

Common People Problems (and Solutions) for Young Managers

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Introduction

Not long ago, reporting lines typically fell directionally along employee age groups. The corner office housed Baby Boomers – even Traditionalists – born before 1965 or before 1946, respectively. Senior managers and directors were about ten years younger than those chiefs. Middle managers about five to ten years younger than their bosses, and team leads younger than that. All of the youngest employees were entry level. They joined a company at the lowest rank and paid their dues and worked their way up.

Today, according to the Society of Human Resources Management, people in their late twenties to early 40s (typically referred to as “millennials,” either a pride-point, or a [less-than-glowing](#) term, depending on who you speak to) are now the [most represented generation](#) in the U.S. workforce. And we (yes, I am also a millennial) are not just paying our dues in the cubicles. Despite some people believing that

we’re lazy, many of us are scrappy, hard workers. And many are ambitious. We were told by our parents in the 1980’s and 1990’s that “*we can accomplish anything,*” and, stand back... we’re going for it. We’re helped by the fact that remaining [Boomers are retiring](#) en masse, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic. We’re seeking out those newly vacant leadership positions, and we’re earning promotions.

This is happening more than you may think. In fact, a study from CareerBuilder that showed, in 2020, 40 percent of employees reported to a [boss who was younger](#) than them. As of December 2020, Jodi Glickman reported for the Harvard Business Review that [more than half](#) of workers under 40 were people managers.



Leadership is happening in non-traditional ways, as well. In 2021 alone, more than [38 million people](#) quit their jobs. According to the Economic Innovation Group, in just the first



three quarters of that year, an astounding [1.4 million new business applications](#) were filed. Many of these new business were started by millennial (“Gen-Y”) and even their younger counterparts in Generation-Z. After spending the first quarter of their careers working for the “man,” these younger Americans have realized that they can run their own businesses.

So, whether we’re leading people in our own start-ups, or climbing the traditional corporate ladders, the truth of the matter remains: people under 40 are the new standard in management.

While this is exciting, and motivating in theory, in practice, there are unique challenges with these changes.

In research from Indeed.com, millennials are explained as being [driven by passion and teamwork](#). We are often visionaries who seek to collaborate with colleagues, and we find change

exciting. Generation Z, people born after 1995, are considered to be some of the [most entrepreneurial and hard working](#) people in the past several generations.

While these characteristics are undoubtedly valuable, there are pitfalls for managers under 40. Indeed describes Gen Z as being highly independent and willing to express their

opinions, and also “determined to win.” Young managers who are open about their opinions can often be viewed by elders as disrespectful, even arrogant. Passionate, hardworking, entrepreneurial visionaries may be viewed as naïve and doomed to fail. Collaborative managers may be conflict averse, and seen as weak. Many Americans still view [millennials as entitled](#), which is only made worse by them receiving promotions over their older colleagues. Hard working Gen Z’ers who cannot step back and delegate, may never truly be seen as a leader. And any of these views (correct or not), when paired with fewer actual years of experience, can lead to one almost guaranteed reality: older staff dislike and distrust their youthful management, potentially to the point of undermining them.

If not career limiting, these generational challenges, at the very least, pose productivity

obstacles to young leadership. Generations Y and Z bring tremendous skills and immediate value into the boardroom, yet they can make a far greater impact if they acknowledge potentially inherent gaps, and seek expert counsel to develop in those areas. Executive coaching targeted at these age groups is *the most efficient and most personalized way to do this.*

People Problems (and Solutions)

(1) Building Trust

The first people problem was broached in the introduction: ***failing to earn trust from older generations.***

This is common for any young leader, whether they sit in the boardroom, started the company, or simply got a well-deserved promotion.

As mentioned earlier, as Baby Boomers retire, their replacements are often younger than some (or most) of the employees in the department(s). This is especially true in family-owned businesses. Parents wish to pass the torch to their child, and all the loyal, tenured employees are asked to

swallow the giant pill of the kid they remember in little league now running the show. We've all seen *Succession* and *Yellowstone* and many of us are living this in real life. When done well, the outgoing generation forces the successor to work in the trenches for several years, earning the trust daily. But even in these cases, it's possible that in difficult times, employees may expect the young blood to fail.

