

Principle 1

All Generations Have Similar Values; They Just Express Them Differently

Many people talk about enormous differences in values between older and younger people as if these differences were an established fact. They say things like

- The younger generation has no values.
- The current lack of values among young people in the workplace is contributing to the general decline of organizations.
- The value system is different than it used to be.

In fact, when we were formulating our research plans, we heard people say such things so often—and with more conviction than evidence—that we set up a line of inquiry just about values.

The idea that generations have fundamentally different values is obviously a commonly held belief. But, we asked ourselves, is it true? Are there significant values differences among the generations? If there are, what are those differences? And if there aren't major differences, what is causing the "generational values gap" at work?

Research

To evaluate what values people said were most important to them, we set up a computer program that presented people with 40 values in such a way that they had to prioritize some values over others.

After this process, each individual ended up with a “top ten” list of values among the 40 values available. Using these lists, we identified the values that people said were most important to them. We were also able to isolate the values that were least important. And we were able to sort and compare these results by the age of the individuals participating.

In this part of our research, 1,285 people responded (68 Silents, 316 Early Boomers, 410 Late Boomers, 411 Early Xers, and 80 Late Xers).

Top Ten Values

The values chosen in the top ten most frequently were

- FAMILY (72%)
- INTEGRITY (65%)
- ACHIEVEMENT (48%)
- LOVE (48%)
- COMPETENCE (47%)
- HAPPINESS (46%)
- SELF-RESPECT (45%)
- WISDOM (45%)
- BALANCE (39%)
- RESPONSIBILITY (38%)

Of these values, only FAMILY and INTEGRITY were chosen by more than half of the people surveyed. It is interesting to note that there is not overall agreement on what the most important values are. There is no consensus among respondents that a certain set of values is more important than all the other values. Furthermore, there was no agreement even within any of the generations that one set of values was significantly more important than another. (Table 1.1 shows the top ten values as reported by the different generations.) The main message here is that *there is not strong agreement among individuals about which specific values are the most important.*

Table 1.1. Top Ten Values, by Generation.

Silents	Early Boomers	Late Boomers	Early Xers	Late Xers
INTEGRITY 69%	INTEGRITY 70%	FAMILY 76%	FAMILY 78%	FAMILY 78%
WISDOM 60%	FAMILY 60%	INTEGRITY 72%	INTEGRITY 60%	LOVE 73%
SELF-RESPECT 59%	WISDOM 57%	ACHIEVEMENT 53%	HAPPINESS 52%	HAPPINESS 59%
FAMILY 53%	SELF-RESPECT 48%	COMPETENCE 50%	ACHIEVEMENT 50%	SELF-RESPECT 58%
COMPETENCE 47%	COMPETENCE 48%	LOVE 47%	LOVE 49%	FRIENDSHIP 53%
RESPONSIBILITY 41%	ACHIEVEMENT 45%	WISDOM 45%	COMPETENCE 46%	HELP OTHERS 46%
LOVE 40%	LOVE 44%	HAPPINESS 45%	SELF-RESPECT 43%	RESPONSIBILITY 41%
JUSTICE 38%	HAPPINESS 40%	SELF-RESPECT 41%	BALANCE 43%	LOYALTY 41%
ACHIEVEMENT 35%	BALANCE 37%	BALANCE 41%	RESPONSIBILITY 37%	INTEGRITY 39%
CREATIVITY 34%	RESPONSIBILITY 36%	RESPONSIBILITY 39%	WISDOM 36%	WISDOM 34%

Do generations have different values?

No, they really don't. Some people from each generation chose each of the values.

When you look at all 40 values that people could choose, the most striking result is how similar the generations are in their values priorities (see Appendices A and B). Although there are a few differences, overall we can't say that the generations have different values.

For example, the value ACHIEVEMENT is not chosen much more frequently by Early Boomers than it is by Early Xers, so it isn't accurate to say that Early Boomers are more focused on achievement. However, it is chosen significantly more frequently by Late Boomers and Early Xers than it is by Silents. Similarly, BALANCE is not chosen much more often by Early Xers than it is by Early or Late Boomers, so it would be incorrect to say that Early Xers are more focused on balance than Early or Late Boomers are, but they do choose it more frequently than Late Xers do.

