

Successful Project Management Leadership in a Multigenerational Workplace¹

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Abstract

The English writer George Orwell famously said, “Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.” The existence of five generations in today’s project management workplace can bring brilliant synergies and frustrations at the same time. We continue to wrestle with typical project management work issues on a daily basis – timelines, quality control, cost issues, risk management. Yet, we also find the need to develop additional leadership competencies as part of the PMI Talent Triangle. Managing multigenerational teams has come to the forefront of many discussions about organizational success as one of these competencies.

This paper will explain why “generational competence” is a critical added leadership skill in the Project Manager’s toolbox. By comparing generational cultures to national cultures, it will help project managers understand the key drivers that shape the five generations in today’s workplace and how those impact values and behaviors, particularly in the areas of leadership, time management and prioritization, and communication. It will also identify how, why, and where generations may differ across cultures and suggest best practices for managing multigenerational project teams.

Introduction

The rhythm of the workplace has changed. As people are living longer, and economic conditions are requiring many people to continue working past a traditional retirement age, companies often find that they have a team that has four generations working together. This means four generalized sets of expectations, motivations, attitudes, behaviors, and communication styles. On the receiving end, it’s four different sets of perceptions, and often misperceptions. That’s a lot of complexity and we haven’t even considered the upcoming

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Generation Z, or the cultural differences among the Matures, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials that make up our current global project management environments.

The Skills of the Project Manager of the Future

Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification has been one of the premier certifications for the last 30 years. Initially, project management practitioners who acquired the certification primarily focused on mastering technical best practices in project management including requirements gathering techniques, project controls and scheduling, risk management and scope management. The global business landscape, however, has since evolved. As Mark. A. Langley, President and Chief Executive Officer of PMI said, “Against the backdrop of constant change, increasing complexity and technology advances, organizations are demanding leadership, strategic management and technical skill from their project managers – essentially turning them into project leaders” (Raconteur, 2014).

After several years of research and surveys of for profit, nonprofit, and governmental organizations, the Project Management Institute (PMI) has identified a set of employer-desired skills needed by project management professionals to lead projects, programs and portfolios that will enable organizations to achieve their strategic objectives. These skills, which are broken down into the areas of Technical Project Management, Strategic and Business Management, and Leadership make up the PMI Talent Triangle (See Exhibit 1). The resulting project manager role is a high-level, strategic one that encompasses a much wider range of competencies than ever before.



Exhibit 1 - The Three Components of the PMI Talent Triangle

Generational Competence as an Integral Part of Leadership

As organizations are using projects as enablers to achieve organizational strategy goals, we know that leadership skills are critically needed in order to successfully navigate complexity in projects. A new term called “generational competence” has been coined and fits squarely under the leadership third of the PMI Talent Triangle. It describes “the adaptations that organizations and individuals must make in order to meet the diverse needs of the four generations in today’s workforce and marketplace” (Seitel, 2005).

Developing, and eventually mastering generational competence will help project managers to better understand behaviors ("what" team members are doing) as well as important underlying beliefs and attitudes ("why" team members are doing it). As a result, project managers will be better positioned to lead, manage time, and communicate in a way that fosters respect and maximized productivity among team members.

Generational Cultures

What is a generation? Let's just get on the same page with a basic, commonly accepted definition: A generation is a group of individuals born in approximately the same time period who *generally* share similar behaviors and attitudes (Robinson, 2013, p.35). Generations are defined less by age and more by common experiences and key events that happen during their formative years. It is important to note that:

1. Marker years for generations may vary slightly depending on the reporting organization.
2. People born close to a generational marker year may exhibit overlapping tendencies or identify with aspects of two different generations.
3. In looking at generational cultures, we are primarily interested in the Cohort Effect: "The effect of being born and raised in a particular time or situation where all other members of your group has similar experiences that make your group unique from other groups" (Heffner, 2014).