Even the strongest, most competent young leader will initially be met with skepticism by Generation X (the skeptics in every situation), and Baby Boomers, who can't help but see their own kids in their new leadership, which then makes them think about their kids pooping their diapers and throwing tantrums, which feels "like yesterday." These babies are the boss? Kenneth Kousen wrote about this [phenomenon](#) for Medium in September 2021, specifically in the tech field.



Do not be offended, reader. Their gut-response is natural. It's embedded in our culture to value experience (this is why resumes exist!), and when someone has quantifiably

less, it's no surprise that we don't immediately



assume they are competent. Many Millennials and Zillennials will be quick to take it personally, which is also natural. Unless someone is a narcissist, they are likely worried – at least deep down – about proving their worth. (And let's be honest, we hope no newly promoted young manager is a narcissist.)

There are serious risks involved in failing to earn trust. A fascinating recent study published in [the South African Journal of Human Resource Management](#) (May 2021) by Lees and Dhanpat found that employee belief in management credibility has a direct positive correlation with motivation, which drives productivity. To fail to earn faith from employees, you set your organization up for major problems. In the best case, older people who can't handle it quit quickly, and (because this is a best-case scenario) you replace them quickly. But the likelihood that you replace them with someone of equal experience and knowledge is low. You might get a more loyal millennial, but they won't have the skills you're losing. In the worst case, you never gain their buy-in, but they do not quit. The older employees undermine you personally and sabotage you. You have to leave the position to escape.

In most cases, you will chip away at building their trust organically. Yet each time you take one step forward, you will soon after take two back.

Perhaps some people occasionally leave, and you replace them with more open and trusting employees. The fact is that employees have more natural trust with people who hired them than with people who replace their previous manager. But these changes, this evolution, is slow, if at all. Sabotage may still happen, even if you don't want to believe it. This article, although old, hits the nail on the head that employees unhappy with specific coworkers or managers may be doing [intentionally harming actions](#) that negatively impact the department or entire business. Your own team puts up roadblock after roadblock, even if they do not consciously realize it. Your changes and ideas are never as successful as they could be. Much time – and money—is wasted.

How do you solve for this? There are several key ways you can fast-track your trust building efforts with the older generations.

First, be open about your lack of experience without selling yourself short. It's easier than it sounds, and it's honest. Then, promote and support your older experts. Treat them with respect and appreciation. Thank them for their contributions that you could not have done as easily or quickly. Give them credit where credit is due.

Next, identify what each employee would value most in you, *second to the experience that you cannot magically manifest*. For some, it could be fairness. Others might value status. Still others might value transparency. As discussed by the World of Work Project, David Rock's SCARF model details the power of these values in trust-building. When you don't have a long resume to lean on, [lean into these qualities](#) instead. And lean in HARD. You should additionally be kind to yourself when you make mistakes. Mistakes will happen. But do not ignore them. Openly acknowledge them, and thank your team members when they pitch in to help. Mostly, learn from the mistakes and don't make the same ones twice. An executive coach is a great resource to help you reflect on these mistakes and take definitive actions to avoid making them again in the future.



(2) Workplace conflict

Next, let's discuss a common people problem, especially for millennials: ***conflict mismanagement***.

If we layer gender identification onto this, people who identify as women are often more

conflict averse than their male identifying counterparts. Those millennial men and Gen-Z in general have their own risks with conflict management – but on the other end of the spectrum. For [Millennials who manage Gen-Z](#), the risk of conflict management issues is high also. Gen-Z can be viewed as arrogant in their communication styles. Executive coaching is an ideal and cost-effective way to work on finding

your “direct-with-respect” delivery. More on this to come.

People who are natural collaborators and teammates often also [seek out workplaces with harmony](#). These

managers want everyone to get along, and they want to minimize conflict.

