

From Boomers to snowflakes - can we all just get along?

The phrase "OK, Boomer" reached a high point recently when it was used in parliament by a 25-year-old New Zealand politician in response to being heckled by an older colleague. While the phrase has predominantly been used by [Gen Z](#) on the popular social media platform TikTok, it has also found some ground in memes on Twitter with millennials and on Facebook with Gen X. And, although its use is meant to shut down older generations, many are now viewing it as the phrase that may actually [bring generations together](#) - if approached correctly.



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For the first time in history, four generations are working side-by-side. Additionally, companies are facing massive shifts across industries: The advent of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), the gig economy, the changing state of the natural world, consumer conscientiousness... In order to effectively spearhead change and adjust workplaces accordingly, leaders will need to understand how the different generations think, operate and view each other.

“Understanding and dealing with human behaviour in the workplace is probably one of the most time-consuming and difficult issues that any manager faces,” says Anita Bosch, Associate Professor in Organisation Behaviour and Leadership at the University of Stellenbosch Business School Executive Development (USB-ED). “The good news is that we do research on human behaviour in order to assist managers to lead different generations of individuals optimally.

“There is a whole science behind employee management and we know how to help you understand how you can utilise generational differences to your advantage.”

According to NBC News, when different generations interact, either a mindset of resistance or transmissiveness occurs, with the majority of individuals being resistant due to “two intersecting forces: The record number of generations competing

for jobs given increasing lifespans and a rate of change that's greater than we've ever seen.”

Digital-savvy Gen Z and millennials are valuable in the workplace of 4IR, which threatens the experience and relevance of baby boomers. This has resulted in boomers sometimes dismissing younger generations as 'snowflakes'. Yet, research suggests that despite their differences, all the generations share traits that could lead to fruitful connections in the workplace. These include strong work ethics, value-driven relationships, ethical and responsible behaviour and problem-solving.

Strategies that could maximise this connection include:

- Frequent training on navigating generational differences and collaborating effectively;
- Nurturing open communication where all employees have a voice regardless of age or tenure;
- Leaders welcoming all opinions, especially those that differ from their own;
- Implementing mentoring programmes between different aged employees to encourage more cross-generational interactions. Younger employees should be encouraged to seek the experience and wisdom offered by senior employees while older employees should learn to be open to the fresh outlooks offered by younger employees;
- Flexible working options such as telecommuting and working offsite. Management should focus on the results employees produce rather than on how they get it done;
- Accommodating employee's personal needs when possible as different generations will be in varying life phases that may require some flexibility; and
- Accommodating different learning styles. One generation could prefer a more experiential learning approach while the other could value interactive, tech-led modules.

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