



# **THE MULTIGENERATIONAL MANAGER'S HANDBOOK**

25 Practical Ways to Manage Across Generations

**LINDSEY POLLAK**

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MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKPLACE EXPERT

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**Sometimes managing different generations can feel like mixing oil and water. Or playing football on a hockey rink. Or joining a conference call from a rotary phone. Generational perspectives seem to conflict on every point. You try and try, but all the management strategies you learned over the years do nothing to reconcile these differences.**



Baby Boomers can struggle to manage tech-focused Gen Zers. Gen Xers like me, who might prefer working alone, are paired with Millennials who enjoy teamwork and collaborations. With so many distinct perspectives, there's bound to be confusion and friction.

The good news is that generational differences don't have to be so challenging.



Simple changes in perspective can turn differences into strengths. When managers and organizations harness this power, they become more successful than ever before.

In fact, the manager who is able to bridge generational differences often becomes an organization's greatest asset.

To help you master your multigenerational leadership skills, I've collected 25 of my most useful, actionable multigenerational management tips in one place. Each suggestion falls under one of five categories:



- Mindset & Office Culture
- Assignments & Project Delegation
- Technology & Office Communication
- Mentoring & Feedback
- Benefits, Recruiting & HR Guidelines

Keep this practical guide on file and reference it whenever you face a multigenerational challenge.

## MINDSET & OFFICE CULTURE

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True change happens when we're able to shift our mindsets regarding generational diversity. In my experience, it's not enough for managers to tweak a few, surface-level behaviors and expect broad changes in office culture. We need to examine our own biases and open up to empathetic responses to personal differences.

### 1. Stop the Generational Shaming.

The first and most important step for creating a healthy, multigenerational workplace is to move away from stereotypes. This starts at the top, with how leaders like you set the tone. Stereotypes are often rooted in shame, which hurts relationships rather than strengthens them. Whether you're using outdated stereotypes (Boomers don't understand technology; Millennials want trophies for everything they do) or have fallen into self-deprecating patterns about your own generation, please stop now.

**Practical Tip:** Call out a colleague (politely) the next time you notice them forwarding an email or retweeting a quote that shames other generations. Kindly point out that such messages are divisive and inappropriate for a work environment.

### 2. Accept That It's Okay if Everybody Wins.

All too often, we perceive generational issues as conflicts. We assume that there must be a "right" way of thinking or doing things. But the best way to succeed in a multigenerational workplace is to discuss and consider the strengths of various viewpoints and land on the ones that work best, no matter where they originate.

**Practical Tip:** It's helpful to apply a common brainstorming strategy here. The best brainstorming sessions include a time of "no bad ideas." Anyone can suggest any idea, and no one is allowed to cast value judgments. With generational disagreements, start with a "no bad ideas" perspective until every viewpoint has been heard. You might realize multiple viewpoints are worth implementing.

### 3. Move from Being a Gatekeeper to Providing More Information Transparency.

Gen Z and Millennials are used to having a world of knowledge at their fingertips with their omnipresent "smart" devices. That ability to access information immediately has leveled the information playing field and means they don't understand why their managers would only share information on a "need-to-know" basis.



**Practical Tip:** Increase transparency as a manager by inviting more Q&A during team meetings or holding debriefs with employees of all levels after big client meetings or project conclusions. This will improve overall culture by building trust, especially with younger team members.

### 4. Re-Think Networking from Drinks after Work to an Activity that Can Fit A Wider Variety of Schedule and Preferences.

The stereotypical round of golf or happy hour get-together no longer works for many people, whether they have a family they want to get home to or they don't drink alcohol. Instead, think of pursuits that you and another person would both enjoy. Better yet, when you're networking across generations, ask your networking contact to suggest a location, time or activity and then make a mutual decision.

**Practical Tip:** Looking for new networking activities to suggest? For someone who's active, ask them if they'd like to participate in a hike or a group fitness class ("sweat-working is the new networking!"). For someone who's artistic, invite them to visit a museum or cooking class. If you're not sure of the other person's interests, try suggesting a joint volunteer activity.

### 5. Remember that Thank-Yous are Free.

Expressing praise and appreciation is a vastly underutilized management tool across all generations. Employees want to know that their contributions matter, so it's important to share successful outcomes with each member of your team. Whether it's through a handwritten note, an email or text, a small gift or a Slack shout-out, don't ever skimp on the thank-yous. Employees want to feel that their work is valued and appreciated.