Overall, FAMILY was chosen more often than any other value. Even so, it was chosen in the top ten by only 72% of those who responded. What does that say about the other 28%? (Author's Note: We were shocked that 28% of people didn't put FAMILY in their top ten. We checked and rechecked the data, and the result is real. Our best guess is that some people really don't think family is important, and that others meant FAMILY when they included LOVE and HAPPINESS in their top ten.) FAMILY shows up more frequently for Late Boomers, Early Xers, and Late Xers than it does for Early Boomers and Silents. Does this mean that Early Boomers and Silents are less focused on their families, or is this pattern a result of a change in focus that comes with age (rather than generation)?

Overall, ACHIEVEMENT was chosen in the top ten by 48% of those who responded—slightly more often than HAPPINESS and WISDOM. ACHIEVEMENT was chosen more frequently by Early Boomers, Late Boomers, and Early Xers than it was by Silents and Late Xers. Does this mean that Silents and Late Xers are less interested in achievement, or that they are at a point in their careers and lives where that is less of a focus?

Overall, COMPETENCE, HAPPINESS, SELF-RESPECT, and WISDOM were chosen about equally frequently (45% to 46%).

FAME was chosen in the top ten by only 3% of those who responded. Early and Late Xers chose it more frequently than did the older generations. Perhaps this is a result of youthful dreams that have not yet gone away?

COMPETITION was also chosen in the top ten by only 3% of those who responded. Late Boomers and Early Xers chose it more frequently than other generations did. Perhaps this is a result of career stage because those two generations are more in the throes of jockeying for position in their careers than are any of the other generations.

AUTHORITY was chosen in the top ten by 6% of those who responded. Silents chose it more often than any other generation did.

What is clear from these results is that many of the standard stereotypes aren't supported by the data—that generational stereotypes are about as true as *any* stereotype is.

Top Three Values

Overall, the values that show up in respondents' top three most frequently are

FAMILY (60%)

LOVE (31%)

INTEGRITY (28%)

SPIRITUALITY (21%)

SELF-RESPECT (17%)

HAPPINESS (17%)

ACHIEVEMENT (13%)

BALANCE (11%)

ECONOMIC SECURITY (11%)

WISDOM (9%)

COMPETENCE (9%)

When you look at the values that each of the generations chose most frequently for the top three (as shown in Table 1.2 and Appendix B), what you find is that there are large similarities and a few interesting small differences.

Table 1.2. Top Three Values, by Generation.

Silents	Early Boomers	Late Boomers	Early Xers	Late Xers
FAMILY 46%	FAMILY 45%	FAMILY 64%	FAMILY 67%	FAMILY 73%
INTEGRITY 46%	INTEGRITY 32%	INTEGRITY 29%	LOVE 32%	LOVE 49%
LOVE 26%	LOVE 27%	LOVE 29%	INTEGRITY 24%	SPIRITUALITY 28%
SPIRITUALITY 25%	SPIRITUALITY 21%	SPIRITUALITY 23%	HAPPINESS 20%	HAPPINESS 25%
SELF-RESPECT 22%	SELF-RESPECT 21%	HAPPINESS 18%	SPIRITUALITY 17%	FRIENDSHIP 25%
JUSTICE 15%	ECONOMIC	ACHIEVEMENT 16%	SELF-RESPECT 16%	SELF-RESPECT 19%
WISDOM 15%	SECURITY 15%	SELF-RESPECT 14%	ACHIEVEMENT 14%	HELP OTHERS 13%
RESPONSIBILITY 10%	COMPETENCE 14%	BALANCE 11%	BALANCE 13%	INTEGRITY 11%
BALANCE 9%	WISDOM 13%	ECONOMIC	ECONOMIC	ECONOMIC
ECONOMIC	HAPPINESS 13%	SECURITY 10%	SECURITY 9%	SECURITY 8%
SECURITY 9%	ACHIEVEMENT 12%	WISDOM 10%	FRIENDSHIP 8%	LOYALTY 6%

FAMILY was chosen in the top three by 60% of respondents. All generations chose it most frequently, but this was more prominent for younger generations than it was for older generations.

