



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

November 2006 *Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the power of four generations working together to promote student learning.

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The Greatest Generation Is... All of Them!



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

As we continue our year-long focus on **Creating a Culture for Learning**, this issue of *Just for the ASKing!* highlights the importance of recognizing, understanding, and appreciating the values, perspectives, and characteristics of different generations in our school communities.

An “Aha Moment” on this issue occurred for me almost twenty years ago. An annual event at Thoreau Middle School was a school visit by an executive from our business partner. Early in that partnership, the president of the business came for a visit and a tour of the building. At the time I was in my forties and he was in his mid-seventies. As we visited classes, I remember being proud and pleased with the work our middle school teachers and students were doing and the real learning that was taking place. From room to room we saw highly engaged students, some working on group objects, others participating in lively discussions. Teachers skillfully guided instruction and ensured that students were learning from meaningful tasks. However, as I watched the face of the company CEO, I saw frustration and concern. As we walked down the hallway, much to my surprise, he expressed his doubts about the state of public education. From his vantage point, there appeared to be too much chaos and disorder. He failed to see that any learning was occurring. He wanted to know why the desks were not in straight rows, why the students were not quieter, and why the teachers were not in the front of the room “teaching.” It was clear to me that the fact that we were from different generations caused us to have widely varying perspectives about best practice in teaching and learning. It was a memorable experience for me because it strongly drove home the point that the two of us saw the same thing differently based on our upbringing, our values, and our past experiences.

We must always remember that we are more alike than we are different. There are, however, many variables that impact our life view: ethnicity, socio-economic status, learning profiles, gender, mobility, family life, religious beliefs, etc. As we enter the 21st century we have added generational differences to the list of variables because we now have four generations in the work force and technology has so impacted how we live our lives. School leaders can use the strengths of each generation if they are proactive in learning about those generational differences and using them to develop appropriate and productive ways to work with and lead each of them.

Social scientists have identified four generational groups whose actions, attitudes, and achievements are

impacted by the discoveries, events, and inventions they have experienced. **Traditionalists**, who range in age from 64 to 82, may be the grandparents who are raising the students we serve or the community members who have the time and means to support schools in many ways. The **Baby Boomer** generation, aged 46 to 63 and a third group called **Generation X** or **Gen Xers** represent the majority of our teachers and parents. The final group, designated as the **Millennials**, range in age from newborn up to 25 years. All the students in our schools as well as our youngest parents are members of this generation. Interestingly, principals and other school leaders come from all four generations. Some principals are selected in their twenties while others are working well into their seventies. **Gen X** or **Millennial** principals, working with staffs comprised mainly of **Baby Boomers**, will be much more successful when they not only have an in-depth understanding of how **Baby Boomers** perceive the world but an understanding of how their own perspectives and strengths impact the relationships. At the other end of the generational perspective, some older principals are hiring teachers who were not born when those principals began their professional careers.

The most important point to note is that we should lead with the mindset that no one generation is “greater” than another. Our job is not to try to change those from other generations into clones of our own generation. Our goal as leaders is to know all staff members well, to use our knowledge about what they know, what they can do, and what they need in order to be contributing members of the school community in ways that promote high levels of student learning.

Three questions provide focus to this discussion of generational differences.

What are some of the typical characteristics of each generation and how can a leader build upon the strengths of each group?

Traditionalists as staff and community members serve as historians of the changes that have occurred in education and in our world in general. It is important to acknowledge their contributions and life experiences. They often work as mentors for young teachers and help them to see that learning to teach well is a lifelong endeavor. **Baby Boomers** actively seek opportunities to contribute and move up the career ladder with many seeking administrative or teacher leader positions. Wise principals channel their competitive nature and sense of optimism into school initiatives that benefit everyone in the school community. The life experiences of **Gen Xers** span events from Watergate to Operation Desert Storm. They grew up “pre-standards” with open classrooms and experiential learning. As today’s teachers, **Gen Xers** prefer action to talk and seek balance between their personal and professional lives. Principals can call upon their extensive technological skills to enhance the work of the school and use their creative energy to think outside the box. School leaders should not try to micro-manage **Gen Xers** but instead give them clear guidelines followed by the space and independence to get the job done. **Millennials** value the expertise of the older generations and bring their cutting-edge technological knowledge and skills to the school environment. They are especially adept at multi-tasking and value and seek immediate feedback on their work performance. When we are explicit in letting **Millennials** know that we value their expertise and input, we are more likely to retain more of them in the teaching profession.

How do strong school leaders use their knowledge of generational differences to create a school culture where the preferences and contributions of each generation are recognized and used to promote a learning-centered environment?

Paula Rutherford in *The 21st Century Mentor’s Handbook* identifies four key variables of school life (and has recently added a fifth in journal articles) that are heavily impacted by generational differences. Those variables are:

- Communication channels
- Professional development
- Feedback
- Supervision and evaluation

- Appreciation and recognition

Those staff and community members who are 40 years old and younger are called “digital natives” while those over 40 years old are “digital immigrants.” That is, those over 40 are at various points in the frequency and sophistication of their use of technology to learn, teach, and organize their lives. For the digital natives, the first choice of communication channels is always the newest technological one; the **Gen Xers** and **Millennials** are wired and there is no turning back. Cell phones, instant messaging, iPods, Podcasts, blogs, e-newsletters, and so on are the preferred communication channel for their personal lives and we need to work with them to make it at least a part of their professional development and for giving and receiving instant feedback. These digital natives need to be patient and understanding with their colleagues who are less technologically proficient or inclined and the older crowd needs to be accepting of the new wave.

In teaming and mentoring situations, those involved need to be proactive in learning about the work preferences and seek to understand the perspectives of those who are coming from a different place and time. Much like the work we have done around multiple intelligences theory and learning styles with our students we need to build the same level of understanding and appreciation for each other. It is only when we do the work to better understand and appreciate one another as adults that we will be able to do our best work in helping students succeed at high levels.

Why is it important for a principal to share information about generational differences with parents in the school community?

Anyone who works in a school is fully aware of the fact that parents in the community talk about the school their children attend with friends and neighbors. Many share their positive feelings about the school and the teaching staff while others complain and bemoan the fact that their child has “one of the older staff members” or “one of those right-out-of college novice teachers” this year. Just as teachers need to develop a better understanding of the strengths of different generations, parents likewise will benefit from an increased awareness of the potential contributions of different age groups. An older teacher may bring wisdom and stability to a classroom while a newer teacher may bring new methods and a strong energy and enthusiasm to the learning environment. Each can be seen in a positive light. Sharing information about generational differences through school newsletters or at PTA meetings may help parents to look at their child’s teacher with greater optimism. Further, a principal can highlight different faculty members in school newsletters acknowledging their experiences and the contributions they make to the school.

Important tasks for school leaders include the development of deeper understanding of the staff members who work in a school, learning what they value and how they view the world, and then creating a culture where all individuals work in a collegial manner. When the principal as well as staff members from different generations know more about each group’s values, characteristics, and contributions, it is inevitable that a stronger school culture will evolve.

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