**Practical Tip:** Before you send out a thank-you, find out how that individual employee likes to be thanked. For example, a company-wide shout-out is perfect for some employees and embarrassing to others who'd prefer a less public acknowledgment.

## ASSIGNMENTS & PROJECT DELEGATION

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### 6. Explain the “Why” of Assignments.

It's safe to say that no one loves menial tasks, and yet most people are willing to do almost any type of work if they understand why they're being asked to do it. Explanations and context resonate with employees across all generations who want to know the reason behind decisions and how their work impacts an organization's larger purpose.

**Practical Tip:** Show how small tasks lead to tangible results. If you ask a colleague to enter data into a spreadsheet, show them the sales letter you'll be sending out next month that includes that data. By handing them a physical document, you're demonstrating how the spreadsheet work is connected to a greater whole. You can even explain how the task of entering addresses into a database will help the company break into a new market segment and grow revenue by 10%.

### 7. Be Flexible on the “How.”

Just because you're more productive when you break down projects into micro-tasks, doesn't mean you should force your entire team to check in every six hours. Often, you'll see the same results (or better) when you allow employees to complete tasks in ways that they find comfortable and familiar. Use data to show why your method is recommended if there is a need to follow a specific procedure.

**Practical Tip:** Before telling a colleague how they should complete a task, ask them how they would solve the underlying problem. For example, ask a new salesperson how they might make a prospect feel welcome and appreciated. The salesperson might suggest a polite, pre-recorded video email. Even though you might prefer a phone call, you can let the employee use their preferred style if it achieves the same goal.

### 8. Create Mixed-Generation Teams and Task Forces.

If your teams or departments aren't inherently generationally diverse, offer other opportunities for employees of different ages to work together. More diversity will bring more innovative, inclusive outcomes and also allow employees of different generations to get to know one another in different settings.

**Practical Tip:** Pick colleagues of various ages to plan team-building activities or tackle an organizational issue such as client retention. Implement a rule that any important committee must have a representative from each generation.



### 9. Be More Explicit about Your Expectations.

You might assume that everyone instinctively should know what “office hours” are and be annoyed if employees come in late or leave early (according to you). However, our expectations often depend on such factors as our generational perspectives, cultural backgrounds and family upbringings.

**Practical Tip:** Be as specific as possible when setting expectations. Don't say you expect employees to “work hard.” Instead, spell out what you consider acceptable work hours and productivity to be. For weekly reports, show employees an example.

### 10. Offer a Variety of Work Opportunities in Both Solo and Group Settings.

Some people love group projects, and others feel they're always the ones picking up the slack. Let different employees choose the way they'd prefer to work whenever possible. Our brains are all wired differently. Some like thinking out loud in groups and some think better alone in a private office or working remotely.

**Practical Tip:** Hold an initial meeting as a group to assign tasks. Those who prefer to work alone can then head out on their own and those who might enjoy the “group-think” model can huddle. After a set time, reconvene and combine notes.

## TECHNOLOGY & OFFICE COMMUNICATION

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Technology can be a touchy subject in the modern workplace. Some employees built their careers without technology while others can't remember a time without it. However, technology doesn't have to become a source of division. Setting clear expectations and allowing employees to choose how to consume and deliver information can ensure everyone has at least some access to their preferred communication style.

### 11. Convey Your Preferred Communication Style.

Most companies have "brand style guides" that provide guidelines for drafting external communications. These style guides cover logo usage, preferred social platforms and overall tone. Consider creating your own one-page "manager [or team] style guide," so that employees have a quick reference to your preferred methods of communication.

**Practical Tip:** Communicate to your team how best to work with you. Be specific. Explain things like your email preferences, pet peeves and expectations of formality and communication frequency. This is particularly important when you have employees who work remotely.

### 12. Discuss Your Team's Preferred Communication Style.

It pays to be flexible with communication, especially when some types of communication work for different types of projects. Although you might prefer phone calls, your web design team might use a screen sharing app like Userback. In these specific situations, I don't recommend forcing others to follow your preferences since you'll add hours of unnecessary back-and-forths.

**Practical Tip:** When onboarding new employees, give them a communications questionnaire. Find out what platforms people like to use and, if appropriate, see how you can oblige, at least some of the time.