As with national cultures, the iceberg model is a useful metaphor for understanding the generations (See Exhibit 2). Similar to national cultures, each generational cultures has characteristic actions and behaviors ("what" they are doing) that are visible, though they only account for the 10 percent iceberg tip we see above the waterline. The underlying generational beliefs and attitudes ("why" they are doing it) are largely invisible, similar to the 90 percent of the iceberg hidden under the water.

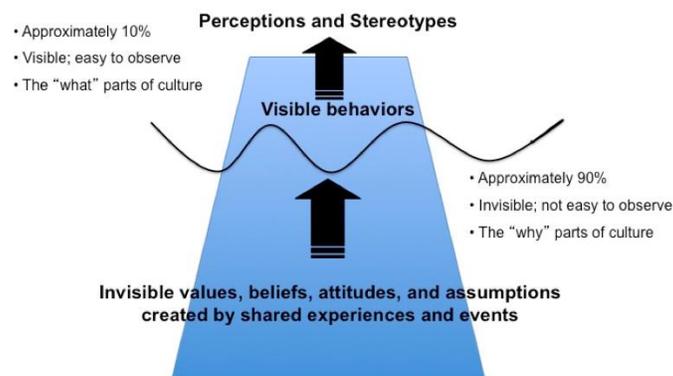


Exhibit 2 - The Iceberg Model

Terminology Around the World

A majority of the research around generations and generational differences has grown out of the US and been US-focused. Since the nomenclature used to describe generations is often derived from characteristics associated with the experiences of that group, the most common names we hear relate to US-based experiences. As a particular age group’s experiences differ (to varying extents) from culture to culture, so too does the terminology employed. See Exhibit 3 for examples of alternate terminology used to describe the generations across cultures.

Generation	Approximate Marker Years	Alternate Terminology
Mature Generation	1914 - 1945	Traditionalists, Silent Generation, Veterans, Freedom Fighters (India)
Baby Boomer Generation	1946 - 1963	Me Generation, Unlucky Generation (China), Dankai Generation (Japan), Generation Bharat (India)
Generation X	1964 - 1980	MTV Generation, Baby Bust Generation, Génération Bof (France), Crisis Generation (LatAm), Generation India (India)
Generation Y	1981 - 2001	Millennials, Generation Next, Yutori Generation (Japan), Generation Pu (Russia), Born-Free Generation (South Africa), Globalized India (India)
Generation Z	Mid 90’s or Early 2000s - ?	Globals, Post-Millennials, iGen, Digital Natives

Exhibit 3 - Sample Generational Terminology Used Around the World

Statistics

Generational cultures and national cultures both evolve over time, although at different rates. In general, national cultures evolve slowly, and due to environmental changes, technological advances, economies, and interactions. Even when a national culture changes somewhat on the surface, its underlying values remain fairly static. Generations on the other hand, both population-wise and hence workplace-wise, will always be in a more rapid state of flux.

Consider some examples of how generations are changing both within countries and relative to other countries:

- Millennials outnumbered Baby Boomers in the US in the first quarter of 2015 and Gen X will outnumber Baby Boomers in the US by 2028 (Fry, 2015).
- In the US, Gen X and Millennials each make up 34% of the current labor force, compared to Baby Boomers who make up 29% (Fry, 2015).

- In Europe, those ages 50 and over account for 47% of the overall population (Stokes, 2015).
- In Latin America, Millennials are the largest age group (30%), followed by Gen X and Gen Z (27% and 26% respectively), Baby Boomers (13%), and Matures (4%) (Luna, 2014).
- In Japan, 7.2% of the population will be 80 or older in 2020 (Martinez-Carter, 2013).
- In China the working-age population (ages 16-59) has been shrinking and was down 2.4 million in 2013 (Qi, 2014).
- By some estimates, Gen Y comprises nearly half the workforce in Kenya (Vilet, 2013).
- In Australia, Baby Boomers account for 34% of the total workforce and by 2020 it is estimated that they will account for less than 20% (McCrinkle, 2014).

