

Closing the Generation Gap

As summer brings in the intern season, it is important to know how to handle the generation gap.

by Kasey Miller

‘W’hen you made the decision to focus on agriculture, you made a good bet,” Jim Welch told college students gathered for the Agriculture Future of America (AFA) Conference. Despite the Great Recession in 2008, the economy in agriculture has stayed relatively strong, as evident in current high beef and cattle prices, the president and founder of The Growth Leader Inc., a business consulting firm, explained. Additionally, 81 million people, all of whom need to be fed, are added to the global population every year. That fosters job security.

Agriculture is a diverse industry, and even though the average age in production agriculture is rising, new blood is certainly entering the industry. Movements like Thought for Food, which is challenging students to create innovative ways to tackle global food issues, and university agricultural advocacy groups across the country are proof that this young generation entering the workforce is passionate about agriculture.

How that passion manifests itself is a result of a different generational upbringing, which can create gaps in communication and understanding between those coming back to the farm and those already established there. As different generations mingle in the workplace (especially during the summer intern season, when the generation gap may

be even more pronounced), it is integral to understand how they each operate, and what that can mean in the workplace or on the ranch.

Baby Boomers

Those in the Baby Boomer generation were born between 1946 and 1964, explains Charles Conrad, professor of organizational communication at Texas A&M University. The average age of agricultural producers is 57.1 years, according to the 2007 Ag Census, positioning them firmly in the Baby Boomer generation.

Baby Boomers were raised in the post-World War II era of social stability and relative prosperity, Conrad shares. Divorce was relatively rare, schools were safe and jobs were secure. Single-earner households with a clear division of labor between men and women were normal, probably the only time in U.S. history in which they were.

Baby Boomers “live to work,” Welch says, putting himself in that generation. “Our job is our life. We grew up in a generation where we didn’t really think about life outside of work.”

They are goal-oriented and put much pride in their status or level at work. Conrad adds that Baby Boomers “were loyal and committed to their organizations, learned to pay their dues patiently and wait for the

opportunity for advancement, and largely defined themselves and their success in terms of their organizational rank.”

Loyal employees, Baby Boomers expected to stay with their organization as long as they chose to do so, Conrad explains, and they could support themselves after retirement with an adequate pension.

Because of this long-term commitment to the job, they develop long-term relationships with coworkers and, Welch says, they feel a greater sense of loss when people leave.

Welch also notes that Baby Boomers grew up as one of the wealthiest generations in history. They were the TV generation, growing up on *I Love Lucy* and *Andy Griffith*, and they are now the fastest-growing population online. More than 80% of the Baby Boomer generation is online, and they are the fastest-growing group on Facebook and Twitter.

Baby Boomers can be great mentors to younger generations, and they enjoy sharing their experience.

The biggest obstacle for Baby Boomers is that they tend to overcommit, Welch says. They are overly optimistic and often have a problem saying no, thus putting too much on their plate. Knowing possible challenges when working with those in a generation is the first step to overcoming those challenges.

Generation X

Generation Xers were born from about 1965 to 1979, Conrad explains, and they contrast greatly with the Baby Boomers. Generation Xers grew up in two-career families, and divorce rates had increased rapidly. They are the products of daycare, technology and downsizing. Seeing their parents get laid off from work, they became incredibly independent and much less loyal to their organizations.

He says Generation Xers concentrate on developing their skill sets to make them valuable to current organizations, but also as a means to get out on their own. They want rewards based on performance, not seniority.

“They move on quickly,” Conrad observes, “changing jobs multiple times by the time they’re in their 30s.”

Welch confirms this, adding that Generation Xers, whom he calls the MTV generation, are unimpressed with authority and much more skeptical. They respond best to direct and candid feedback, and they are more likely to give feedback in that manner. They do not appreciate whining.

Generation Xers live for adventure, value vacation time and are very focused and goal-oriented. They are creative and avid learners, and they enjoy networking.

Because they are so goal-oriented, he says, they are not process-oriented and may not

Jim Welch’s 16 Steps for the Millennial Employee to Stand Out in the Workplace

Jim Welch, president and founder of The Growth Leader Inc., a business and consulting firm, shared these 16 steps for the Millennial generation to excel as they enter the workplace.

1. Demonstrate that you want a career, not a job.
2. Demonstrate a strong work ethic.
3. Write things down.
4. Utilize your voice and build relationships.
5. Leverage listening.
6. Share bad news fast.
7. Bring solutions with problems.
8. Practice the art of follow-up.
9. Confront conflict now!
10. Ask open-ended questions.
11. Use humor to build trust.
12. Demonstrate independence and self-reliance.
13. Show desire to grow skill set portfolio.
14. Give credit to others.
15. Ask Boomers for input.
16. Celebrate what matters.

For more information about Jim Welch and his speaking topics, visit www.thegrowthleader.com/home.html.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 68

Closing the Generation Gap

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67

collaborate as well as other generations. Managers should focus on enabling their creativity skills, which will generate great results and a higher level of job satisfaction.

Millennials

The second biggest generation group, the Millennial generation, includes about 81 million people, compared to the 87 million Baby Boomers. Millennials were born between 1982 and 2002, Conrad explains.

This generation shares a few more

attributes with the Boomers than do Generation Xers. Like the Boomers, they have grown up with more disposable income and are used to having material possessions. They are willing to work hard in the short term for a big payoff in the long term. They also work well in teams.

They are opposite of Boomers in a very big area, Welch says, addressing Millennials. “When you all show up, you want to have a life. You want to have a job, but you also want to have a life, and you’re interacting with a generation that grew up saying ‘your job is your life.’ How you interact with that and how you work together is really important.”

Many Millennial employees are also cynical of institutions and are very socially active, Conrad observes, more so than any other generation since the 1960s. They don’t stay in one position for very long, much like Generation Xers.

Because they have grown up with material things, Welch and Conrad both agree that entitlement is a big challenge with Millennial employees. Asking for or expecting special projects instead of “paying their dues” with normal, mundane projects is a complaint of their bosses, Conrad says. The Millennial employee will often try to negotiate company policies.

Mike Smith of Harris Ranch in California says many entering the workforce don't have realistic views of the workforce, especially as an entry-level employee. He jokingly says Millennials interviewing with the ranch "want a \$60,000 salary and three weeks of vacation a year. They also want to be the CEO in five years."

Jokes aside, those expectations may be too much, too soon, he says, suggesting Millennials continue to be aggressive, but be flexible.

Millennials are generally smart and great problem solvers. However, growing up in an "everyone gets a trophy" society, Welch says,

Millennials need more feedback and praise.

Millennials are master multi-taskers and incredibly tech-savvy, which perhaps poses simultaneously their biggest opportunity and their biggest challenge. Welch explains, the opportunity is that they can handle many projects at once and know how to use technology to their advantage. The challenge is that they can have trouble maintaining focus, and they rely too much on technology. They want instant gratification, and they rely on technology instead of establishing face-to-face relationships.

"There's never been a successful relationship built through email. Not one,"

Welch emphasizes. "There are very few relationships built through text messaging. It's all about the face-to-face; it's all about the voice."

Knowing the traits and challenges that each generation presents can be helpful in maintaining growth. Farms and ranches commonly involve many generations in their operation, and agricultural companies certainly do. When members of different generations prove to be frustrating, just remember there are reasons why they act that way. Knowing the challenges can help overcome them.

