

Providing “Generation Appropriate” Support

What new principals need to know about working with baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials.

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As a new principal, one of your primary tasks is to build relationships with your teachers and help them grow as professionals.

Your staff likely represents multiple generations or age groups.

Your most experienced personnel, most likely baby boomers, have different needs than your least experienced (Generation Y or millennials). Those in the mid-career stage (most likely Generation X) have different needs than the baby boomers and millennials.

While generational diversity is a positive attribute, it also presents a challenge to new principals. A strategy that helps a baby boomer grow might not work well for a millennial. Each generational group requires a slightly different approach for motivation and growth.



A Multigenerational “Cheat Sheet”

Let’s look at some general information about the various generations represented in most schools, and how to support them.

Baby boomers:

Born between 1946 and 1964

Members of this group are also known as the Sandwich Generation; they are often responsible for taking care of their growing children *and* their aging parents.

Motivations: Service and team spirit. They are dedicated and find great satisfaction in making a difference with their students. In addition, asking them for their thoughts and involving them in discussions about their teaching during instructional conferences can be highly motivational.

They Value: Meaningful feedback and also like to have a voice in analyzing their own work.

In the professional growth process, baby boomer teachers value being able to share their perspective and have some input into their own professional growth.

How to Engage: Baby boomers might also benefit from being able to use team, grade-level, or department goals to help guide their growth. Because baby boomers are committed to the school and their colleagues, principals can reinforce this commitment and use it to motivate them to continue to grow as professionals.

Generation X:

Born between 1964 and 1982

Members of this group are sometimes considered “the Slackers,” but this is not entirely accurate.

They Value: Generation X employees tend to be informal, but they also value autonomy and are looking to balance their home life and work.

Motivations: Their supervision and growth process should include opportunities for engagement and decision-making.

How to Engage: In developing professional growth plans, principals might want to set general parameters, then have the personnel generate their specific goals and activities. In the conferencing process, principals might find some benefit in providing feedback, then allowing Generation X teachers to “talk through” their plan to implement the ideas or strategies.

Generation Y:

Also known as millennials, born between 1982 and the late 1990s.


Since Generation Y workers are the newest in the workplace, their characteristics are still emerging. They enjoy fun in their work, have the ability to multitask, and are comfortable using social media.

They Value: Millennials value a fun and engaging workplace, getting regular positive feedback, and having access to instant communication. Since they are still developing their “frame of reference” around their teaching, they can benefit from feedback from their principal about their performance.

Motivations: Many millennials have received praise and positive feedback while they were youngsters, so principals might want to provide simple, tangible rewards and verbal praise for their efforts, and check in frequently and ask them how they are doing.

How to Engage: You might find it helpful to share the connections between their strategies and the impact on the learning of the students. Millennials need to see the effects of their teaching.

Meeting the Needs of Your Teachers

Schools benefit from a faculty with a balance of teachers from all three generational groups. Principals should understand the general needs of teachers within each generational group to help them grow and better impact student success. But, even though teachers fall into separate generational groups, be careful not to make assumptions. Talk with them individually to find out how best to support them and their professional growth. For example, asking a baby boomer, “How can I best support you as we work together this school year?” can go a long way toward establishing a positive relationship, while sharing specific feedback after observing a millennial teach a lesson lets them know exactly what is expected from them. 

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