As global project leaders, it is imperative to not only be aware of the generational make-up in the countries in which we are working, but also to be ready to embrace change and lead effectively so as not to be left behind.

Formative Events, Cultural Differences, and Their Impact on Values in the Workplace

Following is a brief overview of the formative events that impact each generation's workplace values and behaviors, which will be addressed in detail in the following section. These formative events can be considered to make up the deeper layers of the generational cultural iceberg, or the formative and normative shared experiences of each group (See Exhibit 2). The overview is US-based and followed by examples of cultural differences.

The oldest of the five generations in the project management workplace is the *Mature* generation (born 1914-1945). Life experiences including war time, the Great Depression, and post-war prosperity all impacted this generation's worldview and workplace attributes. It is a generation that grew up with many traditional family structures where a mother stayed home and a father went to work. Matures tend to believe strongly in loyalty, hard work and corresponding reward, and respect for the hierarchical chain of command.

Across cultures, not all the corresponding Mature generations experienced prosperous times during their most formative years as generational researcher Tammy Erickson (2011) points out. In East Germany this generation experienced a lot of economic hardship after the wars and is often characterized as hardworking, yet disillusioned and disinterested in politics. In Brazil, the Mature generation also experienced a lot of economic hardship although for different reasons. The authoritative policies of the dictatorial leaders at the time demanded compliance as opposed to respect. In India, this was a generation that experienced the gaining of independence from the British Empire in 1947, and correspondingly is characterized as respectful of tradition, relationship oriented, and conservative.

The large *Baby-Boomer* generation (born 1946-1963 and taking its name from the booming birthrates of the post-war time) both witnessed and played an active part in the political and social turmoil that marked their formative years including the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights

movement, the Kennedy and King assassinations, Watergate, the Sexual Revolution, and Woodstock. Even though they grew up in more traditional, nuclear family environments where they learned to respect authority inside and outside the home, many took on a more questioning stance as they grew up, protesting publicly against authority and power. Nevertheless, the Boomer era was characterized by continued prosperity, opportunity, and the notion of the "American Dream". Boomers idealistically went after everything that was available to them, sought out visible success, and believed they were capable of changing the world. These pursuits often resulted in work-life imbalance and thus, this generation also came to be known for its high divorce rate, and then 2nd and 3rd marriage rates. Despite a lifetime of hard work and planning for retirement, the Baby Boomers are now facing yet another challenge as recent economic downturns are causing many to shift retirement plans and continue working longer than planned.

We can see some critical cultural differences across the Baby Boomer generations using the examples of Saudi Arabia, China, and the former Soviet Union (Erickson, 2011). At this time, a booming Saudi oil economy was creating new wealth and along with that came a generation that was both proud of the country's progress and grateful to those in power who were making it happen. In China, this age group was most marked by the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, which deprived people of almost all education opportunities and created the most uneducated generation in China under a rigid and authoritarian regime. Finally, in the USSR, education became a critical determining factor for success and advancement under the communist system, and there was intense competition among this generation to excel.

Generation X (born 1964-1980), are the children of older Baby Boomers who grew up in an environment that starkly contrasted to that of their parents. Instead of endless opportunities and booming prosperity, Gen X experienced financial, familial and societal insecurity during their formative years including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS epidemic, and Operation Desert Storm. This generation witnessed the decline of military, political and economic strength and later on massive layoffs of their parents as organizations downsized in the 1980s. Divorcing parents often created more dual-income households and gave birth to the concept of "latchkey kids" who would come home on their own after school. Desegregation in schools created diversity and a greater respect for multiculturalism. Generation X became a generation of "individuals" and rather than question authority as their parents did, they saw that they would need to be self-reliant, entrepreneurial, and adaptable in order to survive. On the technological front, Generation X saw the rise of MTV, computers, and videogames. It was the first generation to begin relying on technology on a daily basis as computers, fax machines, and cell phones entered the home and workplace.

