**Managing Generational Conflict in Your Foodservice Operation**

There are currently four or five generations in the restaurant workforce. Each generation brings with it its own set of stereotypes, ideals, and collective experiences. By default, your workplace is a very diverse setting. Many managers view this as a challenge, but it can also be an asset to your establishment if you know how to manage your staff effectively and minimize generational conflict in your foodservice operation.

While the Silent Generation and Generation Z have some stake in today’s workforce, we’ll focus on the three primary generations at work today: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. These three groups predominately make up the working age population.

**Understanding Motivation**

To start with, it’s essential that all upper management understand the benefits each generation brings to the table. It’s easy to get caught up in the negative stereotypes, because those are what the media dwells on. Millennials are lazy and entitled. They are also energetic and quick to pick up on technology. Baby Boomers are slow and can be stuck in their ways. They are also reliable and hard working. Having a manager who doesn’t see the upside to each generation contributes greatly to generational conflict.

With every individual, regardless of generation, managers need know what motivates them and what makes them leave your store for another. Let’s take a look at what, generally speaking, motivates each generation.

Millennial Motivators:

* Recognition, consistent feedback
* Competition and incentives
* Technology
* Mentorships

Generation X Motivators:

* Flexibility in schedule
* Career opportunities
* Team environment

Baby Boomer Motivators:

* Predictable schedule
* Hands-on training
* Face to face interactions with management

And remember that stereotypes are just that—stereotypes. Each employee is an individual with unique qualities, and many won’t fit perfectly into their generation’s mold. Using their generation can be a starting point for understanding them, but to create a cohesive team where you are meeting all your team members’ needs and properly motivating them requires you to know them on an individual level. Each generation has individuals with great work ethic. Each generation has lazy, entitled workers. There are creative individuals in every age bracket, as well as individuals who crave predictable procedures and processes. Once you understand your team members, you’ll be better equipped to motivate them to be their best.

**Balancing Different Strengths**

Most intergenerational conflict is a result of a real or perceived difference in respect that each generation feels they are receiving. This could be a result of management strongly favoring (or appearing to favor) tech savvy workers and doing away with other forms of training or practices. It could be a result of management only promoting based on seniority, which would largely favor older generations, rather than taking performance into consideration, which would allow Millennials the opportunity to advance. On the flip side, management could have no consideration for seniority, which could make older workers feel like their dedication goes unnoticed. It’s easy to see hard skills, such as the ability to utilize the most advanced technology, but don’t forget to take into consideration soft skills, like good communication, reliability, or relationship building. Those are skills that many employees in the older generations have the upper hand on, but often get ignored by management because they are not as measurable. Yet managers in the foodservice industry know that business relies on those soft skills to attract and retain customers!

Don’t divide your staff into a young vs. old regiment. Some managers mistakenly do this to avoid conflict, but it only breeds resentment! Each generation brings different strengths to your team, and you need all of them. Managers create resentment when they praise only one type of worker. The other staff members feel inferior or undervalued. If you give praise for creative thinking, don’t forget to praise the people with exceptional work ethic, teamwork, or other types of strengths. Managers are susceptible to bias, just like anyone else, which makes it critical to always evaluate your own perceptions to ensure you are treating everyone fairly.

While each team member is a unique individual, here are some generalized strengths that each generation tends to possess.

Millennial Strengths:

* Great energy
* Adapts to technology quickly
* Creative thinking

Generation X Strengths:

* Good teamwork
* Ambition
* Team environment

Baby Boomer Strengths:

* Reliable
* Solid work ethic
* Skills gained from years of experience

As you can see, each generation is different, but all of these attributes are necessary for a top-notch team. By having members of different generations in every shift, you will also gain some great cross training and mentoring opportunities as all your staff members learn from each other. It’s also hugely beneficial to strike the appropriate balance so that no shift has an inherent weakness. You wouldn’t want entire shifts with great energy but no teamwork, or a shift full of great work ethic and reliability that struggles to troubleshoot your software when necessary. Creating intergenerational teams and shifts makes for a well-rounded staff that is ready for anything.

When you hired each team member, you did so because they showed you great strengths! Otherwise, they wouldn’t be working for you, right? Keep those strengths in mind, even as new employees come in with different aptitudes. Again, this comes back to understanding each employee and what motivates them. Then set them up for success, not failure. No one wants to work on a team where it is evident that they are the weak link, or that the boss values them the least. Know your employees’ strengths, then use them for the whole company’s advantage.

**Creating a Friendly, Intergenerational Work Environment**

Because each generation tends towards different motivators and strengths, whenever possible, have several options available to your employees to match different personalities. This may mean having two options for training—one being a meeting or seminar, and one being a more hands-on shadowing approach. Try to communicate by both email and in person when possible. Where some employees may highly value flexibility in their schedule, others may value a routine and predictable schedule. Try to accommodate both when you are able.

In a perfect world, if you are attracting talent from across all generations, you’ll be getting a great mix of people’s individual preferences, strengths, and motivators, which will ultimately lead to a very strong team that has creative thinkers and employees that consistently nail procedure, team members that are incredibly reliable and rarely need to change their schedule and team members that can step in on short notice.

It won’t always be possible to be nimble and flexible enough to give each employee exactly what they want, and making the effort will certainly require more legwork and planning, but the result will be better morale, less turnover, better teamwork, and less squabbling and grumbling between employees. That’s a pretty good ROI! Employees are less likely to argue or engage in conflicts when they know management is working for everyone.

Avoid singling groups out by age. Not only does this put you in dangerous waters legally, potentially putting you at risk for age discrimination, but it also creates an unhealthy dynamic at work. Don’t create software training that is only mandatory for older employees. (And don’t hint at older employees that they *really* should go.) Managers should always avoid age-specific language that could be misconstrued as disrespectful. Even seemingly harmless comments or even attempted compliments, such as “You pick up on software so quickly for someone your age!” Those comments harm morale, and are never appropriate.

**The Bottom Line**

Each generation has it’s own “personality,” so to speak, but at the end of the day each generation wants to feel valued and respected. Isn’t that what everyone wants?

Be aware of your own biases, and how you are presenting your priorities and values to the team. Be inclusive in your training, and ensure everyone is continuously learning new skills, be it technology, or the softer skills that the older generations may have the upper hand on.

Lastly, don’t focus on their age or differences, focus on what they have in common. They all work for your establishment, which automatically gives them some common interests and goals. If you allow them to interact naturally, rather than dividing them or drawing attention to their differences, the more camaraderie will spontaneously generate and the less conflict you will have.