

# To execute better, think generationally

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By: Kim Huggins

Is this the year your company finally delivers on its strategy? According to McKinsey, 70 percent of strategic change initiatives don't live up to their promise — a number that hasn't changed much over the years. Experts have cited many reasons for this failure, including lack of trust, a culture of complacency and inadequate buy-in on the part of leaders.

But there's another, hidden factor: a failure to fully mobilize workers of different generations.

Despite all the talk about millennials, boomers and how to manage them in the workplace, most companies still don't get generational thinking. They believe they're sensitive enough to age cohorts. They talk about them at leadership retreats and offer awareness training. They alter onboarding programs and hiring practices with millennials in mind. But they stop there, leaving unchanged the core operational processes so central to strategic execution.

## **Communication, change and innovation**

Unfortunately, a one-size-fits-all approach to execution doesn't work in a multi-generational world.

Our research has charted eight main areas of difference between the generations. Three — communication, change and innovation — figure prominently in the execution of business strategy. By failing to address these differences across all generations, companies pretty much guarantee that some workers will become disillusioned, disengaged, unfocused — and far less able to execute.

Take communication. Your teams can't execute a strategy well if leadership doesn't communicate it in a clear, compelling and even inspiring way. Yet the generations differ in how they like to receive and transmit information.

Older members may prefer to meet face-to-face and the cascading of information is familiar and expected. Younger workers are much more comfortable with electronic communication such as email (Gen X) or text messaging (Gen Y/Gen Z). Style matters, too. Traditionalists and boomers prefer more formality than younger generations — no LOL or TTYL for them.

If you don't take these differences into account, you risk the inattention of some employees. The strategy might be sound, but these employees won't be pursuing it enthusiastically.

Innovation and change pose similar challenges. Younger employees tend to socialize ideas with their peers on social media, whereas boomers turn to trusted colleagues and friends. Also, boomers seek buy-in before committing to an idea, a habit that can frustrate Gen X and millennial employees.

When it comes to change, younger employees are often more open and welcoming than older employees. Traditionalists and boomers like to rely on what worked in the past. They want to see data before committing to change.

All of these preferences are important. If you don't account for them, a portion of your workforce may feel as if the organization doesn't really care about their ideas or opinions regarding operational changes. Or they might feel ill prepared and reluctant to make the key changes on which your strategies depend.

## **Tackle it head on**

Your company can boost execution by tackling these three areas of difference head on. Build nuanced

communication tactics into your strategic plan. For instance, incorporate text messages and apps to communicate more regularly and compellingly with younger workers, while also retaining in-person communication for older workers.

When it's time to brainstorm new approaches to execution, explicitly encourage older workers to take risks and allow all employees to experiment with new ideas in ways that feel safe and validating. Your leadership should carefully explain strategies to older employees, accelerating their understanding of why operational changes required for execution make sense. Also, you can increase the engagement of younger workers by incorporating technology into the implementation plans.

Beyond these solutions, involve employees of all ages in strategic development. It's hard to get excited about executing a plan if you haven't had a voice in creating it.

Also, make it a best practice to hold focus groups or convene planning teams that are generationally diverse. A division of a large energy company did the latter, bringing together a group of millennials to generate ideas on both strategy and execution in consultation with the senior leadership team. The experience galvanized these young people, and the insights they brought impressed senior leaders.

Integrating generational thinking deep into an organization takes time and commitment. But the results are worth it. Make this the year when you finally take steps to master execution. Get employees of *all* ages aligned, engaged and working hard to make your strategy a rousing success.

**Kim Huggins** is a partner at [CLG Inc.](#) Kim is a nationally known voice on generational differences in the workplace. She has a passion for helping business leaders succeed by understanding and managing the diverse generations who work side by side in today's corporate environment. Check out Kim's thoughts and other leaders at CLG on the [organization's blog](#).