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Intergenerational Collaboration: Shared work values that show up differently

Cheryl Flink, Ph.D. and Sarah Coley, Ph.D.
Truist Leadership Institute



“The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes.”

— William James

Overview

The four generations now working together in global organizations represent a rich pool of experiences, perspectives, skills, and motivations that form a company's greatest strength: its people. This extraordinary combination of multiple generations can be leveraged as a core competitive advantage. And yet, while 80% of global leaders recognize that multigenerational workforces are key to growth—only about half of companies include age diversity in their inclusion and belonging initiatives (Perron, 2020).

That's a missed opportunity. Intergenerational teams often experience friction at work—and research and media about intergenerational collaboration tends to reinforce and/or exacerbate common stereotypes and assumptions about older and younger generations. This research took a different approach. We wanted to identify the common ground shared by the four generations that make up the current workforce. We hypothesized that these four generations actually have similar work values—but demonstrate those value differently through their behaviors. We also anticipated that when other's behaviors match our beliefs about how a work value should be demonstrated, collaboration occurs. But when those behaviors do not match our beliefs, friction occurs.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted qualitative interviews with four generations of teammates working together at Truist, a financial services company. The four generations were Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Gen X (born 1965-1979), Millennial (born 1980-1994), and Gen Z (born 1995-2012) (Dimock, 2019). We explored the work values teammates held, the behaviors that they believed exemplified those values, and the friction points that could occur when generations worked together.

What we found is fascinating: The four generations do indeed share similar work values. Their descriptions of what they want and need for collaboration, for effective teams, and for their work environments had remarkable similarities. However, older and younger generations' perceptions of the behaviors that exemplify those values differed in a number of key areas, which we have labeled as friction triggers. In other words, although the values and goals are shared, what is considered the “right” behavior is not.



47 qualitative interviews

12 - Baby Boomer (1946 – 1964)

11 - Gen X (1965 – 1979)

12 - Millennial (1980 – 1994)

12 - Gen Z (1995 – 2012)



45-minute interviews

- What does the phrase “work values” mean to you? What are your work values?
- Do you think that different age groups or generations have different values at Truist? If so, how do they show up—and does that create friction?
- What are some assumptions that different generations have about each other?



Iterative Thematic Coding

- Skilled researchers used iterative thematic coding of interview notes to categorize themes for each question (Morgan & Nica, 2020).
- Multiple iterations resulted in high agreement and inter-rater reliability on the final coding schema.
- Coding used grounded research theory as the primary theoretical construct for the final categories.



Topics



Shared Work Values



Why Does Friction Happen?



Bridging the Gap:
Best Practices



Summary



Shared Work Values

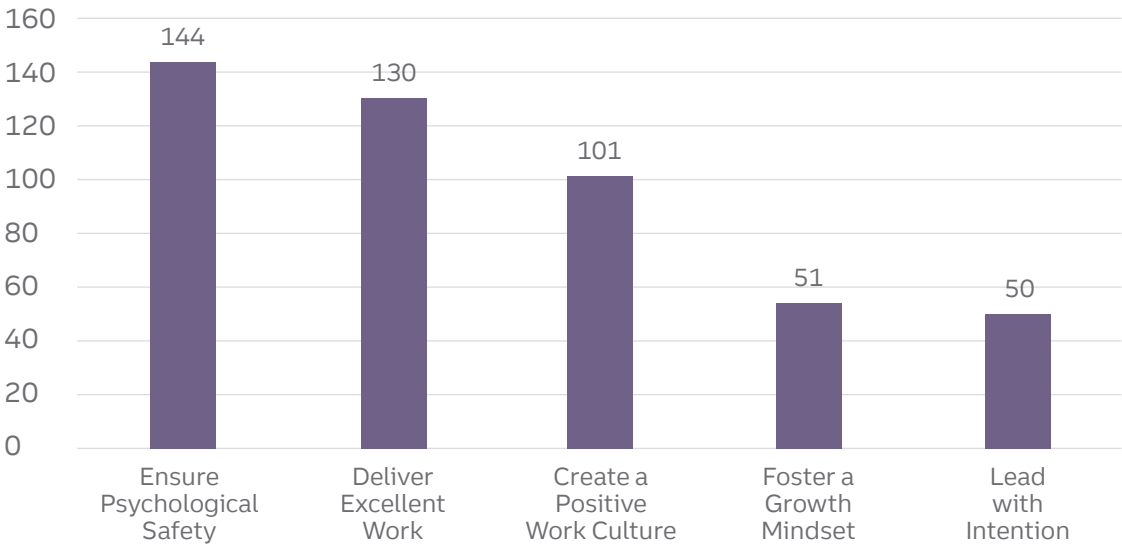
Five work values emerged as important to all generations

Interview participants responded to three questions regarding their work values: How they define the concept of “work values,” specific work values they held, and how these work values “show up” for them across teams. Each participant could thus contribute multiple comments to the same category for shared work-value.

Our framing of “work values” differed from traditional constructs that define “work values” as what a person wants from their work role. Instead, the questions focused on the work values interviewees’ considered core to doing valuable work and what they needed from their leaders and teams.

Five primary categories emerged, including ensuring psychological safety, delivering excellent work, creating a positive work culture, fostering a growth mindset, and leading with intention.

Shared Work Values: Total # of Interview Comments



What does the phrase “work values” mean to you?

