“The key to supporting different generations lies in understanding the drivers of the differences and leveraging unique characteristics to create win-wins for them, their cohorts, and their leaders.”

Churches Understanding Generational Differences

Generational differences can affect everything, including calling for ministry, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity. Think of how generational differences, relative to how people communicate, might affect misunderstandings, high volunteer turnover, and difficulty in attracting and gaining volunteer commitment. How this impacts working in a church setting on the vestry and other various committees as well is something to keep in mind when calling individuals into new ministry as well as keeping those involved committed.

Who and what makes up the four generations? And how do they view work and leadership?

Traditionalists

Traditionalists, born between 1928 and 1945, were raised in homogeneous families and neighborhoods. This generation witnessed the rise of the white collar job and a strong commitment to higher education. Traditionalists have a respect for authority and place a lot of value in receiving financial rewards and having security. A good example of the focus on security needs can be seen in how important health care is to this generation.

Traditional Generation members tend to:

- believe in conformity, authority and rules
- have a very defined sense of right and wrong
- be loyal, disciplined, logical, detail-oriented
- view an understanding of history as a way to plan for the future
- dislike conflict
- seek out technological advancements
- prefer hierarchical organizational structures
Generational Differences in Leadership

**Boomers**

The baby boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, was shaped by the Vietnam War; the Civil Rights movement; and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, John F Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy. Boomers are more suspicious of authority than their parents as a result of events like Watergate and unpopular wars. Boomers are competitive by nature, but they do show some commitment to making a better world.

Baby boomers are drawn to:

- long hours at the office, including evenings and weekends
- building their career over the long term and loyalty to their employer
- viewing themselves and their career as one and the same
- commitment to quality and doing a good job
- “hanging tough” through difficult work situations and policies
- finding solutions to problems
- being in charge and respecting authority

**Generation X**

Generation Xers were born between 1964 and 1980 – the oldest Gen X’s are in their early 40s now. This generation saw the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. They were the first to experience high divorce rates amongst their parents, and most had some exposure to parents or relatives losing jobs to the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. The growth of the Internet and global access to information created a generation that is information rich. Generation Xers asked the question, “where can I get the information? “ Generation Xers are self-reliant and have clear tribal affiliations.

Members of Generation X tend to:

- prefer high-quality end results over quantity
- set and meet goals and are very productive
- multitask
- balance work and life; like flexible working hours, job sharing
- see themselves as free agents and marketable commodities
- be comfortable with authority but not impressed with titles
- be technically competent
- value ethnic diversity
Generation Y

Generation Y, born after 1980, is challenging traditional hiring and recruiting practices. Generation Y comprises not only the largest consumer group but the largest employee group as well. Gen Y’s are the children of the Boomers and the siblings of Generation X. Generation Y’s are very upbeat and optimistic despite having been exposed to routine violence in schools and terrorism. Events such as the Columbine school shootings and September 11th terrorist attacks created an almost constant state of vigilance for many of these young people.

Exposure to technology became ubiquitous for this generation and the comfort level with the use of technology is unprecedented. The family-centric model created a very pro-child environment; Generation Y listens to their parents and respect authority. Generation Y is pro-learning, spiritual by nature, and socially conscious with a very high self esteem. They like to be mentored by Boomers rather than peers; and while they have a high respect for older and more authoritarian role models, they don’t have a high regard for organizations. As a result of the culture and influences that have shaped Generation Y, they are trustful of authorities, respect their parents as role models, and recognize that work is just one priority in life, not the priority.

Members of Generation Y tend to prefer:

- effecting change and making an impact
- expressing themselves rather than defining themselves through work
- multitasking all the time
- active involvement
- flexibility in work hours and appearance; a relaxed work environment
- teamwork
- on-the-job training
- getting everything immediately
- a balance of work and life

Relevance for Ministry

The diversity in background, experience and expectations of the four generational cohorts require different approaches to inviting them into ministry. The key to supporting different
generations lies in understanding the drivers of the differences and leveraging unique characteristics to create win-wins for them, their cohorts, and their leaders. Managing the multi-generational volunteer force requires that each distinct cohort be considered individually from the standpoint of expectations, mobility, development, and call. To ignore the needs and wants of one cohort over another is a very risky practice.

Sharon Ely Pearson is a 30+ year Christian formation veteran, currently serving as an editor and the Christian Formation Specialist for Church Publishing Incorporated. Wife, mother, grandmother, and author, she enjoys connecting people with each other and the resources they need for growing in the knowledge and love of Jesus.