Generational Ethics

By "Boomer" Frank C. Bucaro and "Gen. Xer" Meg Wojtas

'Boomer' Rick cannot understand why 'Gen Xer' Jim cannot seem to get to work on time. 'Millennial' Stacy can not seem to understand why 'Traditionalist' Fred has worked at this company for 40 years although, clearly, he is unhappy.

Statistics tell us that there are four generations in our workforce today. Much research focuses on the differences and how to best work with and manage the varying degrees of experience, viewpoints and work styles. I wonder how the mixing of these very different experiences contributes to the overall ethical culture in companies today.

To clarify, the generations we are talking about are described in the article "New-age challenge: Four generations now occupy the workplace" by James Amos, Pueblo Chieftain, The (CO) 3/7/10 consist of:

10% Traditionalists   (born 1900-1945)
45% Boomers   (born1946-1964)
30% Gen. X   (born 1965-1980)
15% Millenials   (born 1981-2000)

The problem is that when we hear the word 'ethics' we assume it means the same thing to everyone. However, there is some gray area here, particularly when it comes to four different generations. What is ethical behavior for a Millennial may be considered highly unethical to a Traditionalist, Boomer or even a Gen X'er. So who is right? Which generation is more ethical? The answer may surprise you!

The Harvard Graduate School of Education researchers wrote the book, "Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work," (Harvard University Press 2004) on the "ethical conflicts faced by generations in the start of their career ladder." In this book, the young professionals who were surveyed recounted the pressures of participating in unethical conduct, i.e. prematurely publishing data or sensationalizing news stories, for assumed advance in their profession. Would a Boomer make the same choices?

So which generation is more ethical?

Joe Smith at Company 123 has a daughter who is participating in 'the big game' at 4pm on a weekday. Traditionalists' tendency is to stick to their work regimen, as always, regardless of personal/family activities, not because they are heartless but because they view hard work and a strict regime as sacred values. Boomers, whose generational values include 'Workaholism' concentrate on the competition at work and may focus on what he/she may be missing as productive time at work, rather than personal time, particularly during weekday work hours.

Gen Xers, conversely, hold work/life balance as a great benefit at work. They also know they can check email via their phone at the big game, and not miss a beat at work.
Millenials realize that their physical presence at work does not equate their ability to get the job done. They are so tech savvy that not only will they check email, but they can easily stay connected to the

office/clients while at the game and follow up at home, post game. Millenials, due to growing up with technology, can multi task seamlessly at an entirely new level.

So…who is more ethical? The generations who stay at work until 5pm or later? Or are those who place value on important family events more ethical?

The answer? It depends.

The answer depends on what expectations were communicated to each employee in the beginning.

Any ethics training program in any company that has different generations MUST have the following three elements in any ethics training program.

1. Acknowledgment of different generational viewpoints. Do you know what percentage of each generation is in your office? There are many resources available for free, that explore the best tactics to manage each generation. Each age group requires a bit of a different approach to be most effective. Once you know who is in your 'audience' you will be able to understand the varying views of what type of behavior is ethical and what is not. Often times, seemingly unethical behavior is not conducted on purpose…at times, it is just that a member of a certain generation holds beliefs based on their experiences, and that may be different from what your organization advocates.

2. Define ethics. Walk employees through situations pertinent to their job and help them appropriately analyze the situation.   Give them the tools, not just definition.   A community college mandates that all employees must take online training courses prior to hire date. This training program included examples about keeping grades private, appropriate and inappropriate relationships with co workers, as well as who is and is not allowed to view their personnel file. These situations are very specific to the employees at this community college. The college defined ethics in their culture for all employees.

3. Provide ongoing messaging that communicates expectations. Marketing research states that a consumer would need to see the product seven times before they recognize it. Why should ethics training be any different? Even if it is every other month, can you commit to six times a year, dedicated to ethics messaging? More importantly, training should be sensitive to all generations.

By following these three suggestions, you may find that certain ethics sticking points may not be as much of a problem anymore. If you fully understand the generational differences that your employees bring to the workplace, and include this information in your ongoing ethics training, you will be in a better position to have all generations focused on the same ethical path.