark of their success and organizational loyalty. Unfortunately, as the generation reached middle age, corporate mergers, acquisitions and downsizing created instability for many Boomers' careers. Plus, increasing divorce rates resulted in instability in the family unit.

GENERATION X: SHOW ME THE MONEY

The Xers are a small generation, just 46 million members, and are approximately 35 percent of the workforce. They grew up in a world characterized by high divorce rates, an unstable economy and high crime rates. With their Boomer parents out working, Xers were the first generation of latchkey children. As they watched their parents become the victims of corporate downsizings Xers learned to be skeptical of institutions and, instead, to rely more on themselves. Xers are focused, resourceful and independent and characterized by a "show me the money" short-term orientation. Thus, although Xers are hard workers and dedicated to their careers, their lack of loyalty to an organization and their focus on themselves and their family give them more common ground with Millennials than with Boomers.

MILLENNIALS: LOOKING FOR PRAISE

The newest generation in the workplace, the Millennials are a large cohort, numbering 76 million. Today they represent 10 percent to 15 percent of the workplace, but over the next decade they will become the most dominant generation on the job.

 The Millennials are a sheltered group (e.g. "Baby On Board") and are used to being treated as special. As children, Millennials received much attention focused on fostering a positive self-image — this is the first generation to receive sports team trophies for just showing up rather than for outstanding achievements. As a result of their early life experiences, Millennials expect continual praise and may misinterpret silence to mean that they are doing something wrong.

 Millennials identify closely with their friends, parents and grandparents, and, more than previous generations do, they turn to their family for guidance and support. Their Boomer parents have been so eager to intercede on their children's

behalf that they have earned themselves a new label, "helicopter parents."

Accustomed to working and playing in groups, Millennials have grown up very team-oriented, at times to the detriment of independent critical thinking. Theirs is an era accented by "instant" results (e.g. microwave cooking, Internet research, text messaging, etc.), and Millennials have little patience for delayed gratification.

They are multitaskers to the core, and if they are not busy engaging in multiple tasks, they become easily bored. Yet Millennials are also very life-balance-oriented. To the dismay of their supervisors, they will consistently choose personal obligations over work responsibilities.

As the first to grow up with computers, cell phones, the Internet and portable gaming devices, they are the most techno-savvy generation. To them, technology is not a tool but a way of life, a part of who they are, and Millennials operate in a 24/7 virtual world that has almost unlimited access to information. They prefer informality in communication, attire and approach in their personal and professional lives, and they question why organizations insist that employees be in the office on the dot in the morning and stay until the specified quitting time. This generation believes they can be as productive — if not more so — without such restrictions. As long as the job gets done, they reason, it shouldn't matter if they

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sit 9-to-5 at an office desk or work at home on a laptop in the middle of the night.

Of particular interest to Catholic health care is that Millennials are focused on doing meaningful work. Long before they were old enough to become employees, they frequently volunteered in their communities. They were raised to be socially conscious and service-oriented. The most diverse generation in American history, they have been raised with a global perspective and have developed a respect and acceptance of individuals from all backgrounds.

THINK OF IT AS DIVERSITY

In considering how best to address different generational personalities in a workplace, one

ORGANIZATIONAL GENERATIONAL CLASH POINTS

Clash Point	Traditionalists	Boomers	Xers	Millennials
Work/career goal	To build a legacy	To build a stellar career	To build a portable career	To build parallel careers
Reward system	Satisfaction of a job well done	Money, title, recognition	Freedom is the ultimate reward	Meaningful work
Feedback	No news is good news	Once a year is enough	"How am I doing?"	Comes at the push of a button
Changing jobs ...	Carries a stigma	Puts your career behind	Is necessary	Is part of my daily routine
Retirement is ...	A reward	Time to retool	Time off to renew	Recycling
Training	"I learned it the hard way; you can too."	"Train 'em too much and they'll take the new skills and leave."	"The more they learn, the more they stay."	Continuous learning is a way of life.

approach is to view them as workplace diversity issues governed by organizational effectiveness rather than by law. The traits and characteristics that describe the different generations are neither good nor bad. Rather, the descriptions help us understand why individuals from different generations have different values — including their definition of work — and how these differences result in workplace tensions. Failing to recognize and address generational tensions can have negative effects on the organization: increased employee turnover, loss of productivity, derailed careers, higher payroll and training costs, poor customer service and stress-related reactions.

NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL FIX

The values and perspectives of each generation often conflict with the values and perspectives of other generations, resulting in numerous clash points. To appreciate how naturally this phenomenon occurs, we need look no farther than a family get-together that includes multiple generations. Typically there are many sources of tensions and differences: preferred foods, preferred meal times, preferred entertainment (i.e. TV shows, music), preferred attire and preferred behavior. Many if not most of these differences are influenced by generational preferences. As a result, family experiences are how we first learn about clash points between generations. In the workplace, just as in the family context, generational tensions are no party.

Recognizing and addressing generational clash points in the workplace require a two-pronged approach. First, as with other diversity issues, it is critical that we increase our awareness of and sensitivity to generational differences. Second, it is important to recognize and respond to employees' unique needs that emerge related to generational differences.

The organizational response to generational issues begins with leaders. Using a term made popular by Daniel Goleman (1995), leaders need to be "emotionally intelligent" in respect to generational issues. This entails understanding their own generational personality and biases as well as learning about other employees' differences that are based on generational issues. The key outcome is an appreciation of how generational differences can prevent one-size-fits-all solutions.

Once leaders are familiar with these concepts, they can begin to relate them to their organizations. With the help of the human resources department, leaders can distinguish different generational needs and identify potential clash points that may be operating among employees, including managers and supervisors. A word of caution: It is important to avoid stereotyping, as any individual can exhibit a mix of different generational characteristics.

A leader who understands his or her own generational biases as well as the generational conflicts that typically occur in an organization is in the best position to model how to address issues rooted in these differences. As leaders participate in different employee and manager meetings, they can demonstrate sensitivity to different generational needs by noticing and addressing them,

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always in a respectful manner. (See related article on page 37.) Employee-orientation programs are a particularly good opportunity, as attendees usually represent the full generational mix.

STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Along with sensitivity to generational needs and identifying potential clash points, there are several operational changes a leader can make. First, to attract a broad talent pool to an organization, it helps to create diverse recruitment messages that address issues of interest to different generations. While Millennial 20-year-olds are likely to want to hear about technology, learning and teamwork, other generations may be especially responsive to the history of the organization or prospects for advancement or retirement benefits.

A related consideration is where recruitment messages appear. Generations search for new positions in different places and with different expectations. Boomers still turn to newspapers and other traditional sources for job leads, are prepared to mail an application and resume and aren't surprised if they have to wait for an

acknowledgement. Xers and Millennials go straight to the Internet for job postings, file an application online and expect an immediate reply. Some organizations have adjusted their hiring processes to deliver on this expectation.

After thinking through the hiring process, organizations should re-examine the effectiveness of new employees' orientation. While multiple PowerPoint presentations may have been OK with Boomers, this approach can be a recipe for losing the attention of other generations. It is too slow and one-dimensional for the Millennials' taste, for example. They would rather the human resources department point them to a computer program where they can do their own orientation. Icing on the cake would be if the orientation program came on a new iPad or notebook computer.

Training is another organizational function that will be more effective when it reflects generational differences. Xers and Millennials are continuous learners, and providing learning opportunities is one of the key strategic approaches to retaining employees in those generations. They expect a fast, multi-tasking pedagogy, using exercises, games and interactions. Instructors should ban the overheads and add as much technology as possible.

Boomers have been accustomed to a "train them too much and they'll leave the company" philosophy, so continual skill-building training isn't something they expect. They are likely to respond well to traditional, class-based programs conducted at a measured pace.

As with any other diversity issue, managers who give job evaluations and other feedback to employees should be specifically trained in addressing generational differences. That will give them the tools they need to work with the mix represented in their workplace and to be sensitive to individual differences.

Regarding feedback, older employees probably have operated on the premise that less feedback is better. Formal, private feedback sessions once or twice a year have worked fine for them. On the other hand, "trophy kids" (i.e. Millennials) expect continual, informal feedback conversations that let them know how they are doing all along the way. Recognizing this generational reality, some Fortune 100 companies have created new positions for people whose job is to provide Millennials with the frequent feedback they demand.

From this overview, it should be apparent that the ongoing arrival of Millennials to the work-

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force means an increase in personnel issues rooted in generational differences. The diversity framework provides Catholic health care organizations a model for understanding employees' generational-based differences and tensions, and modifying management practices accordingly.

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ADDITIONAL READING
The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace, by Ron Alsop (Jossey-Bass, $24.95).
Millennials Go to College, Strategies for a New Generation on Campus, by William Strauss and Neil Howe (Lifecourse Associates, $59).
Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069, by William Strauss and Neil Howe (Quill William Morrow, $16.99).
When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work, by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman (HarperBusiness, $16.99).
Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace, by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak (AMACOM, $27).

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