Breaking the Generational Myth: How to Use Coaching Skills for Effective Leadership

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't fit today's age-diverse workforce, where the generation gap between the youngest and oldest workers can span more than 40 years. On one end of the spectrum, there are the 20-somethings, who are fresh out of graduate school, college, or high school; on the other end are employees nearing retirement.

It's well-documented that each generation comes with its own set of values, needs, and attitudes, and vastly different expectations on communication styles and work expectations. While this may be true, I constantly ask myself "Isn't this the way it's always been?" We have always had an "age-diverse" workplace and it's likely that we've had multiple generations in the workplace at one time.

What's changed is the landscape of the workplace today. Let's face it—the world of work is vastly different than it was even 30 years ago. Economic drivers have influenced not only how we work together but also the nature of jobs. To compete globally today, we need every worker to use his or her unique strengths to maximize productivity. We need everyone to tap into their creativity and desire to contribute.

In my work with leaders, I hear daily examples of how companies and leaders are wasting the talent of their employees because of unfounded and biased beliefs about groups and individuals, whether based on age or other characteristics. Some leaders are making assumptions about employees rather than getting to know each of them as individuals.

So, if a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work, what can a leader do? Rather than generalizing age-related behavior, a leader should use a coaching approach to connect with his or her employees. The most successful leader finds a way to ensure every generation is heard.

One way a leader can increase team productivity and retain people with the required behavior, knowledge, skills, and aptitude to meet current and future business needs is to know the following details about each person on their team:

- The main reason the employee wants to work for the company
- What the employee considers to be his or her biggest achievement (this year and/or since joining the company)
- What the employee believes is his or her most important professional goal for this year
- How, other than money, the employee would like to be rewarded and/or recognized
- The last time the employee expressed his or her opinion on a work issue to the leader (if none have been shared or few, explore why and how to encourage them to bring forth their concerns, ideas, and suggestions)
- The most recent development program the employee attended (if the leader is not encouraging employee development and dedicating the time for it, they will need to course correct and help the employee set a development plan)

Many leaders struggle with answering all of these questions for every one of their employees. They might find that they can answer the questions for the employee(s) they favor or connect with the most, but not for everyone. These leaders often find that this exercise motivates them to learn more about their employees. They also discover this is the first step in developing a coaching approach with their employees.

It's here that I would offer a word of caution. Coaching is an over-used term in the workplace today. It is an often misunderstood process and is generally not used correctly by leaders. Forcing people into what WE want has never worked, and it's not coaching. Instead, I encourage leaders to get to know their employees. To find out what motivates them at work and home. To find out what inspires them to take action and support them to do their best work.

So, I'm left with the question: When the current younger generation reaches their fifties, will they be asking the same questions about the younger workers on their team? My guess is they will. And the cycle continues.

Whether you are interested in developing your leadership skills or need help in outlining a talent management process that creates a great place to work, I can help you chart a plan for success. I am a Senior Certified Birkman Consultant and use this powerful assessment with individuals and teams to increase self-awareness and work more effectively with others. Contact me at kcrawford@PeoplePossibilities.com to learn how People Possibilities can assist you.