HAPPINESS was chosen in the top three by 17% of respondents overall, and was chosen much more frequently by the younger generations (Late Boomers, Early Xers, and Late Xers) than it was by the older generations (Silents and Early Boomers). Does this show a generational shift in the importance of the concept of happiness in people's lives, or is this an effect of age?

WISDOM was chosen in the top three by 9% of respondents overall, and was chosen more frequently by the older generations. Only 1% of Late Xers chose it as one of their top three values, while 15% of Silents chose it.

ECONOMIC SECURITY was chosen in the top three by 11% of respondents overall, and Early Boomers chose it much more frequently than did any other generation. Perhaps this is an indication of concerns about eventual retirement.

ACHIEVEMENT was chosen in the top three by 13% of those who responded; Early Boomers, Late Boomers, and Early Xers were more likely to put ACHIEVEMENT in their top three than were Silents and Late Xers.

What Happened to Spirituality?

Why is SPIRITUALITY on the list of most important values when it wasn't in the top ten list? Because people either think it is very important (rating it in their top three) or don't think it is critical (ranking it below the top ten). Overall, 29% of people put SPIRITUALITY in their top ten, and 21% put it in their top three. This means that 71% of people didn't rank SPIRITUALITY above 11, 8% ranked it 4–10, and 21% put it in their top three. In other words, most people either think spirituality is central to their values system (the 21%) or do not choose it as a value at all (the 71%).

The overall message is that there are at least as many similarities among the generations in their values choices as there are differences. What we hear day after day is that there is a gap the size of the Grand Canyon between the values of older and younger people. (Specifically, we hear that older people have values and younger people don't.) So when we found that older and younger people were expressing the same primary values in their responses, we had to start thinking about what it meant that the values weren't different. If both older and younger people say they value the same things, why do people think the values of different generations are so different? Because people from different generations behave differently, and people think that behavior equals values or values equal behavior.

Neither is true. Values are what you *believe* is important, not what you *do* to express those beliefs. People often think that if you have one set of values, you will behave one way; if you behave differently from that way, it obviously means you have a different set of values. But that isn't always true, and perceived generational differences are excellent examples of how people use different behaviors to express the same values. The generations don't differ in what they value; they differ in how they demonstrate those values.

*By nature, men are nearly all alike;
By practice, they get to be wide apart.*
—CONFUCIUS (551–479 B.C.)

So let's summarize by answering a few fundamental questions:

- Do the different generations have different values?

No, they really don't. There are a few differences, but the primary values people hold are the same.

- If there aren't fundamental differences between the values of Silents, Early Boomers, Late Boomers, Early Xers, and Late Xers, why do people think that there are differences?

Because how people express their values is often different by generation, just as it is often different by culture. For example, wearing jeans to work may be considered to be an

expression of disrespect for the work site to a Silent or an Early Boomer who thinks that jeans are too informal for work, but to employees from the Early or Late Xer generations, wearing jeans at work is not necessarily an expression of disrespect—they just want to wear jeans.

All Generations Have Similar Values; They Just Express Them Differently

What has become clear through the research and through talking to people is that conflicts about values are not about the values themselves but about how people express those values. So with regard to values issues, younger people are not contributing to the decline of the working world any more than older people are. Further, you don't have to be concerned about how to cater to each generation individually. The values of the generations are so similar that there is nothing you need to do to hedge against the "bad" values of one generation or to try to keep the "good" values of another. The values are the same. However, the behaviors that go along with those values are different.

Our sires' age was worse than our grandsires'.

We their sons are more worthless than they:

So in our turn we shall give the world a progeny yet more corrupt.

—HORACE (QUINTUS HORATIUS FLACCUS, 65–8 B.C.)

As a leader, you need to be aware of differences in behavior among the generations. As we've said, it isn't what people *say* they believe in that causes problems between members of different generations; it's what they *do* that causes the conflicts. Perceived values conflicts between people of different generations can arise in a number of different ways.

