



## A GENERATIONAL MIX GIVES ORGANIZATIONS AN EDGE

### YOUNGER BOSS, OLDER WORKER

“I grew up with TV dinners, [Eric] Clapton on the eight-track and Perry Mason,” says Robert, 57. He runs marathons, reads the manual, and watches reruns of “Law and Order.” Robert believes he’s earned the right to an executive salary and the corner office.

Jeanie, 22, says she can’t remember a time when she couldn’t text as fast as she can talk. “I concentrate best,” she says, “when I’m watching TV, listening to my iPod, and answering an IM.” She believes in instant gratification, rewards and life after work.

Jeanie is Robert’s boss — and they represent the new normal in today’s workplace. A survey by Harris Interactive on behalf of CareerBuilder.com finds that 69 percent of workers 55 and older report to younger bosses. Baby boomers who delay retirement often find themselves working for people young enough to be their grandchildren. As we emerge from recession, it’s more important than ever that every employee contribute their best.

A generational mix gives organizations an edge. A variety of perspectives and approaches can increase a team’s creativity, make them more responsive to a wide range of clientele, contribute to broader-based decisions, and simply make the work more fun.

Yet the mix of generations can create challenges. The older worker/younger boss configuration feels awkward to many. Just a few years ago, people from different generations were separated by rank and status. The oldest employees filled executive positions, the middle-aged held mid-management jobs, and the youngest worked on the front lines. In the scenario above, Jeanie may sense that Robert feels superior even though she’s the boss — while Robert may think Jeanie favors his younger, less experienced, more tech-savvy colleagues.

Both Robert and Jeanie need to recognize the value each brings to the table. Different generations have unique perspectives on everything from workplace humor to work style and work ethic. By understanding and accepting their differences, Robert and Jeanie can tap each others’ strengths and work together to produce solid business results.

Their communication will be stronger if they follow the Titanium Rule: Do unto others, keeping their preferences in mind. Here are some ways Robert can follow the Titanium Rule and work effectively with his younger boss:

- **Focus less on relationship and more on results.** Avoid talking about your years of experience; instead, keep track of your accomplishments and keep Jeanie up to date on them.
- **Respect Jeanie’s expertise.** Be open to new ideas.
- **Refrain from behaviors that drive younger generations crazy.** Avoid comparing Jeanie to your daughter. Don’t act like a know-it-all. Nip cynicism and sarcasm in the bud.
- **Keep up-to-date with technology.** Ask Jeanie how she prefers to stay in touch. If she tends toward text messages and you don’t, it’s time to learn. Check IMs and cell phone regularly.
- **Jump on training opportunities.** Learn new software programs and attend communication workshops.

To bring out Robert’s best, Jeanie may need to adapt her style. Here are some steps to consider:

- **Acknowledge his expertise.** Identify Robert’s strengths, and be open to learning from him. Tap into his experience.
- **Consider giving Robert a bit more face time than might be natural for you.** For most baby boomers, relationship and business results are intertwined. Get together for a cup of coffee and get input on whatever issues are at hand.
- **Give plenty of direction without micromanaging.** Make certain Robert is clear on your goals and standards, and let him make his own decisions about how to reach them.
- **Link your message to organizational vision and values.** Robert may have been part of the group who formulated them, and the vision and values help him see where his contribution fits.

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