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Breaking the Generational Myth: How to use Coaching Skills for Effective Leadership

by Kathi Crawford, IAC-CC

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't fit today's age-diverse work force, where the generation gap between the youngest and oldest workers can span more than 40 years. For the first time in history, there are four generations of workers. On one end of the spectrum, there are the 20-somethings, who are fresh out of graduate school or college; on the other end are employees nearing retirement.

It's well-documented that each generation comes with its own set of values, needs and attitudes, and vastly different expectations on communication styles and work expectations. While this may be true, I constantly ask myself "isn't this the way it's always been?" We have always had an "age-diverse" workplace and it's likely that we've had multiple generations in the workplace at one time.

What's changed is the landscape of the workplace today. Let's face it—the world of work is vastly different than it was even 30 years ago. Economic drivers have influenced not only how we work together but also the nature of jobs. To compete globally today, we need every worker using his or her unique strengths to maximize productivity. We need everyone to tap into their creativity and desire to contribute.

As a Leadership and Career Coach, I hear daily examples of how companies and leaders are wasting their human resources because of unfounded and biased beliefs about groups and individuals, whether based on age or other characteristics. Some leaders are making assumptions about employees rather than getting to know each of them as individuals.

So, if a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work, what can a leader do? Rather than generalizing age-related behavior, a leader should use a coaching approach to connect with his or her employees. The most successful leader finds a way to ensure every generation is heard.

I teach a leadership class at the University of Houston called "The Power of People," where leaders learn ways to increase workplace productivity by improving processes to attract, select, develop and retain people with the required behavior, knowledge, skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs. We ask each leader to make a list of their direct reports and identify the following:

- Full name, month and year they joined the company
- The main reason the employee wants to work for the company
- What the employee considers to be his or her biggest achievement this year
- What the employee believes is his or her most important professional goal for this year
- How, other than money, the employee would like to be rewarded
- The last time the employee expressed his or her opinion on a work issue to the leader
- The most recent development program the employee attended

I was surprised to see that many leaders struggle with answering all of these questions for every one of their employees. They might find that they can answer the questions for the employee(s) they favor or connect with the most, but not for everyone. These leaders often find that this exercise motivates them to learn more about their employees. They also discover this is the first step in developing a coaching approach with their employees.

It's here that I provide companies with a word of caution. Coaching is an over-used term in the work place today. It is an often misunderstood process and is generally not used correctly by leaders. Forcing people into what WE want has never worked, and it's not coaching. Instead, I encourage them to get to know their employees. To find out what motivates them at work and at home. To find out what inspires them to action and give them the opportunity to do their best work.

So, I'm left with the question: When the Generation X and Millennial generations reach their fifties, will they be asking the same questions about younger workers as the Baby Boomers are today? My guess is that they will. And the cycle continues.

Do you have experience coaching leaders of age-diverse teams? Please share your comments below this post on the blog:
http://tiny.cc/92a34

Kathi Crawford, SPHR, IAC-CC, CEO of People Possibilities LLC (www.peoplepossibilities.com) provides consulting and coaching services to address the culture and activities a company must have to attract, develop, reward and retain its workforce. Before launching her business, Kathi spent years honing her coaching skills as a human resources leader.

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