Fundamental Difference in Values

This is as likely to happen between people of the same generation as it is between people of different generations. For example, Boomers on average don't agree with each other about what values are important any more than they agree with the Xers or

Silents. Differences among individuals on what values are important are the rule rather than the exception.

Tim and John are working together to produce a better advertising campaign for their company. Tim is consistently focused on making sure that everyone involved in the project is happy about what is going on. John is consistently focused on producing a campaign that is good and that will get attention for the company—therefore making the company money. As an internal, company-based deadline looms, these values come into conflict because the artwork is substandard. (Amy, who created the artwork, misunderstood what she was supposed to produce, and she delivered it at the last minute so there wasn't time to redo it.)

John wants the deadline pushed back so that the artwork can be redone and the campaign will be successful—and if they have to explain that they must push back the deadline because Amy's work wasn't right, so be it. Tim insists that the deadline stay the same, and says that the artwork is good enough. Tim believes it is more important to meet the internal deadline and avoid having Amy get into trouble for misunderstanding the instructions than it is to have the campaign be very good.

Tim and John are at an impasse because John thinks it is more important that the work be done well and the campaign be good (competence is the priority, not “good enough”), and Tim thinks it is more important that the deadlines be met and Amy's poor work not be brought up because it would upset her (affiliation is the priority).

Working with people who have fundamentally different values is tough. If Tim and John can recognize that they hold different values, they can work to resolve the conflict by

- Compromise
- One of the two leaving the project
- One of the two changing his values

Most likely the fundamental difference of opinion won't be resolved; it is unlikely that Tim will begin to prioritize competence over affiliation or that John will prioritize affiliation over competence. The most likely outcome is that they will come to a compromise that each will be equally happy (or unhappy) with.

Another possibility is that John will eventually stop working with Tim because he will become increasingly frustrated with having to compromise all the time. What is least likely is that one of the two will change his values.

What actually happened? Tim got what he wanted: the campaign was turned in before the deadline, and nothing happened to Amy. John decided that having a good campaign was important enough to him that he was willing to do extra work to achieve it, so he arranged the process so that the artwork could be completely redone in the next stage. There were additional costs to the project because John had to hire a new artist and do a lot of extra work, but in the end he felt it was worth the extra effort and was pleased with the product.

Same Value, Different Expressions

As we've noted, people who share the same value can express that value in different ways, which may lead to conflict. For example, varying expressions of the value of collaboration can lead to conflict.

Kim and Jerry work in the same company in different divisions. In this company, collaboration is considered to be a very important value. Both Kim and Jerry agree that collaboration is important, and they both say they work hard to make sure they behave in a collaborative way. Nonetheless, they are often unhappy with each other because Jerry thinks that Kim doesn't actually collaborate.

Jerry's perspective is that Kim doesn't value collaboration. He believes that she really wants to be able to make all the decisions herself. He thinks this is obvious, and as evidence he cites how she resists inviting people to meetings and avoids consulting people about the decisions she is making. He believes that she just wants to go with her gut instinct rather than ask for other people's opinions.

Kim believes she is very collaborative. As evidence she points to her inviting people to meetings and asking for others' opinions all the time. She believes that the fact that she doesn't ask everyone in the building to every meeting or take a vote of all staff for every decision doesn't mean she's not being collaborative. She says that she is interested in other opinions and doesn't know what else Jerry wants her to do to be collaborative.

So, is one of these people collaborative and the other not? Is Jerry so touchy-feely he probably never gets anything done because he's asking everyone for opinions and having endless meetings? Is Kim too power hungry to collaborate with others? Or do they just have different ideas of what being collaborative means when it comes to what people actually do at work?

Some people would claim that the difference between these two people is fundamentally a values issue: one person values collaboration, the other doesn't. In this case, what is actually going on is that they are expressing the value differently. Kim and Jerry both value collaboration, but they have very different ideas about what it means to act collaboratively in the workplace.

Given what we now know about the true nature of the conflict, what might Kim and Jerry do to solve their problems?

