

U Text, I Type

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Today's generations approach workplace communication in different ways, and this has become a source of underlying tension for many organizations. The sources of this tension show up in a variety of ways. It's the young person who never answers his phone but responds to text messages immediately. It's the senior manager who responds to e-mail, but only once a week. Digital communication has been a boon to our efficiency. At the same time, it has made this same communication more perfunctory. Most young people are comfortable texting and e-mailing their way through the day, for example. But many workplace veterans feel a twinge when they receive the short, impersonal emails that are all facts and no emotions. At the same time, many young people wonder why older workers take the time writing entire sentences when one or two words will do.

While Boomers have used the workplace as a source of socialization, Xers have insisted on more of a balance of work and life. They tend to approach the job as a place to get things done without the small talk that consumes so much time. With endless communication options available at their fingertips, Millennials are apt to be maintaining interactions with two or more people at all times during the day. Place all these people in the same workplace and they're all likely to experience impatience with others' communication practices.

Finally, there are the struggles with external communication. We cannot simply assume that customers want to communicate the same way we do. One large accounting firm ran into trouble, for instance, when its young auditors started texting Baby Boomer clients rather than picking up

the phone to ask questions. A consulting company discovered the hard way that allowing young associates to rely on Spell Check to ensure well-written proposals is a recipe for disaster.

While Boomers have spent their careers meeting face-to-face with customers, more and more they spend their time on conference calls, webinars and Skype. To them, it's just not the same. Regardless of how anyone feels, these differences in beliefs about communication etiquette have a material impact on productivity, employee retention, along with sales and customer service.

So what can a sandwich manager do to address, and hopefully, resolve these issues? Here's what we recommend:

Begin by identifying the specific behaviors that appear to be the sources of tension and misunderstanding.

Listen for them in conversations. Check with customers about their preferences for communicating with your organization. Look for patterns that indicate whether a particular habit or practice is creating tension. Test your perceptions with others. Be careful not to fix something that's not broken. Blurting something out like, "Why can't you people just get along?" may create an issue where there is none. If a particular behavior or practice appears to be confined to one person, address it individually.

Consider the impact these behaviors may be having on productivity, employee relations and customer relations.

We all have the desire for a stress-free working environment. Of course, life and other personalities get in the way. Consider what you can do to quantify the impact these issues may be having in the workplace. Explain to your team the costs of miscommunication and misunderstanding. The

more specific the better.

Seek input from customers and those outside the organization. If your area of responsibility communicates with the organization's customers, make some phone calls and send some e-mails. Ask a sample of individuals to critique your communications with them. What would they prefer? What issues might they have? What suggestions would they make? Communicate these ideas to your team and ask for reactions and ideas.

Work toward establishing and enforcing protocols that address the sources of cross-generational miscommunication. Of course, the last thing that an organization needs is more bureaucracy. That said, it is important to ensure that everyone functions with common goals and communication. If there are one or more specific issues that need to be addressed, establish a protocol that can be easily defined and followed. Don't make it all encompassing. Make sure it addresses only the specific concern. Be careful, however, about complicating the process. Communication is the lubricant in getting things done, not the task itself.

Seek ideas from those involved. More than once a great idea has been lost because the person who thought of it didn't think anyone would listen. The same person who expresses the concern may be the same person who has the best solution. In fact, effective managers make a practice of asking those who complain about something to come up with a solution as well. Many times, the issue is confined to that person's frustration with another individual and should be something to be worked out between them. As a sandwich manager, you may find it necessary to foster that conversation.

Finally, look for ways to encourage people to embrace these new protocols. The old adage says "What gets examined, gets done." If this new practice is to be consistently adopted, attention will need to be paid to it. Be sure to check in periodically to see if this newly established protocol is working. Introduce those new to the organization to these etiquette guidelines as well. Ask for suggestions from all the generations as to whether it is working and what might be done to improve the process.

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