Great Divide: The Generational Gap in Emotional Intelligence

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For the first time in history, organizations find their offices occupied by employees spanning four generations—Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists. While the generational gap can create a healthy marriage of fresh perspective and deep wisdom, we’ve all seen it give way to significant culture clash. For instance, the largest generation in the workforce—Baby Boomers—are used to a structured work environment with planned face-to-face meetings, overtime, and the occasional weekend at the office. While most never really learned to love the structure imposed on them by their Traditionalist predecessors, Boomers have learned to deal with it. Generation Y, on the other hand, has never lived in a world without telecommuting, business via BlackBerry, and text messages crafted with code words that stump even the most tech savvy among the older generations.

Aside from lingo and work habits, TalentSmart® researchers wondered whether generational differences also exist in the vital workplace skill of emotional intelligence—recognizing and managing your own emotions and those of others.

Our analysis of more than 6,000 individuals tested using the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal® revealed a sizeable difference in the core emotional intelligence skill of self-management. Notably, Generation Y (18–29 years old) and Baby Boomers (42–60)—the two largest groups in today’s workforce—have a massive chasm between their abilities to self-manage.

So what is responsible for Generation Y’s lagging self-management skills?

It could be that coming of age with too many video games, instantaneous Internet gratification, and adoring parents have created a generation of self-indulgent young workers who can’t help but wear their emotions on their sleeves in tense situations. However, a deeper look reveals another explanation. Even within the same generation, older people have better EQ skills than younger—despite sharing the same generational influences.

Self-management appears to increase with age. Experience and maturity facilitate the mastery of one’s emotions. Generation Yers just haven’t had as much time to practice and perfect their skill at managing their emotions. That’s good news. It means the younger generation’s deficient self-management skills have little to do with things you can’t change, like the effects of growing up in the age of iPods and Facebook.
Training and development specialists have the power to address and improve Gen Y’s core EQ skills. They not only can do it; they must do it. The ultra-competitive, fast-paced marketplace of today won’t give many organizations the time to sit back and wait for nature to take its course. With much of the talent pool nearing retirement age, organizations need to prepare talented twenty-somethings for leadership roles—today. Despite tech-savvy self-confidence and top-notch educations, the younger generation’s lower self-management skills severely hinder Generation Yers’ otherwise high potential. After all, if they can’t manage themselves, how can we expect them to manage others?

TalentSmart’s Emotional Intelligence Appraisal® has already proved to be the vital first step in helping hundreds of thousands of individuals raise their self-management skills in only a fraction of the time it would otherwise take via the aging process. In just 10 minutes online, employees can discover their strengths and learn which skills they should work on most. More than just a test, the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal® includes a results report with more than 10 hours of e-learning that features interactive Hollywood movie clips that help bring each EQ skill to life. The proprietary Goal-Tracking System™ helps learners monitor their progress, set reminders, and share their goals and progress with others. More than 75% of the Fortune 500 already uses the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal® to help employees accelerate the development of their emotional intelligence skills.
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Lac D. Su is the Director of Strategic Alliances for TalentSmart, the leading provider of emotional intelligence tests, products, and training. He forms and manages relationships with key TalentSmart resellers and assists clients with the implementation of skill development initiatives.