### 13. Use The Concept Of "COPE: Create Once, Publish Everywhere" for Important Communications.

People prefer to interact with information in different ways depending on such factors as their generation, personality, schedule, job function, location and more. Technology makes it possible to meet many, if not all, of these preferences by allowing us to repurpose content in multiple formats.

**Practical Tip:** As a general rule of thumb, offer any important communication in at least two formats. For example, offer your monthly team meeting as both an in-person event and a livestream for people working remotely that day. If you put your training materials in a manual that's posted on your intranet, you could also supplement the manual with YouTube videos or short podcast episodes.

### 14. Offer Professional Development in a Variety of Ways.

Keeping skill sets sharp is one of today's most valuable practices for employees of all generations, but not everyone wants to sit in a training room for four hours. Take advantage of the wide variety of ways to upskill your team that meet diverse learning preferences. Provide options and choices for how your employees learn.

**Practical Tip:** You might provide options such as online and offline courses, individual coaching, educational games and quizzes, bite-sized videos, rotational assignments and more. Then track results to see what is most effective with your mix of employees.

### 15. Explain the Cultural References You are Using.

While obscure references and slang existed well before the digital age, the Internet has drastically increased our library of idioms. It's also harder to know if your references fall flat over email – you can't see the confused look on your audience's faces.

**Practical Tip:** If you don't think your team knows what you mean when you say to keep "lots of irons in the fire," (keep your options open) or why someone might want to "slide into your DMs," (send you a direct message) explain what you mean. Everyone is bound to learn something. At the same time, don't actively date yourself if you can avoid it. If you're on the older side, it can't hurt to brush up on some current pop culture. If you're on the younger side, read up on the history of your company or industry, so you can better relate to and bond with longer-tenured colleagues.

## MENTORING & FEEDBACK

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Mentorship is an excellent way to build relationships and develop talent within your company. And despite the traditional mentoring model of an older person delivering wisdom to a younger person, mentoring can and should work in both directions. Reverse mentoring (also known as co-mentoring), when a younger employee provides guidance to an older employee, is a growing trend in the workplace.

### 16. Remember that “Common Sense” isn’t so Common.

As Voltaire said, “Common sense is not so common.” It’s easy to bemoan the fact that “kids today” don’t know how to do things that older generations may consider to be basic knowledge, but take a moment to consider the world from their perspective. For example, you might be annoyed that a younger employee doesn’t seem to know basic telephone etiquette until you realize their limited exposure. Because they didn’t grow up with a “house phone,” they had fewer chances to practice phone skills and have always lived in a world where they could make reservations and plans online.

**Practical Tip:** Most employees will agree that it’s important to be polite and courteous on calls. The trick is getting from idea to action. To help improve their phone etiquette, allow your younger team members to listen in while you make calls.

### 17. Improve Your Team’s Skill Sets through Samples or “Watch and Learn.”

The apprenticeship model is a great way to address the “common sense” issue above, and can apply to any sort of workplace training. Help people of all generations learn by demonstrating the best practices you want them to know. Showing specific examples or modeling behaviors can make all the difference.

**Practical Tip:** Lead by practical example. If you’re trying to teach proper email tone and formatting, BCC your colleague on outbound client emails (just be sure to remind them not to “reply all” when BCCed!). If you’re trying to teach basic video editing, sit down and walk a teammate through the video process from start to finish.

### 18. Promote a Career “Lattice” Instead of a “Ladder.”

Newer generations are increasingly changing the trajectory of career paths, and you can help encourage longevity and retention by offering

rotational opportunities that give employees of all generations insight to different areas of your company and various roles. Don’t assume that every employee wants the next job on a perceived career ladder. “Lattice careers” and lateral moves can be very appealing.

**Practical Tip:** To promote internal mobility opportunities, allow employees to participate in micro-rotations, where an employee from one team might work on a short-term project with another team. Also, when talking to employees of all ages about career development, discuss more than one option for the next step in their career development. Don’t make assumptions about what people want to do next.

### 19. Find Different Avenues for Feedback to Make it More Frequent, Ongoing and Actionable.

While many companies have already done away with the traditional annual performance review, they struggle with what to put in its place. There’s no one-size-fits-all feedback strategy, so it’s important to try different methods until you find the best fit for your team. The best place to start is with frequent, ongoing feedback.

