

Shane Jensen of New Quest Consulting gives examples of communication styles at the WorkSafeBC Prevention Field Services Conference.

Generating Communication

By Lynn Easton

Take a look around any office or jobsite these days and you'll see people of all ages working side by side — and that's a healthy thing, says leadership consultant Shane Jensen of New Quest Consulting and Coaching.

"This is a perfect opportunity for baby boomers to embrace the idea of coaching younger workers," he says. Demographics are changing quickly. These young employees — known as millennials — now make up 37 percent of Canada's workforce, and are the fastest growing pool of workers in the country.

As knowledgeable baby boomers begin to retire, these new workers must be taught the ropes to ensure safe, efficient, and healthy jobsites in the future. But how do older workers connect with millennials who may be more than half their age?

"Leaders need to create a two-way dialogue," Jensen says. "It's all about trust." While older employers and

supervisors are eager to pass on their knowledge, he urges them to use soft skills such as listening and encouragement. Starting a dialogue about technology can also help.

Unfamiliar communication styles can be challenging to incorporate, but Jensen warns against divisive generational stereotypes that can cause friction in the workplace. "Every generation has had a bad rap," he says. "We need to suspend our preconceived notions to create a positive work environment."

However, there are a few unique traits that can help people understand communication styles used by co-workers of different generations. Baby boomers, born between 1946–1964, were once maligned as lazy hippies, says Jensen. Now, they are workplace leaders. They often prefer to talk on the phone, or in person, and want to pass on their extensive knowledge.

Generation Xers, born from approximately 1965–1978, were once accused of being slackers, but are now seasoned workers who like to get straight to the point, and favour the efficiency of email.

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Millennials, born from about 1979–2002, are at ease with evolving technology media and prefer texting to talking. These employees often turn to Google or YouTube instead of co-workers to learn new skills. While they’re often criticized for their reliance on technology, this can also sometimes lead to improved safety and efficiency.

He points to the example of a young worker texting his supervisor who was sitting right beside him in a car. When his supervisor chastised him, the young worker explained that he believed it was safer to text a non-urgent reminder message instead of distracting his boss while driving.

“This is the new reality,” Jensen says. “It makes sense.”

Millennials can help create a healthy work environment by sharing their tech savvy but employers must have the final word on which type of communication is most safe and efficient for their organization. Young workers should use traditional email, phone, and in-person communication when necessary, Jensen adds.

Baby boomers can continue to impart important knowledge these new workers can’t find online — they just need to ask millennials what kind of support they need to succeed. “Baby boomers want to download their tremendous amount of knowledge,” Jensen says. “That’s why it’s important to embrace their coaching role.”

His message of creating a healthy multi-generational work place is catching on. His workshops were the highest rated sessions at a recent WorkSafeBC prevention field service convention.

“The approach resonated very well,” says WorkSafeBC manager of Field Prevention Services Colin Duong, who helped organize the conference. The message is timely as demographics begin to change rapidly, he said. “The challenge is already here.” ☹️

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