Across the globe, although the state of many local economies was similar and produced a generation more similar than any other on a worldwide scale at that time, we can still see important cultural differences that distinguished Gen X in the US from Gen X in Germany, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia as examples (Erickson, 2011). Germany's Gen X experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall and the integration of East and West Germany, which had a huge financial cost. This monumental event produced a generation said to be "cautious about national identity" and "focused on self and family." Brazil was experiencing severe financial crises as the country

transitioned out of the 20+ year dictatorial, military rule, resulting in a generation that was more inward looking, “family centric”, and “self-reliant.” As we return to the example of Saudi Arabia, we see a contrast from the wealth and pride the previous generation experienced as oil prices declined and the government ran deficits for the first time. Saudis began to question the ability to depend on institutions for financial stability, and became a generation largely characterized as “disillusioned” and “conflicted by tradition and modernity.”

Millennials (born 1981 - 2001) came of age during a time of global and economic expansion. Many are the children of ambitious Baby Boomer parents who raised this first generation of children with “schedules” to be focused on competition and achievement. Events such as the Columbine school shooting, 9/11 in New York, 11-M train bombing Madrid, and 7-7 London Terrorist attack have marked this generation in a global way as technology enabled information to be transmitted and experienced faster and more pervasively than ever before. While this generation is often thought of as “digital natives”, it is important to remember that the oldest Millennials actually didn’t grow up with ubiquitous technology. (That is a distinction left to Gen Z.) Rather, they later came of age during the time of mobile phones, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and the like. For this reason, many Millennials have established relationships that extend beyond social and cultural lines through virtual communities and chat rooms with people outside their communities regardless of ethnicity or cultural background. Millennials are often considered to be more open-minded and tolerant of differences in race, religion, culture, sexual orientation or economic status than any other generation.

Many comparable Millennial generations outside the US have marker years that differ from the traditional 1981-2001. For example, in Japan, the Yutori generation is considered to be those born between 1987 and 1996. “Yutori” means “room to maneuver” in Japanese and refers to the shift in educational methodology which was supposed to encourage more creativity in the classroom. It is the first generation to not have the “corporation for life” work mentality and security of its predecessors and has been marked by the bad economic downturns of the 90s and ‘08 (Vilet, 2013). In Kenya, Gen Y is defined as those born between 1990 and 2000, and is said to make up nearly half the workforce (Vilet, 2013). In China, Gen Y were born between 1980 and 1989, and are currently estimated at 250 million strong (SIS, 2015). This generation grew up under the One-Child Policy, which has resulted in a 4-2-1 structure (4 grandparents, 2 parents, 1 child) and a generation of what many consider to be highly individualistic and self-centered children with high expectations from families and organizations.

Although Gen Z currently makes up a mere 1% of the labor force, and it is still a generation whose identity is a work in progress, it is worthwhile to keep them top of mind, as those born in the mid 90’s will begin entering the workplace in large numbers in the next few years. Gen Z has been defined by some as those born in the mid-90s and by others as those born in the mid-2000s, and there is still no consensus on a generational name (See Exhibit 3). As a result of technology, this generation will feel more “connected” to events on a global scale than any previous one, regardless of whether the event took place in their own backyard or 10,000 miles away. While some Gen Zers may remember the events of September 11th, they are more likely to vividly recall the North African and Middle Eastern uprisings in 2011 or the real estate

meltdown in 2007-2008. This is a generation for whom technology has been ingrained in their existence since birth, including in a mobile way. Growing up in a healthier economic situation than Millennials, Gen Z is often characterized as “realistic” instead of “optimistic”. As many are raised by Gen Xers they mirror an independent, entrepreneurial spirit of those parents. One recent Randstad survey comparing Millennials and Gen Z found that 17% of Gen Z want to start a business and hire others versus 11% of Gen Y (Randstad, 2014).

