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# The Pitfalls of Giving Feedback Across Generations



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD

## **Bridging generational divides may involve discomfort but can push a team towards excellence.**

Recent research has focused on the benefits of real-time feedback: See the problem, correct the problem. That probably works if you're the boss passing feedback on to your subordinate. But if you're younger and less experienced, going right up to your colleagues to tell them how they could improve is likely to put them on the defensive and make you a bunch of enemies. It could even stunt your career.

Generational diversity in the workplace has increased significantly over the past decades, as people are living longer and retiring later. Today's organisations may employ people from four generations at one go – a situation unheard of a few decades ago.

I became interested in age diversity at work 25 years ago in my first management role. I had hired a former pharmacist who was my mother's age. Elegant and worldly, Carole was returning to the workforce after spending 18 years raising children. I still remember how awkward I felt when

I had to guide her when she began struggling with a client. The age difference was no issue when things were going well, but I worried about coming off as obnoxious when I prescribed some needed changes.

### **Mismatch between role and traditional social cues**

My reaction, as I learnt later, is sometimes referred to as *status incongruence*. This refers to the perceived mismatch between a person's social characteristics (in this case, my youth) and the role in a specific context (here, acting as a coach).

One **research project** with 8,000 employees in Germany showed that when younger managers supervise older workers, everyone is measurably less happy. While the former can feel awkward, the latter are constantly reminded that they somehow “failed to keep pace.”

To complicate matters, each succeeding generation has developed its own ideas about who should give feedback to whom, how formal that feedback should be, and the ideal ratio of praise to criticism. Some colleagues may expect to receive feedback once a year, and only from their boss. Others may believe that feedback should be given in real time and in all directions. Here are a few of the key differences:

#### *Baby boomers (now in their late fifties to seventies)*

They were the first to get graded on “works well with others” at school. They were also the first to have work discussions about emotional intelligence and to see feedback as a means to improve interpersonal relations. Though previous generations were more likely to hint at potential improvements, boomers introduced the annual performance review. They also **learnt** that feedback should be formal, documented and given in annual meetings between boss and subordinate.

#### *Gen Xers (in their forties to mid-fifties)*

They grew up in two-income families amid rising divorce rates. These “latchkey kids” learned to get along without an authority figure and to rely mostly on themselves. They tend to be considerably less formal than their boomer colleagues. Open to instant feedback, they don't want to wait all year to know how they're doing. They are also the first generation to give upward feedback.

### *Millennials, or Generation Y (in their late twenties and thirties)*

They were raised when child-rearing psychology focused on building self-esteem. A product of helicopter parenting, they're sometimes nicknamed the "snowflake generation". But this stereotype – overly sensitive millennials being easily crushed – may be **misleading**. In fact, **research** conducted in 2019 showed that when it comes to accepting feedback, millennials are less sensitive than their older colleagues. While it's true that they expect copious praise, they don't necessarily wilt when criticised.

### *Zoomers (in their teens to mid-twenties)*

They were the first to grow up surrounded by social media and thus by constant informal feedback. Zoomers learned to post something on Tiktok in the morning and watch reactions come in all day long. They are more likely to expect feedback to be frequent and given in all directions (subordinate to boss, peer to peer, and so on).

## **A tough but necessary pill to swallow**

The cross-generational tensions these differences engender are captured nicely by the story of Richard, a business writer in his late fifties who works for a large media firm. Recently he attended a session where everyone in his department took turns to receive feedback from all team members on their current projects. First, two other senior colleagues gave Richard both praise and tips for improving his work. Then it was Connor's turn.

A talented writer in his mid-twenties, Connor didn't tiptoe. "This is all right," he told Richard, "but you completely left your personality out. Your audience wants to feel that you're with them, but your individual voice is absent."

For Richard, it was a tough pill to swallow. Getting feedback from someone with decades less experience than him made him uncomfortable, to say the least. He immediately rejected his comments. "I wasn't ready to listen to what he was saying, let alone collaborate with him again," he said.

One problem was status incongruence. But also, in Richard's baby boomer generation, feedback normally comes only from your boss. Richard left the meeting quite shaken.

## **Explicit norms to the rescue**

If you're leading a multigenerational team, the best way to deal with diverse expectations about feedback is to establish explicit norms for how and when it should be given. That creates a common platform on which all can converge.

Despite his initial discomfort, Richard understood that Connor was simply abiding by the feedback norms of the team. After he got home, he reflected on the feedback he'd received. It then became clear to him that Connor's had been the most valuable.

Connor's different perspective pushed Richard to think of ways to make his writing richer. "He was right. My experience as a journalist had taught me to leave myself out of my writing, and in this case, it made the piece feel sterile," he said.

As Connor was from a generation where people self-disclose more openly, it was easier for him to see the gap in the writing style. Seeing his piece with new eyes, Richard wrote something that, in his own opinion, was "infinitely better".

If your team is composed of people from various cultures, genders and generations, frequent and open feedback sessions can allow everyone to get stronger ideas on how to improve. It exposes blind spots and promotes greater cohesion. But first, everyone should become more aware of the potential pitfalls so as to nimbly avoid them.

*This is part 3 of a three-part series on the art of giving feedback in the age of DEI.*

*This is an adaptation of an [article](#) published in HBR.*

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#### **About the author(s)**

**Erin Meyer** is Professor of Management Practice in the Organisational Behaviour Department at INSEAD. Erin is the Programme Director for INSEAD's executive development programme **Leading Across Borders and Cultures**.