



“FROM WEDDING RINGS TO NOSE RINGS”

PART 1 – PRE-BOOMERS

“I can’t believe they just said that.” “I will not give my life to this place.” “These younger employees just don’t know how to work.” Sayings like these abound in the workplace as generation conflict plays a significant impact on how employees view each other. For the first time in our history there are four distinct generations working and that causes some of the difficulty. Once one learns what another generation values to be important, what their communication style is, and a bit of their history, it is easier for all of us to work together. Generations can get along in the workplace.

The oldest generation in the workplace, the Pre-Boomer (representing people born before 1945), are known as the last generation in this country that understand money. For every penny paid into social Security, they will get it back. They are the last group to utilize savings accounts as a norm. If they have resources they will invest in stocks, bonds, CD’s and other financial instruments. They do not rely solely on a pension to fund their retirement. They have a first person association with the Depression and grew up with a 17% unemployment rate, which has colored how they look at finances.

These employees were born before or during the war years, in a period of low birth rate.

When they entered the workplace, in the late 1950’s and throughout the 1960’s, they faced comparatively little competition for good jobs. The relatively small size of the generation, combined with the rapid expanding industrial economy led to a shortage of managers. When they looked at their career options, pre-boomers saw a variety of choices. They were not expected to hit the ground running. Instead their careers were nurtured by the organization. They can be described as corporate warriors giving up independence, individual spirit and family in favor of security and the community of the corporation. Their beliefs about career and work were shaped by their childhood memories of the scarcity and insecurity of the late 1930’s and the war years. As employees they feel they are fortunate to have a job, not that the company is lucky to have them. They are loyal, hardworking and follow the rules. Younger co-workers may view them as non-sense. They are also cautious and thrifty. The adage they follow is “Let’s do one thing, do it right and then move on.” They are motivated by a job well done. A successful recognition of this employee’s work would include a handwritten note of appreciation. Not surprising is that they prefer personal communication over computer-mediated communication. Work has defined their life. This is also noted in that as youngsters they



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had chores; work that had to be completed by breakfast which usually involved the care of animals. This group is the last that knew true manual labor. In contrast, chores for children today often include loading a dishwasher – not quite the same thing. This group can see this reflected in some of the younger employee's work ethic. They see them missing more work days. To them, this represents a lack of commitment and of taking the job seriously on the younger employee's part.

This group finds themselves an endangered species in the workplace today. At Catawba County this group makes up 2.84% (31 employees as of February 2009) of the workforce. To some Pre-Boomers none of the old rules and traditions are true any longer. Organizations now adhere to a management philosophy that many of them don't understand. Corporations, in their time, engaged in exhaustive corporate planning. Today, the corporate wisdom says the advantage is in speed.

They represent a lost belief that life is not fair and take the bumps along the road with quiet resolve. In the last 1960's the term "silent generation" was coined. While this group is not silent, they are, by nature, more quiet about their feelings and emotions. The work that best symbolizes this generation is sacrifice. Everything was done in order to provide a better life for their children. This generation is the last one where women stayed home to raise the family and the majority of homes were one income. Divorce

was considered to be a disgrace and a scandal. This group exemplifies faith in American institutions, loyalty and willingness to conform. For them two things were absolute: the church and the government.

To bring this to you on a more personal level, the following are memories from your fellow Catawba County Pre-Boomer co-workers. These are some of the moments that have shaped their lives. First article of new clothing was their wedding dress, hand-stitched clothing from feed sacks, chores done at an early age, chores done before school and after supper, picking neighbors cotton to get money to go to the county fair, cutting firewood to heat house and cook with, chickens ran loose in yard, hunted eggs all year long (not just at Easter), neighbors helped each other when it was time to shuck corn (go from farm to farm), large tin tub in the backyard full of well water heated by the sun to take a bath in, listened to the radio at neighbors, no TV, heated iron on stove to iron clothes and earned \$25.00 a week and still able to save money. We were told this is why they are still working today. Work is all they have known. They are glad to work for a living and be helping people.

By comparison, the next generation we will profile in the workforce is the Baby Boomers, who represent the largest part of the population in the US at 77 million. The largest birth rate ever in this county occurred between 1946 and 1959. In other words, this is a generation that has spent their entire lives



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waiting in line. Stay tuned, but most of you are use to that. The Baby Boomers make up

44.69% of employees of Catawba County.

(Most of the information in this article was taken from the article “From Wedding Rings to Nose Rings...Generational differences in the Workplace and in the Practice Setting”, by Marilyn Moats Kennedy supplied by Leading to Change and the book Career Intelligence by Barbara Moses.)