They might begin by discussing what they each define as collaborative behavior. If they can understand what each thinks is collaborative, then they can better identify where they disagree. And if they know how their perspectives are divergent, they can do a better job of figuring out where they need to be compromising and thinking about what the other needs.

It would also be helpful if Jerry would hold his tongue when he finds himself about to say that Kim doesn't value collaboration. If Jerry feels strongly about including more people in meetings or making decisions differently, he would do better to explain to Kim exactly why he believes that his approach would be more productive than hers. For example, does he see real difficulty in getting initiatives through because Kim doesn't include enough people in the decision making? Or is his concern primarily about helping people feel more "heard" within the group? Jerry would be more persuasive if he could explain to Kim—without using generalizations or critical language—what the improved outcome would be from a change in her behavior.

Kim, for her part, might try to step back and figure out what is motivating Jerry's need to include more people in the meetings and decision making. Is there something specific that he thinks is going wrong because of her behavior? Can he show times when something would have gone more smoothly if more people were brought in to the decision-making process? Or is this a personal issue with him? Is it that Jerry feels as though he doesn't have

enough of a say in the decisions, and is accusing Kim of not being collaborative as a backhanded way to get her to give him more power? If Kim can figure out Jerry's motives, she can address his concerns more effectively.

Whether or not you agree with another person's (opposing) perspective, that perspective is very useful information to have. Both Jerry and Kim can use the disagreement to better understand the other's viewpoint, values, and goals, and the other's ideas about how those goals might be most effectively accomplished. The feedback people give you is always useful, because it tells you something about how others see you or about others' motivations. In any case, you can use the information to help bridge the differences in perspectives in a way that is advantageous to both parties. What Kim, Jerry, and probably many of us need to work on is how we deliver the information and how we hear it ourselves.

How family is valued is another area that often results in conflict because people have different ways of expressing the same value. FAMILY was the value chosen most frequently, with 34% of the respondents choosing it as their first value (the most important value on the list to them), 60% putting it in their top three, and 72% putting it in their top ten. But when you ask people from different generations what valuing family translates into in their day-to-day behavior, their responses often sound as if they come from different planets. Older men (Silents and often both the Early and Late Boomers) are likely to say they show that they value their family by working long hours and making a lot of money so that their families can have what they want.

In contrast, Early and Late Xers are likely to say they show that they value their family by spending more time with their families (even though they don't actually work fewer hours). There is much less focus on the amount of money they're bringing home and much more focus on the time they get to enjoy with their families.

Sometimes this difference in how people express their valuing of family can result in different attributions about why people are working as much (or as little) as they are. One stereotypical conclusion is that those who work many hours and are working hard to climb the corporate ladder are selfish workaholics; in fact, their real motivation may be to provide a good and stable financial life for their families. Another stereotypical conclusion is that those

who don't work many hours are lazy slackers; their real motivation may be to spend more time with their families. Remembering that people might be expressing the same values in different ways, in view of different contexts and different economic pressures, can serve as an antidote to making these kinds of stereotypical attributions.

How This Applies to You

The research shows that the generations' values do not differ significantly—individuals of all generations differ much more from each other than any generation does from the others. That is, there are more differences within each generation than there are between generations. Therefore, when you are party to a conflict that appears to be about generation-based values differences, you need to try to remember two things. First, it is more likely that the conflict is about a difference between individuals that has nothing whatsoever to do with their generation. Second, the conflict is about differences in behavior rather than about a fundamental values difference.

For example, at the beach today (in the United States) a woman considers herself to be dressing modestly if she wears a tank suit (one-piece) rather than a bikini. Sixty years ago, the smallest, most revealing bathing suits were more concealing than the most modest ones are today. We need to remember that it is better to assume that the values are the same and work from there.

A pertinent example has shown up recently in the courts. More and more people (especially younger people) are getting facial piercings and showing visible tattoos at work. What does it mean to have a tattoo or facial piercing? What are the values expressed by that choice? We're sure that if you think about this topic, you'll have some gut-level reaction to it. And the question is becoming more relevant every day as tattoos and piercings become more prevalent in different areas of society and as they are being seen more by clients.

