

How we adapt our behaviour to deal with the generation gap we have with subordinates, our peer group and our bosses.

Development needs – written by Mike Burrows

In the various roles I have now, I am appraised and I appraise others. The paperwork that supports the process varies from what I will call the full works to starting with a blank piece of paper. This piece will not cover types of systems but rather what the development needs of the more experienced person are and what is particular to those of us with a few years in the bank.

When I am asked to comment on the performance of experienced colleagues, I find it hard to point to areas of development as they often appear to me to have a full set of relevant skills. Accordingly what I try and do is to identify any obvious knowledge gaps where some training will help, to look at areas of behaviour where perhaps we can discuss how it has impacted on others and how changes can be made.

An area that I know concerns me and I suspect others is how we adapt our behaviour to deal with the generation gap we have with subordinates, our peer group and our bosses. We hear a lot about the expectation gap between baby boomers and generations X and Y, but how can we make sure we are effective despite what I call the experience gulf. In this piece I want to set out some ideas, I am not sure I am confident enough to call them tips.

The first thing is to look at differences of perception. How do they view you? That you have had it easy, that your motivation is lacking, and that you are out of touch. How do you view them? That they are wet behind the ears, that they do not show respect to you or customers, that they do not use the same language, that they are more concerned about themselves rather than the job and the organisation. There are elements of truth and complete exaggerations here but the key thing is to try and put yourself in the other person's shoes and see what barriers there are likely to be to understanding and how they are likely to react to what you want to say.



There are barriers about how we use technology. To many of us we find it hard to get beyond the basics in using the Office suite of programmes and using different devices at the same time. The younger generation seem to think nothing of having a smart phone (or two) plus a tablet plus their laptop on the go at the same time. They are far more attuned than me to social networks and find my attitude odd. The consequence seems to me to be that younger folk blur the distinction between work time and their own time- the thought of not being able to use a smart phone for personal texting or calling or accessing the internet during working hours just does not enter their heads. The converse is that they are able to use IT to get tasks done in a fraction of the time that it takes me or at least the tasks that the IT can help them with. There is also an oddity about their sense that they do not need to speak to people, an email or a text is enough. I am still thinking through what my response to this is, although what I do know is that I must try and keep in touch with what is happening.

A follow on from this is that we do seem to have different expectation in life. It is common amongst our generation to think that our objective was to get a good job, get married and build a home and family around the job and your partner. Now there is a perception that life is built around friends and job with partners that are not meant to be for life and that what you earn is there to be spent on a social life that includes exotic holidays and going out several times a week. I recall talking to a young manager five years ago and she could not comprehend what it was like to feel insecure about a job, she was well qualified and good. I doubt whether she has the same attitude today but I do not see much of a willingness among most young people to accept that austerity affects them to. Of course the way I think we have to deal with this difference is to stop and take a long look at what is going on around us and think back to our parents and grandparents and see how we were different to them. My parents just wanted peace, a home and family and enough money to get by. My grandparents wanted to see their children grow up and get their own house and not have to go to war. I think we have to accept that each generation has different expectations and different levels of acceptance. The young are much better than we were at not accepting gender and race bias and unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

What we have then is a need for us to get on the wavelength of the young sufficiently to begin to understand differences in priorities and behaviour. We both have to learn from each other, we as the more experienced need to accept that the young are sometimes over confident, that their listening skills and attention spans can be very frustrating, and that they will often devalue our experience as not relevant and not worth listening to. Just because we did not get something to work does not mean they will make the same mistakes. What the young could learn from us of course is legion but most of all we need to be able to slow them down a bit and help them to understand that effectiveness needs planning, a clearly defined set of desired outcomes and a delivery plan that can work.

Of course what I have said about the gender gap is really what happens between 'folk'. We are all different and when we interact we need to think a lot more about the other person, what they want to get out of it and what makes them tick. The result of course is that we both end up improving our performance in the organisation – or the home for that matter. I started this piece talking about development needs, what I have tried to do is to use some chat to talk about the sort of thing we should be talking about to others when we are in a discussion about how we can do things a bit better.