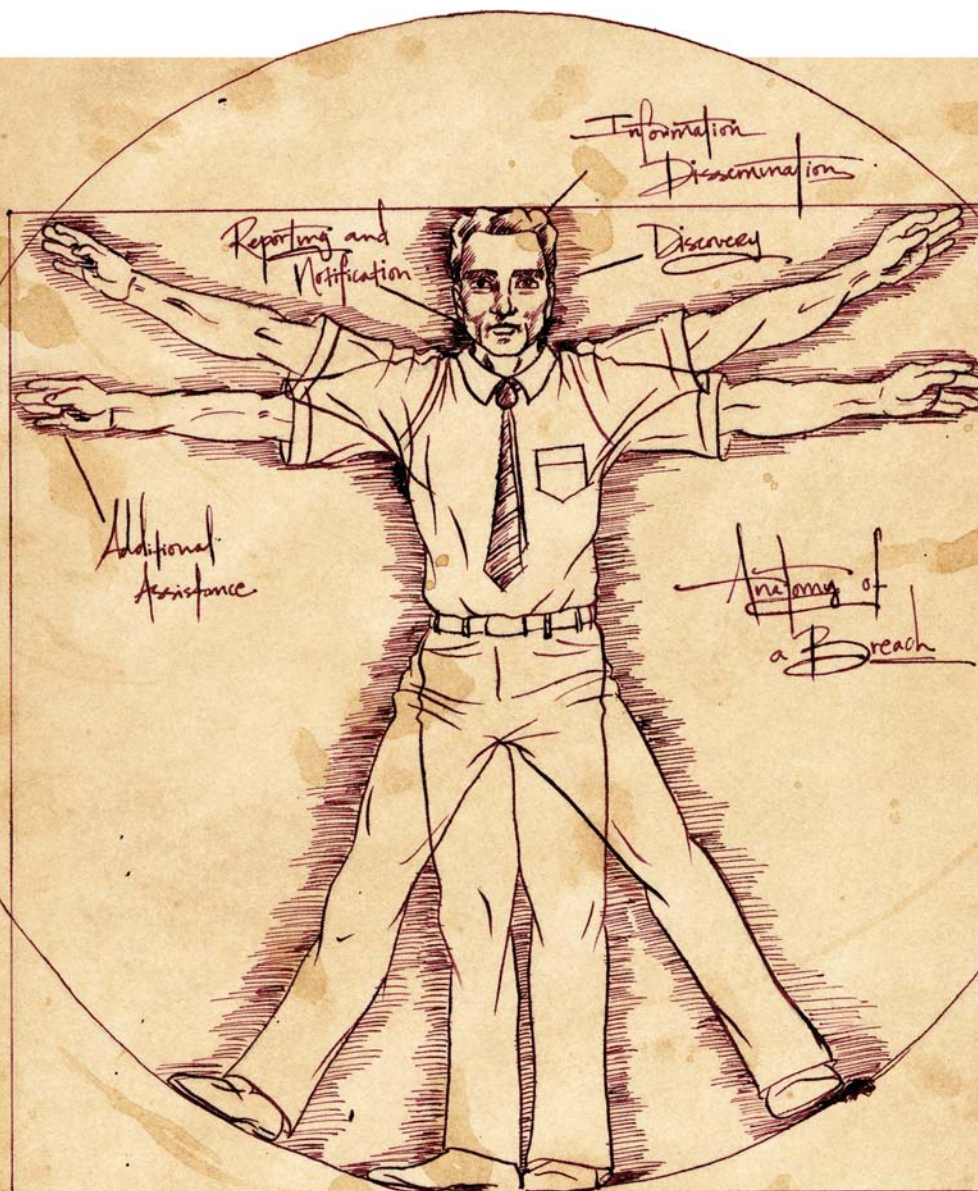


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COMMUNICATE WITH GENERATION YERS: FIRST, TALK TO THEM

Excerpts from a real conversation among a Baby Boomer, a GenXer and a GenYer lead to insights about cross-generational communication

Global warming may be the hot issue of our day, especially on the political front. But inside organizations, the climate change may be relatively tepid compared to the generational storm that's brewing.

Yes, generational gaps have always existed. But the current one among Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979) and Generation Y (1980-1994) is more extreme. Plus the consequences for employee communication professionals are greater. Why?

Just scan this conversation—civil but a bit contentious—among three

individuals from the three different generations. You're reading it here first ... The impact on employee communication will be fast and furious especially if GenY gets its way at work.

How did this conversation come about? Several months ago, the Baby Boomer (Liz Guthridge) and the GenX (David Kligman) started talking about challenges in communicating across the generational gorge. They wanted to bounce their ideas off of a member of GenY. But who? Just a few weeks later, a GenY—Liz's stepson—moved in with her and her husband for the foreseeable future. (Yes, it's true,

GenYers, especially compared to the Boomers, get along with their parents and like living at home.)

So the three of us met a couple of times in person to appease the Boomer—Boomers like meetings. Then to placate GenX and GenY, we continued our conversation virtually, summarized here. We also debated how communication professionals need to change ... soon.

Boomer: Are we Boomers really behind in using technology to communicate at work? After all, many of us are using the tools: blogs, instant messaging, text messaging, wikis, social networking, etc.

GenY: It's not about the fact that you are using, or trying to use, such tools. (We are all very proud of you.) It is the fact that you see such tools as another way to disseminate YOUR message. My generation sees technology as a way to let everyone have a voice.