The issue has come up many times in the courts, typically around the question of how much the organization can control the appearance of individual workers to protect the image of the organization. There was a recent court decision in which a woman sued, alleging sex discrimination. The core of the case was that she

had a tattoo and was required to cover it, but a male coworker was not required to cover his. Why the different treatment? The company felt that other people thought that men with tattoos (especially military ones) were heroes, whereas women with tattoos were “bad” (that is, prostitutes or drug users). The court decided that the company’s behavior was based on outdated gender stereotypes that were inadequate justification for treating men and women differently.

What the company was doing was what people do every day when they see another’s behavior and attribute a particular set of values to it. The fundamental flaw in this thinking is that we can’t possibly determine another person’s values simply from observation of his or her behavior, or clothing, or piercings. We can know what it would mean if *we* behaved that way, but we can’t possibly know—without asking—what it means for the other person to behave that way.

If You Are a Manager

If you are a manager faced with employees who are at odds over a seeming values conflict, ask yourself first whether it really is a values issue. Is the conflict about fundamental differences in values, or is it about feeling valued and respected? Is it about what behaviors show respect? Is it about certain employees not being treated the way they think they should be treated? Is it about them thinking that they should have power (and seniority) over someone who they feel should not have it? Often what at first glance appear to be values conflicts are really more about people feeling valued and respected by the people they work with. As a manager, you have to decide how much of the conflict is fixable and how much people are just going to have to tolerate. If you can intervene (quietly, often with each party individually) and coach the parties to help them understand what is going on with the other person, you have both helped yourself in potentially reducing workplace conflict and provided a learning opportunity for the people involved. Every opportunity to take the perspective of others is a learning opportunity, for there are few skills more useful to people than being able to accurately “read” and react to others around them. The earlier a person learns this, the more effective they will be. The better they are at this skill, the fewer of this type of conflict they are likely to have.

Sometimes the issue isn't going to be fixable, because someone believes the other is just wrong and can't see the situation from any other perspective. As a manager in these cases, you might find it useful to understand why employees who make values judgments think that they have the right (read: status) to do so. Employees have a right to personal opinions about the people they work with, but these opinions cannot be allowed to affect the productivity of the group. Most of the time, people can manage these perceived values differences just fine—after all, they don't have to like everyone they work with. When they can't, you as the manager need to diagnose the true origin of the conflict (because it generally isn't actually about values) and help people deal with the real root of the problem.

It is true that people from different generations often express their values differently and that these different expressions of values can cause conflict. When these problems surface, you can remind those involved that differences in behavior do not necessarily reflect differences in fundamental values. As a leader, you need to help everyone remember that there is a difference between values and behaviors. If the people are actually complaining about behaviors, find out what is bothering them. Help them move away from general complaints about "values" and understand the specific behaviors that are troubling them. If you can help them understand the particular issue, you can help all the parties involved put together an action plan or a behavior plan so that the conflicts don't arise—or, if they do, can be dealt with more effectively and efficiently.

When you hear someone saying that younger people "have no values," ask her whether she really thinks that or whether she just doesn't like what a particular younger person is doing at that moment. Do the people saying this really think that it is the younger person's fundamental values that are wrong, or is it just how they are behaving at the time? If the complaint centers on how the younger person is behaving, ask the person making the comment (in a lighthearted way) why he thinks that he is the arbiter of "good" values in the workplace. It is one thing to make such complaints at church or at home, but a workplace is different. Everyone is of course entitled to an opinion but needs to be circumspect about expressing personal condemnations at work. Addressing work issues is fine, but it is not a good idea to make sweeping stereotyping statements about coworkers.

It is important for us always to remember that even when people (older or younger) are doing things that drive us crazy or offend our sense of what is right, it is likely that they are doing what they are doing out of values very similar to ours . . . they're just expressing them in an exceptionally annoying way! We can't say they are without values and are therefore bad people—it is no more true of them than it is of us.

What You Should Have Learned from This Chapter

- People of all generations have similar values.
- FAMILY is the value chosen most frequently.
- Values and behaviors aren't the same thing—someone can behave very differently from you and still hold the same values.