

**THE POLICE
HOW-TO
GUIDES**

**HOW TO CLOSE THE
GENERATION GAP WITH
BETTER COMMUNICATION**

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HOW TO CLOSE THE GENERATION GAP WITH BETTER COMMUNICATION

*Understanding
generational
differences can help
everyone work
together better*



Photo courtesy of Amaury Murgado.

I was standing in front of my platoon giving a roll call briefing several years ago and I started scanning the room. I was talking about the usual fare – stolen vehicles, missing persons, and special patrol assignments – when I saw a lot of young empty faces staring at their yellow pads and pretending to take notes. All of a sudden it hit me that they were at best only half-listening to me.

There they were, the next generation of cops taking up space and breathing my air. I started to get angry. I decided to give them the benefit of the doubt with a quick test. At one point I said, "My pants are on fire," and kept on talking about information our property detectives were looking for. Only one person looked up half heartedly, turned to the deputy sitting next to him, and asked, "Hey, did he just say his pants were on fire?" The other deputy looked over at him and said, "What did you just say?"

Needless to say, at that point, I broke into my old Army habits and went into the Sergeant Major mode, lambasting each and every one. As you can imagine it was ugly, but in my eyes it wasn't ugly enough.

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You can't go old school on them because you'd end up in IA. They have the authority to use deadly force and kill if necessary, but say a curse word in front of them, and it becomes a hostile work environment. And yes, with my age combined with my years of experience, of course I talked about "back in the day" and the differences between old school and the Nintendo generation.

I stressed how they have been coddled by technology, counting on their mobile data computers and TASERS too much. About how us dinosaurs (their word for people like me) made arrests without TASERS and in-car computers, how we used to actually get out of our patrol cars, and how we actually took the time to learn our community. In my day we shook trees and kicked rocks to find the bad guy.

From Dinosaurs to Gen Y

Thinking back on what I said, I was clearly experiencing a generational divide. My philosophies are very different from the younger crowd, so in reality maybe it was more about me. So why is any generation gap such a big deal? The answer is simple and deep.

For the first time in history, we have four generations working side by side in the modern workplace. They consist of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials (also known as Generation Y or Nexters). With four different groups working together, there is bound to be a collision between each other's set of values.

When I was young back in the '60s, grown-ups talked a great deal about the generation gap. It meant the old and young didn't understand each other very well. They couldn't communicate. If men are from Mars and women from Venus, the younger crowd is from Pluto.

From what I can tell, not much has changed; in fact it might even be worse. How often have you heard, "This new generation of cops just doesn't get it...they want it all but they

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don't want to work for it. All they do is text and play video games." Hell, I haven't just heard it, I've said it! Or how about hearing the opposite: "Damn, this guy's a dinosaur. He must have patrolled in sandals. Will someone please tell him this isn't the military and I don't care how hard it was 20 years ago?"

Hello, my name is Amaury Murgado, I'm a retired Army Reservist, a 23-year law enforcement veteran, and yes, I am one of the Baby Boomer dinosaurs; welcome to my world as a supervisor. So what's the answer to this question of generational divide?

We wear the same uniform and are supposed to be doing the same job. But how do we deal with this total lapse in communication? I suggest we learn to communicate better by understanding that there are and will always be differences in our values. We have no choice because we are a product of the times we grow up and live in.

The main issue here is that we tend to see differences and attach judgments to them. Different is not necessarily bad. Sun Tzu's ancient writings on strategy talks about knowing your enemy and knowing yourself. In this case we are one and the same. We are all part of the problem, so let's learn about each other and, in doing so, become part of the solution.

Traditionalists (born before 1945)

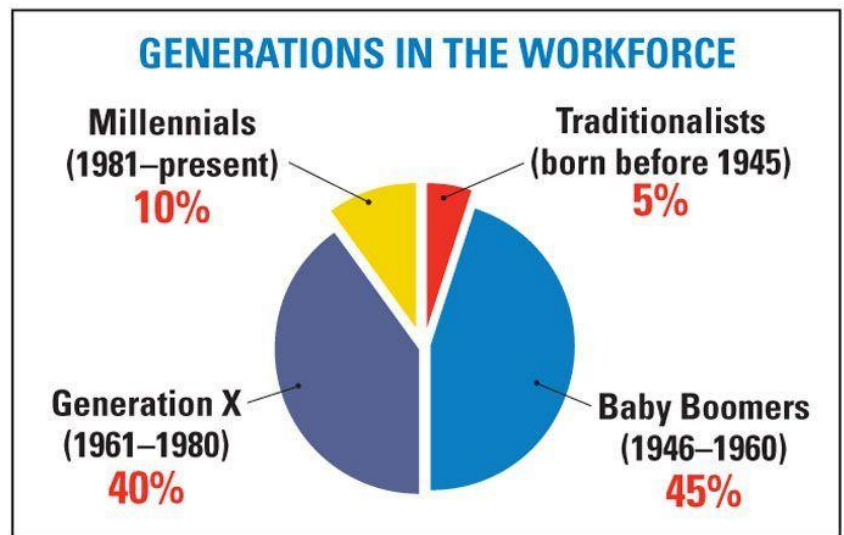
This group is practical, patient, loyal, and hardworking. They are rule followers and respectful of authority. Their world was shaped by their parents, whose values go back to the 1800s. This generation experienced the Great Depression and World War II. With regard to trust, they take their time in developing relationships and their word is their bond.