GenX: We've got to remember technology is everywhere. We're still not very smart about how to use technology for employee communications. The fact is, employees expect to communicate the same way at work as they do at home. And they expect to have some say in the conversation. That means we can't be in full control of the messages. Instead, we should be moderating the discussion.

GenY: Everyone knows that Boomers are control freaks. (Look who's leading this discussion.) What you all are just learning now is that you can't control the message anymore. Example: Hillary 1984 ad on YouTube earlier this year.

Boomer: Not being able to control the message is HUGE for Boomers. We're used to scripting our leaders,

and helping them stay on message point.

GenX: But the point is that "staying on message" equates to spin among younger employees. And if employees think it's spin, then the message is actually less believable. What employees want are messages that are honest. Employees want to be treated like adults.

GenY: Leaders who are scripted only add to the perception that the only floor the leaders spend time on is the top floor. Boomers are the generation of encyclopedias. GenY is the Wikipedia generation. Everyone has something to add and we as co-workers will keep everyone on message.

Boomer: So what do we do to influence leaders to recognize that communicating among the generations is a major business issue? And how do we get them to realize they need to change the way they communicate and interact? (Note that I'm getting the hang of this and seeking out your opinions, rather than first imposing my point of view on you!)

GenX: We need to show that some of the most successful companies are adapting their communications to fit the preferences of younger generations. Companies that fail to recognize the real differences in generations and the way they communicate will lose those employees to competitors who embrace the differences.

GenY: Leaders need to recognize that things are changing right now. New talent is emerging from universities, and they're looking for companies with environments open to new ideas on all levels. We expect our ideas to travel up the ladder as much as they travel down. Our

leaders also need to realize that GenYers don't want to be hated (not like we care) by our superiors (elders). But "my way or the highway" can't be the approach anymore because the highway looks fine to us in our hybrid getting 60 mpg.

Boomer: For our entire life, we Boomers have dominated everyone with our large numbers. And even though we like customized services and products, we've been content to go along with the masses. Mass media has worked for us, especially as we've climbed into positions of power and have watched the technology revolution go on around us. But mass media doesn't meet the needs of the younger generations.

GenX: Messages need to be meaningful, personal and up-to-date. Who wants to skim static, boring Internet sites? Who wants to get "reply all" e-mail messages? Another example of the disconnect between generations are these town hall-type meetings where employees sit and listen to executives drone on and on. I'm not saying these meetings can't be worthwhile, but younger generations want to interact, add their own insights and be a participant, not a passive listener.

GenY: Old-fashioned bulletin boards are a good tool for those of us in retail environments or other places where employees can't easily use their cell phones or computers while we work. Whiteboards work well, too. It helps if the information is color coded by topic. And you keep them up-to-date. And you let employees post our stuff too.

GenX: Bulletin boards, yes. But manager cascades, no. They're too slow. And the messages are so inconsistent they're almost useless. >

Boomer: Agree. Cascades are so dependent on managers. Some managers do them, ranging from well to painful. Others don't bother.

GenY: Cascades appeal to the Boomers' familiarity and comfort with hierarchy. In the peer-to-peer world we operate in, cascades have no value. Managers do have a role, but it's not to filter information.

Boomer: We really need to change our mind-set about our role and work differently. We've got to stop contributing to the clutter (less is more), especially if the information is either content free or just plain irrelevant to individuals. We've also got to recognize that user-generated content or whatever you want to call it is here to stay. And we need to encourage it. That means sharing our power to communicate.

GenX: By providing outlets for interactive comments and forums for social networking at the worksite, we're using technology in an appropriate way ... and the way the younger generations expect.

Boomer: Earlier, David suggested our role should be moderators. We should also be trainers, helping others write clearly and concisely. And we should be more involved than moderators and trainers. For example, we should serve as hosts of a type of world café (*www.theworldcafe.com*) asking questions that matter and making sure everyone in the organization who wants to talk can contribute to the conversation.

Boomer: One more point. With all of these changes, though, we still need to reserve room for experts. As a Boomer, I can't totally trust

smart mobs. I want my experts. (Thank you, Carol Kinsey Goman for reviewing this for us ... for me.)

GenY: Experts are fine. But GenYers hate to be talked down to or told what to think. So if you can take experts and mix them in with the smart mob to reach a consensus then you should be all right.

GenX: Exactly who are the experts? I'm with GenY on this one – aren't we all capable of being experts? Creating a dividing line of who is an expert and who isn't only further creates the illusion of another aspect of the hierarchy that's so 1950s.

Boomer: Maybe we should have a meeting to study this ... Only kidding.

GenY: I'm just ready to turn the volume on my iTunes back up. **J**

TO BE RELEVANT, COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS MUST CHANGE:

From:	To:
Watching the changes from the sidelines	Leading the change, including anticipating trends
Giving executives guidance when asked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sure executives are not insulated or isolated from others • Stopping the filtering of information (up, down and across) • Creating discussion forums for executives and employees
Taking orders from executives and HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking questions • Initiating ideas
Acting as the company ventriloquist	Serving as an aggregator, synthesizer and interpreter of information, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sure participation is broad • Getting diverse points of view • Translating the jargon • Providing context if needed • Explaining the back story if needed
Attempting to control the messages	Working with executives and other leaders to develop themes to emphasize
Addressing the masses	Communicating to individuals one-on-one through personal communication, such as RSS feeds and other opt-in methods
Honing writing and editing skills	Teaching others these skills. Also becoming an expert at facilitating and event planning. (If people are going to attend meetings, they want them to be worth their time.)