Chapter 17
Help Me Understand: Effectively Communicating Across Generations

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ABSTRACT
Higher education leaders need to identify differences among generations of employees and students and develop a strategic plan for managing and motivating across the generations. This case study addresses the following question: “How do higher education leaders lead and motivate multigenerational employees and online students?” An understanding of the common characteristics of each generational group is the first step for developing a strategy for motivating all employees and students in higher education. Communication, mentoring programs, training, respect, and opportunities for career advancement are components valued by all. It is important for higher education leaders to understand the values, work ethic, and communication style of the different generations. The implications for higher education leaders lie in establishing an organizational culture that promotes satisfaction for all individuals in the higher education setting.

BACKGROUND
The number of adult learners have increased as individuals are re-inventing themselves and working longer to meet the extension of the retirement age. As such, higher education leaders need to be mindful about the different generations working in various capacities in the higher education setting. College leaders, such as department chairs or other leaders responsible for training and hiring faculty members, also need to be aware of the differences across the generations. This is especially true for online instructors who do not meet face-to-face with students.

According to DeMarco (2018), “Now that four generations, and in many cases five, are working together in offices across the country, how will workplace customs change when it comes to communication?” (p.1). As such, the topic of engaging and managing the multigenerational workforce calls for further research. Educational leaders at all levels are challenged with leading various generations. This

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has had a major impact on higher education leadership in terms of retention, recruitment, motivation, and productivity. Faculty members also need to be aware of the differences between multigenerational students, especially in the online classroom, and establish communication models where all students are motivated to perform at the highest level.

**INTRODUCTION**

At the present time, there are five generational groupings of employees in the workplace and in the higher education classroom. Grensing-Pophal (2018) describes the generational groupings as:

- **Traditionalists**: Born before 1946
- **Baby Boomers**: Born between 1946 and 1964
- **Generation X**: Born between 1965 and 1976
- **Generation Y, or Millennials**: Born between 1977 and 1997
- **Generation Z**: Born after 1997

As individuals are working well into their late 60’s or early 70’s, higher education leaders need to adapt their leadership styles to effectively manage, motivate, and retain employees from various generations. As Grensing-Pophal (2018) states, “By 2024, about 25% of the workforce is projected to be over the age of 55. That compares to only about 12 percent of the workforce in 1994. In fact, in some workplaces, 55 doesn’t even begin to signify time to retire. Those in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s also are deciding to stay in place either full time or part time. This trend has resulted in a new phenomenon: more generations in the workplace,” (p.1). Additionally, the flexibility of online learning promotes many adults to return to college. Students across generations have different communication styles and study habits. Online instructors need to be mindful of these generational differences and adapt a teaching style that promotes success for all students in the online classroom.

The diversity of generational workers and students impacts motivation and retention of employees. Additionally, higher education leaders, such as department chairs, need to train instructors on communicating with multigenerational students. This is especially imperative in the online classroom where nonverbal cues are absent. As such, college leaders and instructors need to be knowledgeable of the differences across generations and leverage the strengths of each group. “When communicating across generations most likely it isn’t just one. Most of us are trying to reach a mix of individuals, but how does each generation like to be reached and how do we combine them,” (Aalgaard, 2015, p.1).

While higher education leaders and instructors may be aware of the various generations in their institutions and classrooms, implications for motivating and managing across the generations may not have been considered. “Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons. Learning how to communicate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace and the world of business,” (Hammill, 2015).

While the core values are similar, college leaders need to take a different approach when attempting to meet the needs of multigenerational employees. According to Moss (2017) the challenges of blending a mutigenerational workforce include: