Chapter 2
Leading Across Generations:
Issues for Higher Education Administrators

Carolyn N. Stevenson
Kaplan University, USA

ABSTRACT

Today's workplace is composed of four generational groups of employees, each with varying degrees of technological expertise, career expectations, and professional experience. As such, higher education administrators need to identify differences among generations of workers and develop a strategic plan for managing and motivating across the generations. This case study addresses the following question: "How do higher education administrators lead and motivate multi-generational employees and online students?" An understanding of the common characteristics of each generational group is the first step for developing a strategy for motivating all employees and students in higher education. Communication, mentoring programs, training, respect, and opportunities for career advancement are components valued by all. It is important for higher education administrators to understand the values, work ethic, and communication style of the different generations. The implications for higher education administrators lie in establishing an organizational culture that promotes satisfaction for all individuals in the higher education setting.

INTRODUCTION

As more individuals are delaying retirement and working several years past the retirement age, it is important for higher education administrators to be knowledgeable about the different generations working in various capacities in the higher education setting. College administrators, such as department chairs or other administrators responsible for

training and hiring faculty members, also need to be aware of the differences across the generations. This is especially true for online instructors who do not meet face-to-face with students.

According to Paul (2011), "An unprecedented number of workers from four generations—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Generation Y—are working alongside one another and bringing their own values, goals, and communication approaches to the workplace (p. 1)." As such, the topic of engaging and managing the multi-generational workforce calls for

further research. Educational leaders at all levels are challenged with leading various generations. This has had a major impact on higher education administration in terms of retention, recruitment, motivation, and productivity. Faculty members also need to be aware of the differences between multi-generational students, especially in the online classroom, and establish communication models where all students are motivated to perform at the highest level.

At the present time, there are four generational groupings of employees in the workplace and in the higher education classroom. According to John and Johnson (2010), the four multi-generational groups are:

- **The Traditional Generation:** Born pre-1945; 8% of the workforce.
- **Baby Boomers:** Born 1946-1964; 30% of the workforce.
- **Generation X:** Born 1965-1980; 17% of the workforce.
- **Generation Y or Millennials:** 1981-1995; 25% of the workforce.

In the very near future, there will be five generational groupings of employees in the workforce and in the online classroom at the same time. This fifth generational grouping will enter the workforce in 2020 and is known as Generation Z or Gen 2020 – born 1996 – 2025 (John & Johnson, 2010). As individuals are working well into their late 60s or early 70s, higher education administrators need to adapt their leadership styles to effectively manage, motivate, and retain employees from various generations. Additionally, the flexibility of online learning promotes many adults to return to college. Students across generations have different communication styles and study habits. Online instructors need to be mindful of these generational differences and adapt a teaching style that promotes success for all students in the online classroom.

The diversity of generational workers and students impacts motivation and retention of employees. Additionally, higher education administrators, such as department chairs, need to train instructors on communicating with multi-generational students. This is especially imperative in the online classroom where nonverbal cues are absent. As such, college administrators and instructors need to be knowledgeable of the differences across generations and leverage the strengths of each group. "Demographic and social trends will have a significant impact on the workforce in the coming years. Thus, in today's struggling global economy, it is more important than ever that organizations leverage the knowledge, skills and abilities of all workers—from all generations. By capitalizing on the strengths and values of different generations, HR leaders can create a competitive advantage" (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009, p. 2).

While higher education administrators and instructors may be aware of the various generations in their institutions and classrooms, implications for motivating and managing across the generations may not have been considered. "What many people don't understand about the generations is the relative size and how it affects everything from attention to compensation to the opportunity to advance and to the need for development" (Deal, 2008, p. 5). According to Deal (2008) "Across generations, employees are more likely to remain with an organization if they receive:

- Learning and development opportunities
- Good compensation
- Opportunities for advancement
- Respect
- Recognition
- A good quality of life outside of work" (p. 5)

While the core values are similar, college administrators need to take a different approach when attempting to meet the needs of multi-generational employees. "The key is to be able to effectively

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