Three Dimensions of Difference

According to Dr. Jennifer Deal (2007, p.1) at the Center for Creative Leadership, “...The so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout.” Three areas relevant to project managers who wish to develop their generational competence in order to manage this gap more successfully are Leadership (hierarchy and authority across generations), Time Management (personal and work time across generations), and Communication (preferred styles across generations) (Gelbtuch & Morlan, 2010). These generalized behavior patterns correspond to the top part of the cultural iceberg (Exhibit 2) and stem from the underlying values, belief, and experiences described above. It is interesting to note how the generations shift in relation to each other on each dimensional scale and for project managers to strategize on their multigenerational team accordingly.

Exceptional Leadership: Hierarchy and Authority Across Generations

On a leadership scale, we must understand where a generation tends to view hierarchy and authority residing including how rules are set, how teamwork is viewed, and how management styles vary (See Exhibit 4).

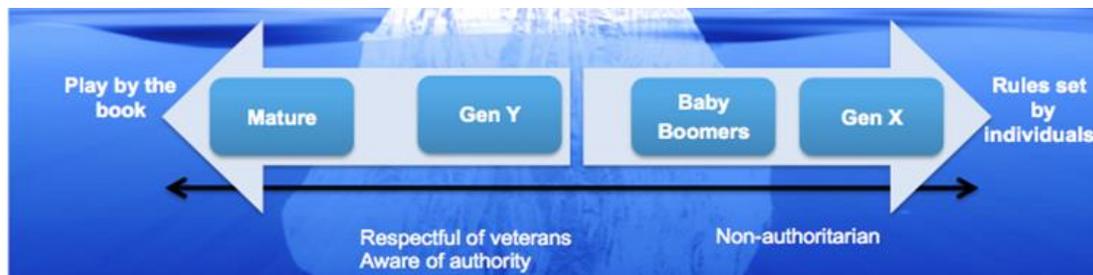


Exhibit 4 - Hierarchy and Authority Across Generations

Loyalty and respect are a common denominator for Matures and Gen Y, although in different ways. Matures are loyal to institutions and respect authority, and this authority comes from seniority and tenure. Strategies for managing leadership of this generation include being prepared to spend more time in discussions to learn from and recognize their experience, engaging their historical memory of past lessons learned, and encouraging anecdotal story-telling to show respect and elicit information.

Gen Y on the other hand is loyal to people and will often respect and seek guidance from those in positions of authority such as the Mature generation. It is important to involve this generation, give them a proverbial “seat at the table” and consider the ideas, creativity, and innovation that they offer which may contrast to more established organizational ways of doing things. Despite their young age, in many workplaces they are no longer the youngest generation, or if they are, they will soon pass that torch to Gen Z.

Baby Boomers on the other hand champion teamwork and equity but think that rules can be challenged. It is important to be prepared to clarify the reasons for proposed changes as this is a generation of questioning authority. As the Baby Boomers take over the organizational hierarchy, it can also be effective to ask them to lead by mentoring newer employees in the organization. Many Gen Y are the children of Boomers, and for this reason there is a high level of synergy and understanding between the new “oldest” and “youngest” generations in the workplace.

Finally, Gen X, in contrast, believes that rules are dynamic and set by individuals rather than institutions, tending to test authority and disliking too much oversight or micromanagement. This generation of individuals is often best led by leveraging their independent and entrepreneurial instincts. A recent IBM Study (2015) surveyed generations on Attributes of the Perfect Boss, and asked each group if a good boss would be “open to new ways of doing things”. Gen X had the highest percentage of agreement of any generation, reinforcing the value this generation places on individual and new ways of doing things.

Strategic Time Management and Prioritization: Personal and Work Time Across Generations

On a time management spectrum, we must look at differing priorities in terms of work-life balance and related obligations (See Exhibit 5).