The most natural communicators are able to use this desire to seamlessly manage conflict whenever it may arise.

The rest of us (ahem, most of us), chase harmony by *avoiding* conflict altogether.

The problem lies with the simple fact that avoiding conflict does not work for leaders. Workers are going to have conflict. Sometimes it will be task conflict, and other times it will be



sillier, school-ish relationship conflict. But conflict itself is inevitable. As the leader, employees will bring that conflict to you. They either want to protect their status or job. Or they want to keep you on their “side.” Or, they just want to vent and be seen by you as their friend, rather than their employee. Most concerning, maybe they want to get a colleague in trouble, even fired.

Whatever the reason, conflict is coming your way whenever you sit in leadership. You are viewed as mediator, decision maker, and fixer. Whether you like it or not.

There are several distinct risks to this larger people problem of mis-handling conflict.

First, if a manager approaches conflict from the perspective of the “teammate,” and rather the perspective of manager (or policy enforcer), there is the risk of inconsistency. If you fail to share the clear, rational reasoning for your determinations, employees might believe you always side with a “favorite” employee, or conversely, always gang up on the least favorite. Best case scenario, people get upset and quit, and quietly fade away from your business forever. Worst case scenario, people file (and win) discrimination lawsuits that are career and/or company-killers. In most cases, people will stay at the company, but the environment

will be come increasingly toxic and therefore counterproductive.

Another risk is in simply avoiding the conflict. We’ve all been here before, either at work or amongst friends. In the office, ignoring conflict can sound like, “I know that Joe is really frustrating sometimes. Thanks for telling me, *again.*” Yet after promised to address the conflict, the manager never does.

Let’s again explore the likely outcomes of this. Best case scenario, Joe and his nemesis suddenly begin to act like grownups and work out their issues amongst themselves. (HA! And then the pigs started flying.) Worst case scenario, the employee who keeps complaining about Joe becomes so frustrated that no action has been taken to resolve Joe’s behavior, that s(he) files (and wins) a hostile work environment lawsuit that is a career or company-killer. In most instances, the [conflict will continue to fester](#) if left unaddressed. Much like the earlier risk, the workplace becomes toxic and counterproductive.

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Finally, conflict averse people often know that they are supposed to manage conflict, but they aren't sure how. These leaders may



respond to conflict simply by *telling* the employees to get rid of the drama. This could sound like, "Look Kathy, I get that Joe's a pain. But we're all grown ups. I need you two to work it out and move on. Thanks." No discussion. No mediation. No support. This manager thinks they've squashed the conflict, but they've actually just excused themselves from it. How helpful for Kathy! (Not...)

One last time, let's explore the real-life results of this approach. In the best possible scenario, Kathy gets the message, tells Joe directly about her issues, he respects and validates them, and they agree to put their differences behind them and skip off into the sunset together. This is possible, but I wouldn't advise betting on it. In the worst case – you guessed it! – Kathy or others make complaints or file lawsuits, and potentially win, about hostile work environments and/or discrimination. These

could kill your career in a traditional company, or kill your company at a start-up. Typically, the situation leads to a less dramatic, but still costly outcome, wherein the conflict festers and the workplace becomes

more and more toxic and counterproductive.

At this point, you may be sufficiently convinced that addressing conflict well is critical for your department and/or business. But how does a conflict avoidant manager handle the drama?

Managers – especially Generation Y and Z managers, need to use the "direct-with-respect" communication style. They should directly address the conflict individually with all employees involved. During those conversations, the manager should directly tell the employees that they will schedule a meeting for them to work out the conflict together, with the other employee(s) involved. Be clear about how you wish to manage conflict and follow your own standards. Do not surprise anyone by doing less – or more – than you promise. Stay respectful of the people, even if you disagree with their perspectives. We are all entitled to our own points of view. When in doubt, side with the

policy or precedent. Stay consistent. Document everything to protect yourself against the worst-case scenarios detailed above. And work with an executive coach if needed to guide you through it every step of the way.