Traditionalists are also called the silent generation. They don't share their thoughts right away. They like formality whether in oral or written form. This group draws lines in the sand and expects you to honor them. This generation is strongly

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influenced by family and religion. Though most of this generation is retired, the ones still working are in senior positions and wield considerable power. This group accounts for approximately five percent of the workforce. Their need for social order is often viewed as being biased, prejudiced, or sexist.



Traditionalists Tips

1. They prefer face-to-face or written communication.
2. They don't like their time wasted.
3. When speaking, focus on your words. Cut back on body language.
4. Use a historical perspective as they prefer what has worked in the past.
5. They have a high work ethic, which doesn't include having fun at work.

Baby Boomers (1946-1960)

This generation did not go through as hard a time as their parents. The Traditionalists wanted their children's lives to be better than theirs and gave them the best of what they could. As a result, boomers developed the importance of "me." This

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Boomers are very accepting of others as long as they can perform to their standards

group grew up during a time of prosperity (1950s) and also in times of social upheaval (1960s). This was the first group to feel a shift in family values. The concept of marriage as an institution started changing. The boomers account for the largest group comprising approximately 45 percent of the current workforce.

While their parents worked for the benefit of the company, the boomers work for the benefit of the individual. It was the boomers that started the workaholic trend. The difference in perspective between Traditionalists and Baby Boomers is that Traditionalists worked hard because it was the right thing to do. Baby Boomers work hard to be successful and get to the next level.

Boomers embrace the team concept and tend to shy away from the more rigorous structure of their parents' companies. They don't like rules for the sake of having rules and tend to challenge the system. Boomers are very accepting of others as long as they can perform to their standards. They are very competitive and will fight for a cause.

Baby Boomer Tips

1. They are the "show me" generation, so body language is important.
2. Avoid controlling language as it turns them off.
3. Answer questions thoroughly and expect to be asked for details.
4. They like options in their thinking and don't like being boxed in.
5. Recognition is important, so provide it often.

Generation X (1961-1980)

This generation is economically conservative and does not rely on institutions for their security. They saw what their parents went through as they felt the pain of downsizing. They have an entrepreneurial spirit. They are often seen as disloyal as they don't trust companies and often move around. They were the first latch-key kids.

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Millennials have grown up in a high-tech world and they know no other

This group was the first to start having instant results (TV remotes, Internet, etc). They prefer to manage their own time and solve their own problems rather than rely on management. They seek and value information. They also value feedback and flexibility. Though this generation works hard, they have a balance and value their time off. They prefer an informal atmosphere and like their fun. This group makes up 40 percent of the current workforce.

Generation X Tips

1. They love e-mail as a primary communication tool.
2. Talk in short spurts to keep their attention.
3. Share information and keep them in the loop.
4. Dealing with them in an informal style is a key factor in success.
5. Cut to the chase and avoid unnecessary meetings.

Millennials (1981-present)

This group is the youngest by far and accounts for approximately 10 percent of the current workforce. This is the group that has grown up in a high-tech world and they know no other. This group wants more of a say as to what happens to them. They are more diverse than the last group, being exposed to more diversity either in person or through technology. This group likes to make and spend money. They are more optimistic than their parents about the future. Technology is highly valued as a tool for multitasking and often integrated into everything they do.

Millennial Tips

1. Challenge them whenever you can.
2. Do not talk down to them.
3. They also prefer e-mail communication.
4. Give them regular feedback.
5. Use humor and don't take yourself too seriously

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Closing Thoughts

With regard to my earlier example, my platoon went on to be one of the best platoons in the agency, even though the average experience level was only two years. There weren't any magic bullets and I had no clue as to the intricacies of the generational divide (being former military, I never gave it much thought).

I did try two things, however, that may help you in a similar circumstance. I tried to explain more in detail why we were doing things the way we were and I kept stressing that we had to meet our objectives. I did try to create more buy-in and avoided "just do it" situations whenever possible.

In the end though, and to be perfectly honest, I just pulled rank. Nothing seemed to work (I don't do warm and fluffy very well) so I told them that when they made lieutenant they could run their platoon as they saw fit. But since this was my platoon, we would continue to use my framework.

It also helped that I periodically took away their in-car computers for short periods of time and showed them their technology was a privilege, a tool, and not the end all. Amazing things started happening when they walked in the land of the dinosaur. They paid much more attention at briefing, they got out of their cars more often, and there weren't as many jokes about when I patrolled in sandals.

Apparently, being older gives you a sense of wisdom that helps you intuitively overcome problems. Or maybe, rank does have its privileges... LOL. LOL? See, even we dinosaurs can learn new tricks.