

## Developing a Positive Interpersonal Culture between Generations in the Workplace

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### Introduction

In a presentation rich in wisdom and laced with anecdotes stemming from his Louisiana roots, Dr. Sotile urged his listeners to appreciate the connection between work, family, and physical and emotional health. Drawing on more than 20 years of research and clinical experience, he also proposed strategies for making the workplace more appealing and more productive for persons of all ages.

### Resilience and Human Nature

Human beings are in general a happy group. Asked to rate their degree of happiness on a 10-point scale, most people come in at a 7. Humans are also resilient: even those who have experienced a major crisis eventually achieve a 6.5 self-rated happiness quotient. Furthermore, the factors that have the greatest effect on happiness or discontent are not the big events; they are life's little ups and downs.

Emotions are contagious. They begin at the individual level but quickly branch out to one's family, workplace, hospital, health system, and community. Even though people are generally resilient, a work environment that has too many downs and too few ups can become toxic. Workers who find themselves in high demand, low control situations are particularly at risk. Research shows there is a crucial interplay between work, health, and family. Work can serve as a buffer to family issues, and vice versa. In all cases, "caring connections are what help build resiliency and make the difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction," said Dr. Sotile.

Although pressures often come from external sources and are difficult to manage, environments that give workers more control—through teamwork and collaboration—are consistently less stressful than environments that do not value worker input. People want to know that their contributions are valued and that their work has meaning. Asked to name the characteristics of the ideal job, 2,300 employees responding to a 2001 survey listed the following top five preferences:

- Personal satisfaction
- Knowing that my work is valued
- Knowing that my work is helpful
- Knowing that my job will last
- Employer support

## Characteristics of Employers of Choice

- Remember the four building blocks: pay, praise, train, and promote.
- Trust employees. Communicate your objectives well but don't micromanage.
- Be flexible, especially in areas such as scheduling.
- Try to avoid making employees work overtime unless they do it by choice and receive compensation.
- Promote teamwork, collaboration, and a feeling of family.
- Offer career planning guidance to employees of all ages.
- Stay in communication with employees. Get to know them. Ask them about the best and worst parts of their jobs. Ask What will keep you here? and How can we make your life easier?

## Generational Values and Management Strategies

As the U.S. workforce becomes more diverse, better educated, and more mobile, managing becomes more complex. The effect of intergenerational differences on the workplace merits exploration.

Today's workforce contains many people well beyond age 65—the traditional retirement age. It contains large numbers of midlife people—the baby-boom generation. And each year, high school and college graduates join the workforce. What are the differences among these workers? What are the similarities? How can managers overcome the differences and harness the similarities to produce a cohesive workforce? The first step, Sotile suggested, is to become acquainted with what each generation values. On the basis of that understanding, appropriate management techniques can be selected and applied.

**Traditionalists.** Workers born before 1945 are the oldest segment of the workforce. Many remember World War II. Their childhood heroes were George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, and other military figures. Members of this generation were trained to respect authority and to defer gratification. These workers place value on

being recognized for their contributions. As they age, they also value a flexible work environment. Most are eager to learn and remain involved.

- Management strategy: Acknowledge their contributions, ask their opinions. Show respect. Be clear and factual in communications.

**Baby Boomers.** The baby-boom generation includes everyone born between 1946 and 1964. Their heroes were people such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy. Their childhood aspirations were high—the Moon (at least the sky) was the limit. Although they may have questioned authority as young people, baby boomers grew up to respect authority. Some became workaholics or super moms; feeling they had to make a choice between family and work, many chose the latter. Baby boomers, like their parents' generation, want recognition. Many are also seeking to correct the imbalance between work and family.

- Management strategy: Provide an environment based on relationships, not hierarchy. Give workers opportunities to share their feelings. Don't waste their time.

**Generation X.** Gen-exers were born between 1965 and 1980. Members of this generation saw major changes in family dynamics, including the normalization of divorce. They saw their parents suffer unanticipated economic consequences as corporate downsizing occurred. Gen-exers tend not to defer to authority. Their heroes often ended up besmirched. They are accustomed to sensory stimulation, including a choice of dozens of channels on cable television and access to the Web. These young people are individual thinkers. At work, they want flexibility in terms of schedules and dress. They also want jobs that are stimulating and enjoyable.

- Management strategy: Ask them for feedback; encourage them to get more training; emphasize team meetings; value their input; dispel the myth that these young people are slackers. Speak to them in their own terms. Create a safe haven for them in the work environment. Provide mentoring and cross-training opportunities.

**Generation Y.** Workers born since 1981 hearken back to the spirit of the idealistic youth of the 1960s. Many have grown up in families with considerable financial resources. These youth are interested in service—they want to do good as well as do well. Having grown up in an increasingly heterogeneous society, they are colorblind and accepting of diversity. They value teamwork, a collegial atmosphere, and being trusted.

- Management strategy: Appeal to their sense of fairness. Assign them to work teams but also empower them with individual responsibility. Acknowledge their positive contributions.

In sum, intergenerational differences are substantial. Acknowledged and affirmed, they can strengthen the workforce. At the same time, certain values—the need for balance between work and family, a need to learn and achieve mastery, the desire to be trusted—are common to all generations. Workers of all ages also look to work as a source of personal fulfillment. These are values that management can and should support.

## Conclusion

Family, work, and health are each closely connected to happiness. Because family and work are both so important, finding a balance between them is essential. This is a challenge for each generation. Managing today's diverse, multigenerational workforce requires sensitivity to each employee's needs. It requires that managers show interest in their employees, acknowledge their contributions, and give them opportunities to grow and take on more responsibilities. It requires them to be generous and to be gracious.