(3) Delegation

The third people problem, ***failing to delegate***, is [common](#) for both millennials and Gen-Z'ers, but for different reasons. Millennials, being conflict averse and driven to be a teammate, may opt to do work themselves out of fear of being seen as dictatorial or unhelpful. Zillennials, alternatively, often simply choose not to delegate because *they can do the task better*. They are the fastest technology learners of all generations. They enjoy multitasking and staying busy. They are passionate about their work. Gen-Z entrepreneurs especially may be reluctant to delegating.



For most of us, regardless of generation, delegating creates a risk of sub-par work product. If we care about our work and companies and career (if you are here, let's assume you do), this is a *very scary possibility*.

But the truth is, if we do not delegate, our business cannot grow. Delegation is key to scalability. Automation and technology are often seen as the scalability must-haves, but a scaled company is one that requires more people. And more people require training to do the job. And, eventually, you want "the business to run itself" so that you can focus on strategy, P.R., or wherever the business needs you. No business can run itself. That cliché means that other people are doing the work. They're doing the R&D. They're drafting the communications. They're analyzing the data. They're fixing the problems. Leaders need to *know how to* fix a problem, but they can't be relied upon to actually fix every problem. Pass. That. Baton.

In addition to failing at scaling, opting out of delegation can lead to two additional key risks for your business: managers are stretched so thin that they make mistakes, or managers burn out. You want to avoid both of those pitfalls. This [research study](#) from 2017 demonstrated that delegating more tasks led to increased job satisfaction in the healthcare field. People who delegated liked their jobs more. When you like your job more, you're more apt to continue doing it, and to succeed.

Learn to delegate from a delegation expert, typically a mentor you know to be excellent at this oft-terrifying skill, or an executive coach.

Force yourself to practice. Start small. Have your mentor or coach hold you accountable. And finally reflect with that coach and learn from mistakes. Get better. Little by little. Task by task. And watch your business grow because of it.

(4) Non-compliance

The last people problem reviewed in this paper is the least glamorous: ***falling into non-compliance.***

Many younger managers, with their excitement



for their career and passion for their product, are missing

a critical piece of expertise. Human resources. The HR field is still one of the most commonly entered and most essential to every business. However, the typical entrepreneur or newly promoted sales manager or heir-apparent in a family business have no practical HR experience. HR is, unfortunately, oft dismissed as an unimportant administrative function.

Human Resources could not be more important.

Let's all agree that company culture and talent management and recruiting and hiring the best

and the brightest are all absolutely crucial activities for your organization.

But beyond that, there are real dollars associated with the typically more administrative roles of HR. There are endless rules and regulations at the Federal, state, and even local jurisdiction levels. These agencies and administrations do – and will – audit businesses for compliance.

Are you up to speed on the rules and legal requirements as it relates to the EEOC, ADA, OSHA, FLSA, OFCCP, ICE and more? They affect businesses earlier than you may realize – often “kicking in” when you hire your 50th (or even 25th) employee.

Fines for non-compliance can range from \$100 per violation to \$10,000 per violation. Not per company – per violation. For many companies, these fines can erase a full month of sales revenue in one fell swoop. In some businesses, they can be enough to shut doors permanently.

If your business is growing, don't opt to “stay small enough” to evade regulations. That only holds you back from reaching full potential. Rather, engage with an HR expert to prepare you for this growth, set up systems to be in (and maintain) compliance. Protect yourself, and watch yourself soar.



Conclusion

Regardless of our age, managing people is often lamented as the hardest part of a leadership job. Yet for managers in Generations Y and Z, the risks are even greater. We do not always have mentors with decades of management experience. We often forget to navigate the challenging generational waters. And we sometimes, at our worst, forget (or choose not) to ask for help.

If you are a business leader, you know the value in recognizing both your strengths and your gaps. If your strengths are in your product, your processes, your innovation, your market – you're poised for success. Now is the time to hire a coach to help close your gap – the people.



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