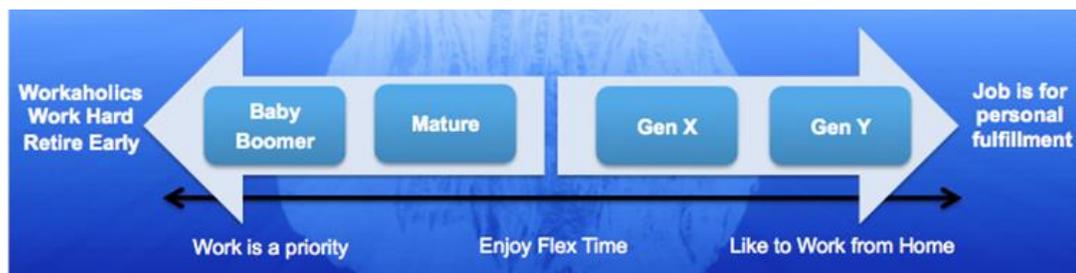


Exhibit 5 - Personal and Work Time Across Generations

Baby Boomers and Matures both consider work a high priority. Baby Boomers are concerned with the number of hours devoted to projects, regardless of productivity. This is a generation that invented the concept of the workaholic and believes strongly in visibility in the workplace. Typically, this generation has been hesitant to take time off and lose their so-called place on the team, resulting for many in an imbalance between work and family. Many strategies for

effectively working with Boomers center around recognition of time put into projects. Public recognition, perks that are financially based or communicate status (e.g., expense accounts, travel), and even more flexible work schedules as they move into the highest ranks of the organization all help communicate the value placed on their work ethic.

Matures were typically a generation of punching the clock and putting in the hours to get the job done, however, at this stage, many Matures tend to appreciate flexible schedules. Matures grew up working hard to maintain a job and have that job security, but at the same time, also very much separated the two – personal and work. Satisfaction can be a job well done in and of itself and the ability to go home, be finished, and ultimately retire. For this generation, work is not necessarily supposed to be fun – that’s why they call it work! Even so, it is still important to this traditional generation to honor their work and achievement through tangible items such as plaques, clocks, or other company gifts.

Gen X is typified by a desire to control and set their career path, personal ambitions and work time and place. They are getting paid to get a job done, and then have time for other areas of life. Much of this is a rebellion against Boomer parents who never found this balance. Gen X displays much more of a “work to live mentality” and will sacrifice the balance when necessary but not as a general rule. Best practices for managing Gen X on the time spectrum focus on providing them as much freedom as possible *with* their time. On the micro level, this may take the form of enabling them to work on their own or a reward for a job well done in the form of time off. On the macro level, it may be providing options for controlling their professional development path. Rewards and recognition need not be as visible as with the Boomers, and should focus on their project results rather than time put into a project or even an organization.

Gen Y is driven by a strong need for work-life balance and benefits that enable a gratifying career *and* life including personal development and community involvements. For this generation, lifestyle and meaningful experience count, and they look to an organization to enable both. It is important to recognize Gen Y’s desire for frequent and upwardly mobile change and organizations may do this by providing a variety of project management career paths and exposure to myriad project experiences. In fact, a recent Wall Street Journal article cited the results of an EY survey that said, “Millennial parents are twice as likely to increase the amount they work after having children, compared with some of their Generation X peers” (Morath, 2015). The article went on to say that, “The results suggest young workers don’t feel they need to choose between having a family and advancing their careers.” When managing Gen Y, project leaders are best served by understanding both this generation’s personal and professional goals.

Superior Communication: Preferred Communication Styles Across Generations

On a communication dimension, we must be cognizant of what types of communication are most valued by each group and how those are delivered (See Exhibit 6).



Exhibit 6 - Preferred Communication Styles Across Generations

As Matures grew up in a pre-computing age, where the communications took place via rotary phones, in-person, or perhaps memo, they mastered interpersonal skills and value in-person communications. When possible, many Matures appreciate colleagues choosing in-person communication such as face to face or phone as opposed to solely electronic interactions. The relational based communication skills developed by this generation may also be advantageous when communicating with clients or needing to clarify situations.

