

Managers Letter

Bridging the Gap: Managing an Older Workforce

by Elaine Appelle

There was a time when managers earned their high level roles as a result of longevity. Their on-the-job training, years of experience and familiarity with the company's history positioned them as reliable contributors to the bottom line. But today, young managers rapidly ascend the corporate ladder toting advanced management degrees, experience with the latest computer software and relative comfort with new workforce technologies.

In turn, today's veteran workers, known for their dedication and mature perspectives, may find themselves uncomfortable with new technologies and uncertain about their role in relation to this new, largely younger breed of managers.

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***Dee Soder
Managing Partner
CEO Perspective Group***

Bringing these disenfranchised groups into alignment is fundamental to corporate success. In fact, the topic recently captured the attention of the *Wall Street Journal*. Writer Carol Hymowitz stressed the importance of maintaining equilibrium and avoiding friction by taking steps to bridge the workplace generation gap in an article entitled, *Managing Your Career: Young Managers Learn to Bridge the Gap with Older Employees* (July 21, 1998).

Thousands of longstanding managers have made successful transitions, keeping pace with new technologies and adapting to change imperatives. But in cases where

older employees resist change, their younger supervisors must take responsibility for motivating them to use new resources, change their routines and achieve the technical expertise they need to operate efficiently in today's fast-paced business environment.

Dee Soder, managing partner of the management consulting firm CEO Perspective Group, says, “Older staffers are undoubtedly going to be in their present jobs longer, so it's truly a waste of talent not to help them improve. The payoff, in terms of employee contributions and the corporation's profits, can be great.” When a company understands the value of its investment in seasoned employees and is committed to leveraging the potential of every employee, generational conflicts are less likely to result.

Companies can cultivate the best of both worlds and ensure that reversal of traditional age roles in the workplace does not create a barrier to teamwork or success. First, younger managers must be made aware of the value older employees bring to the workplace. This awareness can be developed through management orientation programs, encouragement of bidirectional mentoring relationships and a culture of respect and tolerance for diversity. Young managers also can foster successful relationships by taking special care not to alienate older managers, strengthening communications, offering support for skill building and facilitating change.

Factors in workplace generation gaps

Modifying and improving ingrained work habits can be a daunting prospect. Given today's strong reliance on automation and technology, immediate change is often demanded. Yet change rarely occurs overnight. It is important to remember that most people don't resist change itself; they resist uncertainties about the outcome. Developing a clear understanding of the dynamics of any change, be it a new technology or strategic initiative, will empower older employees to approach change in a positive way. When change is managed effectively, even hard-core stalwarts can be moved in new directions. And, when younger managers are sensitive to the needs of an older workforce, they can have a positive impact on productivity.

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Communicating clearly about the purpose and expectations associated with any change is essential to gaining buy-in. It's important to share information about how change will influence future work. Young managers must make certain that entrenched employees are familiar with the goals of a change agenda and that those goals are attainable within logical time frames. For example, expecting senior employees with little computer experience to learn a new software system in two days is not realistic.

Establish clear performance standards

Benton and Halloran, authors of *Applied Human Relations, An Organizational Approach*, state that all employees, no matter what their age or position, like to know how they are doing. Clear and detailed performance standards enable managers to communicate expectations and employees to understand feedback. They can engender confidence in one's work, encourage acceptance of criticism without resentment or fear of job loss and establish a goal to strive for even higher performance standards.

Performance standards should be goals every employee, regardless of age, can understand and meet. These goals can be to:

- Complete reports within a specified time frame.
- Reduce absenteeism by a certain percentage.
- Stabilize or decrease specific costs.
- Reduce employee turnover to a specific level.
- Lower the incidence of customer complaints.
- Reduce variance between time allowed for projects and actual time to delivery.

Focus on behavior, not personality

Counseling employees regarding performance is most fruitful when it is behavior driven and not personal in nature. For example, it is counterproductive to point out that an employee appears resentful of a management change. It would be more effective to focus comments on a specific problem, such as noncompliance, and add a specific performance requirement such as to seek technology training. New managers also should take time to explain management imperatives, discuss them honestly and offer opportunity for the employee in question to offer solutions to the problem at hand.

In many cases, change also can be facilitated by taking into account some of the psychological factors that affect productivity. For example, most people enjoy variety in their work rhythm, and a change of pace often reduces fatigue and boredom. A younger manager can offer veteran employees a variety of options to enhance productivity and morale. It may be easy to:

- Vary the type of assignments or projects.
- Invite the employee to assist on a new project for the company.

- Ask the employee to learn a new skill or competency so he/she will be able to teach it to others.
- Involve veteran employees in a team meeting to develop morale boosters. Recognition can come in the form of an "Employee of the Month" award posted on a company bulletin board or in a company newsletter.

Gradual is good

Abrupt changes are rarely welcome, particularly by old campaigners, so it is important to approach change gradually. As Madelyn Burley-Allen, president of Dynamics of Human Behavior in San Mateo, CA, says, giant steps should be avoided. When young managers must facilitate change among older groups of workers, they should plan ahead, discuss the change in open forums, ask for suggestions and keep everyone in the loop. This will lessen discomfort and increase willingness to learn new skills and adapt to new procedures.

While there is always the chance that a senior employee may refuse to conform to new organizational standards, the majority is eager to fit in and help the company reach its goals. To bridge the gap, new managers should take special care to uncover how to achieve the best fit and bring the most value to the employee, manager and company.

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