**Practical Tip:** Be a one-minute manager. What if you gave each employee a one-minute feedback session every day? This could look like a quick debrief after a presentation or a few sentences of praise added to a finalized logo design.

### 20. Aim to Talk with Someone of a Different Generation Every Week.

Sometimes a cup of coffee or a Zoom chat is all it takes to grow in empathy and understanding across generations. Through these cross-generational conversations, you’ll become more attuned to other generations’ perspectives and values. Employees will also appreciate feeling heard and building a personal rapport with a leader like you.

**Practical Tip:** Set up a weekly reminder to schedule one-on-one conversations in your calendar. This will keep you accountable to your new multigenerational habit.



## BENEFITS, RECRUITING & HR GUIDELINES

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A generationally diverse workforce means your employees may have differing expectations when it comes to the recruiting experiences and employee benefits they value most. For example, younger employees might not need a “gold standard” health insurance plan, although they might appreciate seeing a mental health counselor twice a month. Choice is critical when it comes to recruiting, benefits and wellness.

### 21. Recruit Talent from Diverse Places.

Want to recruit a diverse, multigenerational workforce? Then you’ll have to recruit from diverse, multigenerational pools of talent and try some different approaches.

**Practical Tip:** Try posting your open positions on niche job boards, such as [SeniorJobBank.org](https://www.seniorjobbank.org), [SHRM-Veterans.jobs](https://www.shrm.org) and [OutProNet.com](https://www.outpro.net). And don’t forget about “old school” options like local news outlets.

### 22. Diversify Your Application Submission Process.

It’s important to be on the front-lines of recruiting, but don’t neglect applicants, often of older generations, who use traditional forms of communication like faxing or snail mail. By allowing applicants to submit their resumes through multiple avenues, you’ll gain access to diverse talent that spans generational and economic spectrums.

**Practical Tip:** To attract a more generationally—and socio-economically—diverse pool of job applicants, welcome resumes and applications sent via an online portal, email, regular mail, fax and mobile phones—whatever method works best for each applicant.

### 23. Get Creative with Your Benefits.

All generations are looking for workplace programs that bolster their sense of well-being. This includes traditional benefits (like health insurance), work hour and work location flexibility and on-site perks. PTO, pet insurance and gym membership discounts all have a place in the modern benefits package.

**Practical Tip:** Consider offering a menu of benefit options that speak to different generational needs, such as retirement savings and student loan repayment and child care and eldercare support. All generations of employees will appreciate having choices.



### 24. Offer Different Types of Physical Workspaces.

Studies show that all generations want one, simple workspace feature—more natural light. Most people also want access to a variety of workspace layouts depending on the nature of their work. Flexible, modular workspaces—along with the option to occasionally work remotely—help promote satisfaction, innovation and performance.

**Practical Tip:** Keep spaces flexible and allow employees some choice in where they work, including providing a clear remote work policy. At the office, designate private spaces for heads-down concentration and break-out rooms for collaborative team work. An open, all-use space that tries to embrace the best (or worst) of both worlds rarely succeeds.

### 25. Invite Teams to Have Tough Conversations about Topics Like Mental Health.

Today’s younger generations believe very few topics are off-limits, and mental health is a great example. In fact, the openness we’ve seen regarding the issue of mental health in college students has significantly moved the needle on treatment and diagnosis, with the rate of student treatment increasing from 19% in 2007 to 34% a decade later.

**Practical Tip:** Address mental health, as appropriate, in staff meetings and internal communications. This might mean inviting a counselor to speak on managing anxiety and depression or offering subscriptions to digital wellness apps like Headspace, Calm or Moodfit.

## MEET LINDSEY

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**Lindsey Pollak is a *New York Times* bestselling author and one of the world's leading experts on Millennials and today's multigenerational workplace.**

She was named to the 2020 Thinkers50 Radar List, which honors 30 global management thinkers whose work is shaping the future of how organizations are managed and led.

Her latest book, *The Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workplace* was published by HarperCollins in 2019 and named a Book of the Month by both *The Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times*. Her speaking audiences and consulting clients have included over 250 corporations, law firms, conferences and universities. Her advice and opinions have appeared in such media outlets as The TODAY Show, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, CNN and NPR.

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