Baby Boomers also believe face-time is important, though they often like to follow-up in writing. It is important to understand that this “workaholic” generation often expects more of everything and that includes not just hours, but also follow-through, documentation, and organization. Although nearly at the top of the organization age-wise, don’t underestimate their technological abilities.

Gen X and Gen Y both place less value on face time, having grown up with much greater technological influences than the Matures and Boomers. Gen X tends to seek open communication regardless of organizational hierarchy and status. This technoliterate generation often uses email as the primary method of communication, preferring to keep messages brief and to the point. It is a generation that appreciates giving and receiving regular feedback.

Gen Y likes anytime, anywhere communication and may be described as techno-savvy and the first generation to be connected 24/7. It is a group that is used to real-time communication such as text, chat, Twitter, and what may seem like distractions are often their way of multitasking and getting a job done quickly. Technological social networks have also translated into a more natural ability to work in teams, relate to different people, and connect across cultures. This generation seeks positive reinforcement from superiors and respects their opinions.

Conclusion

In addition to the generation-specific strategies already mentioned, consider the following strategies for successful multigenerational project leadership (Gelbtuch, 2015):

Strategy #1: Do your research. Although we often think about generations in terms of age, as we have seen, each generation is defined much more by common experiences than birth years. So just as you would with a national culture, do your research. Understanding the key

drivers and events that have molded the group's behaviors in each country will help you understand more and judge less. For example, many in the Born-Free Generation in South Africa (the first generation to grow up without Apartheid) are experiencing and managing a level of freedom that previous generations didn't have, along with the challenge of integrating diversity in the workplace. Don't necessarily stereotype by equating mentality with age. Age is just a number.

Strategy #2: Be prepared to embrace change. In the past ten years, the US workforce alone has changed dramatically. The *Greatest* generation (the generation before the *Matures*) has been phased out, the *Mature* generation has shrunk from 18% to 2%, and *Gen X* and the *Millennials* have come to dominate the labor force at a combined 64% (Fry, 2015). As leaders in high performing organizations, we must be aware of both the current generational makeup in the countries in which we are working as well as the changes on the horizon. By being prepared to embrace change, we improve our ability to lead effectively and not be left behind.

Strategy #3: Develop your "generational competency". Through our educational and professional endeavors, we focus on developing competencies. Demonstrating "cultural competency" has become popular but have you thought about management modifications that you can make in order to display "generational competency"? These adaptations straddle cultural and generational boundaries. For example, generally speaking, China's Millennials are motivated by hard work, whereas Europe's Millennials often seek work-life balance and US Millennials look for a job that provides personal fulfillment. Taking differences like these into account is now a critical part of achieving organizational success on a global scale.

Strategy #4: Focus on being relevant. Rather than equating "different" with "bad", today's leaders should think more about how to be *relevant*. We adjust our products and strategies for different markets. We alter our leadership and communication styles for different audiences. We adapt ourselves across different cultures. We must also strive to modify behaviors and expectations where possible to be as relevant a leader as possible to each generation and reap the benefits of the diverse project management environment in which we find ourselves today.

As with national culture, the first step is to become aware of the differences. Be open about what you notice and make it a topic of conversation as you work to maximize the synergies across both generational and national boundaries.

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Conrado Morlan is an experienced global portfolio, program and project manager with more than 20 years of experience in aligning projects with organizational strategy for multinational companies and leading virtual and collocated multicultural and multigenerational teams in the Americas and Europe. Mr. Morlan was one of the first 150 individuals to achieve the PfMP credential worldwide and was the recipient of the PMI 2011 Distinguished Contribution Award for his activities and influence in championing project management to Spanish-speaking practitioners and organizations. His contributions to Project Management are numerous as he strives to increase the field's visibility and advance the profession through conferences, blogs, articles, and interviews. One can also consider that his presence and its effects are multiplied by three, as his linguistic talents enable him to work across borders at equal levels of comfort in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Conrado can be contacted at conrado@thesmartpm.com.