

BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP IN ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH TRAINING

Article

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The workforce of today's law enforcement agency is a diverse medley of many components. There is a mix of race, ethnicity, gender, and generational make-up in organizations. The make-up of organizations continues to evolve with not only the passage of time, but also with changes in the community and the organization.

While the possible conflicts relating to differences in for race, ethnicity, and gender are often obvious, generational differences are often overlooked. According to Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, in their book, *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for the New Workplace*, (2001), "There is a growing realization that the gulf of misunderstanding and resentment between older, not so old, and younger employees in the workplace is growing and problematic" (p. 1). This problem will not just go away or correct itself. The need exists for law enforcement officers to be well educated academically and well trained both in general and specific law enforcement curriculum. There has been limited training or education regarding the diversity and differences between the generation categories that make up the workforce. Tension and conflicts continue to occur. Providing generational training can develop understanding and improve organizational efficiency and employee cohesiveness.

Multiple generations have always been in the workforce. They continue in today's workforce and will continue to be in the workforce in the future. Historically, for the most part, the generational classes were somewhat secluded from each other by the organizational hierarchy. Mature (older) staff members with seniority were promoted into supervisory and command positions. Middle-aged staff members were promoted and placed into supervisory and middle-management positions. Younger employees staffed entry-level positions, which were responsible for the bulk of the work. The generational blending of the classes was the exception, rather than the rule (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 10).

Today's law enforcement workforce is somewhat transitory in nature. Improvements in salaries and retirement benefits have led to earlier retirements. Workers are no longer apprehensive about moving from job to job and to different communities. Even so, changes in the use of technology and budget cuts have created reductions and job reclassifications in the workforce. No one can really be assured that his or her job is secure. This unrest can result in somewhat of a survivor mentality of us versus them, often in generational groupings (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 2). These generation cohorts tend to have their own sense of individuality and generational enmity.

Young workers are entering the workforce and often promote quickly. However, more often than not, mature workers hold supervisor or management positions (Jamieson and O'Mara, 1991, p. 14). Mature workers maintain their decades of organizational gains against the younger workforce desiring to advance and obtain job security. This can lead to generational name-calling and categorization. Conflict and dissension creates an atmosphere within the organization which affects efficiency, energy, and productivity (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 2).

These generational differences can impact productivity and organizational cohesiveness. Police executives cannot ignore these generational differences if they are to be effective leaders. Executives, managers, and supervisors must be able to adapt their style and work environment to reach across the generational spectrum in order to promote clear communications and organizational cohesiveness. Organizational leaders and managers must have, "the ability to relate effectively to all types of people is one of today's essential leadership skills" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 2). The need exists to properly train and develop the workforce from line staff to executives. The differences between the generational cohorts must be

recognized in order to promote an understanding between the groups and to improve the interaction between them. The focus is on a quality collaborative team effort, on confronting differences about work without petty infighting, and on continual attention to the development of members as integral to achieving the task (Bradford & Cohen, 1984, p. 7).

Each of the generation categories a set of broad characteristics associated with them. The characteristics vary slightly depending on the source, but most individuals within each category share commonalities. The generation categories actually overlap by three or four years, and there are not any definitive starting and ending points. Generation grouping is a form of stereotyping; with that stereotyping, comes some level of concern in forming these groups. Not every individual in a certain category may share the broad characteristics of a given cohort. However, common ties and characteristics do exist, which reinforce and sustain the generation groups.

The workplace of today and the future is technology-based and information-driven in a global environment that can and often affects law enforcement. The structured hierarchy that favored the senior employee is no more. The workforce of the future will be a blending of younger and older workers throughout the organization's structure (Gamel, 2003).

This intergenerational blending sets the stage for conflicts between the generational cohorts. While dissension and conflict is nearly inevitable, experts point out that lack of understanding of others' perspectives can create stress, frustration, and confusion (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 11). It is not uncommon to hear statements and comments in the workplace that echo the conflict between the generations in the workplace:

- “They have no work ethic. They’re just a bunch of slackers.”
- “I have a new rule. I will not attend meetings that start after 5 P.M. I have a life.”

- “He’s been out of training and in the field for six months and he wants a promotion – a promotion!”
- “If I hear ‘We tried that in ’87’ one more time, I’ll hurl in his wrinkly, old face” (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 11).

It is important to recognize that while these fundamental conflicts are inevitably occur, they create tension, and frustration, which negatively impacts personnel, organizational efficiency and operations (Jamieson & O’Mara, 1991, p. 35).

Jamieson & O’Mara state that a core element of the organization of the future is managing work teams. These teams must be able to work together to provide superior customer service. Once these teams sever communication obstacles and develop understanding, they can develop their own culture and loyalties (p. 130). The way to overcome conflicts and other barriers is through mutual understanding that is developed through training. Training and understanding are the keys to developing a cohesive workforce in a multi-generational law enforcement organization of the future. It is especially imperative that officers and staff work together in providing public safety services and solving problems, for the safety of the community and officers themselves.

Age alone is not the only difference between the generation cohorts; each cohort has its own unique traits and styles associated with it. Even the United States Army has taken notice of the differences between generations. Wong found that senior officers do not understand today’s junior officers or their perspectives (2000, p. 3). The Army’s future leaders are leaving in part due to generation conflicts. Many of the junior officers leaving the Army blame the lack of understanding of these differences by the senior officers. An awareness and understanding of these differences can be developed. The development of understanding of the generational

groups by the members of the organization can create and enhance organizational teamwork and cohesiveness for law enforcement.

Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack (2001) classify the generational cohorts. The generalities of the specified groups are as follows:

- The Veterans – Born between 1922 – 1943. They are also known as Traditionalists. They were born prior to World War II and their memories and influences are associated with world events of that era. A smaller sub-group of this cohort is the Bridge Generation (born between 1940 – 1945) that is characterized by influences from both the Greatest Generation (1922 – 1943) and the Veteran Generation. The Veteran Generation tends to have civic pride, loyalty, respect for authority, and traditional values. The vast majority of the women in this group remained in the home or held traditional jobs such as teachers, nurses, and secretaries. These were the “Ozzie and Harriet” model parents. They tend to be stable workers who remain with an employer. They are good at saving funds for economically challenging times.
- The Baby Boomers – Born between 1943 – 1960. Boomers were the first generation impacted by television. They tend to be self-centered and spoiled children who want immediate gratification but also tend to do as they are told and not question authority. Boomers tend to maintain the hierarchy of the previous generation. In the workplace, they tend not to trust people over 30. They define the world as pre-us, us, and post-us. They’re committed workers and invented the 60-hour work week. They work long and hard for their rewards. Boomers are willing to sacrifice family for the job. They tend to promote through the organizational hierarchy to achieve career success. Their ethic is one of not trusting of newer workers, and they have become engrossed in cause groups or occupations.

- Generation X – Born between 1961 – 1980. They are also known as Xers, Gen X, and the Me generation. The majority of Xers were raised in a dual income family. They had limited adult supervision, being the “latch key” kids. Xers were raised on MTV, CNN, video games, and the Internet. Forty percent were children of divorce. They feel at ease with computers and technology as they were raised in a technological environment. Xers are extremely self-reliant, yet are skeptical and jaded about most organizations. They tend to be loners, loyal to themselves, not organizations. However, they do work well in groups. They are group contributors and are group tolerant, but tend not to be good at teamwork. Often they question authority and are fiercely independent. Generation X resists authority and is reactionary to control. They object to group or individual labeling. They dislike being labeled as Xers. They are impatient and want things now. They tend to have balance in their life: Work is work. They work to live, but do not spend their life at work.
- Generation Y – Born between 1980 – 2000. They are also known as Nexters, Millennials. This is the most recent cohort entering the workforce today. They have not known life without computers and technology. Nexters are optimistic, self-assured, and independent. They are very comfortable with technology. They are committed to college and higher education. They tend to be structured parents, micro-managing their children with cell phones and pagers. Nexters can be loyal to a good boss. They tend to marry later in life, but are very impatient and want things today; they don't like to wait. Nexters tend to be team oriented, joiners, and collaborators. Many are driven and tend to be early achievers, but are anti-bureaucratic. They need low-stress, even-keeled bosses. Nexters tend to respond better to supervisors or manager who let them do things rather than direct them to do things. They have traditional values with strong family ties, yet are blended with tolerance.

Law enforcement organizations already strive to reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, most often focusing on ethnicity more than anything else. However, the make-up of this workforce includes generational groups as well. Significant amounts of time and money have been devoted to the training of officers to develop understanding and tolerance of ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual orientation differences. However, there is very limited training of law enforcement employees with regards to the differences between the generation cohorts.

Experts have identified significant differences between the generation classes. Some of these differences create conflict and negatively impact teamwork and organizational cohesiveness, yet little has been done to improve the working relationship between the groups. How well the generational cohorts interact with each other depends on an organization's ability to train and educate them on these differences. Enhancing employee awareness, understanding, and tolerance of generational differences would improve the organizational interaction, communication, cohesion, and teamwork. There are a number of strategies an organization can use to evaluate, assess, and implement generational training.

First, an assessment of the generational make-up of the organization should be completed. Examination of the make-up of the generational cohorts and their positions in the organization should be included. This allows the organization to identify potential tension or conflicts. An example would be an all veteran group cohort of supervisors supervising Generation Y group cohort or line staff or vice-versa.

Second, a survey completed by employees can be conducted. The survey would assess the employees' perception of generational issues in the organization. The survey could include topics to be evaluated such as knowledge of generational differences, the level of interaction between cohorts, the atmosphere created by management toward the cohorts, the ability to

promote within the organization among the cohorts, the perspective of employees in the cohorts towards the organization and management, employee satisfaction, and the level of respect and cooperation between cohorts to name a few (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 253-257).

Another strategy would include the use of informative training bulletins and briefings to enlighten employees on the differences between the cohorts in order to promote understanding between them. The use of prepared presentations such as videos, DVDs, or, CDs could reduce labor costs in getting the information to all members of the organization.

Finally, a comprehensive training plan could be developed and delivered to members of the organization on a regular basis until all members are trained. Thereafter, the course or updates would be delivered on a periodic basis to develop and enhance the knowledge of the organization's members. The organization would deliver the course material as part of employee orientation to develop generational understanding and bolster organizational cohesiveness.

Employees are the framework of the organization. In order for the organization to prosper and operate efficiently, employees must work together as a team towards organizational goals. If employees are in conflict with each other, productivity and efficiency of the organization will suffer. Employees operate better when they work together as a cohesive team. As the workforce changes in its make up, organizational leaders and managers must be prepared to deal with the diversity of the workforce not only along ethnic, racial, gender, and religious lines, but generational differences as well.

Police executives cannot ignore these generational differences if they are to be effective leaders. Executives, managers, and supervisors must be able to adapt their styles and work environments to reach across the generational spectrum in order to promote clear communications and organizational cohesiveness. It is important to remember, "The ability to

relate effectively to all types of people is one of today's essential leadership skills" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczack, 2001, p. 2).

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