- “ Doing good work and expecting good work from others.” – Gen Z
- “ How I perform my work every day—how what I do impacts the entire organization and our clients.” – Millennial
- “ Making sure we are all on the same page and coming together towards a common goal.” – Gen X
- “ That my work aligns with [my company’s] values and is achieving our purpose and mission.” – Baby Boomer

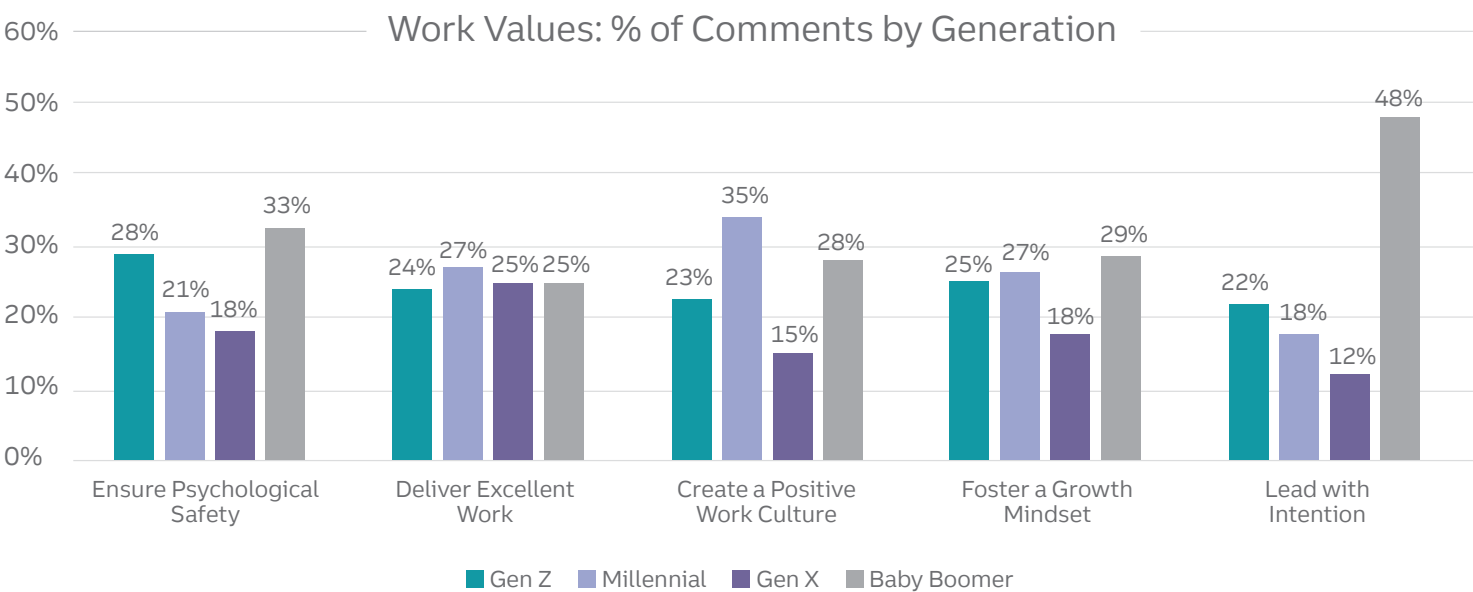
Values are shared across generations

Which work values were valued most—or least—by each generation? We analyzed the percentage of comments made by each generation within each shared value category (see chart to the right).

The work values are clearly shared, with all generations having a substantive number of comments for each category. The work value of “deliver excellent work” have virtually the same number of comments across all generations.

Some differences did emerge where one generation placed a different emphasis than another; these differences align to other research findings:

- Younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) placed higher emphasis on having a growth mindset, which aligns with the desire to advance careers and status (Leslie et al., 2021).
- Baby Boomers strongly emphasized their focus on being a role model and mentoring new generations (Kim et al., 2022).
- Millennials placed a higher emphasis on building a positive work culture (Battacharya & Ghandi, 2020).
- Gen X tended to have the fewest comments about any work values and may appear to be less engaged than other generations (Appelbaum, et. al. 2022). They may also highly value independence (Freeman, 2022).



How do these work values “show up” to our interviewees? How do they describe each value?

To identify the work values categories, we used a grounded theory approach, identifying research-based definitions of the work values. We identified sub-themes within each of the five major categories, looking for shared words and phrases that provided richer detail and meaning for each category. On the next pages we bring to life the shared work values in three ways:

1 — **Research definitions** of each work value

2 — **A summary of the sub-themes and phrases** interviewees used to further describe what that work value meant to them. For example, if an interviewee identified “Honesty and transparency” as a key work value, we then asked them to describe what that meant to them and what behaviors they sought. The interview might respond with “the courage to have hard conversations.”

3 — **Quotes** illustrating viewpoints from each of the four generations

This section includes detailed descriptions for four of the five shared work values. **The fifth value, leading with intention**, appears in the section on friction disruptors because of its foundational role in building intergenerational collaboration.



1 Create a Positive Work Culture

Research Definitions

What makes up a positive work culture? Researchers have found:

Nine indicators including collaboration/teamwork; growth and development of the individual; recognition; employee involvement; a positive, accessible and fair leader; autonomy and empowerment; appropriate staffing; skilled communication; and safe physical work. (Lindberg & Vingård, 2012)

Attracting and retaining talent leads to massive cost savings—this stems from organizations creating environments where each employee has what they need, feels empowered to do their best work, and feels comfortable turning to their colleagues when they need support (Mortensen & Edmondson, 2023).

How interviewees described it

- We assume positive intent and focus on creating a congenial atmosphere.
- We spend time building relationships.
- We respect one another and affirm one another's value to the team and our work.
- We have taken time to understand one another's working styles and communication styles and honor the differences in how we get good work done.



Quotes from interviewees

Gen Z – I set aside time to talk with people individually. Sometimes, people don't want to share something in a group. If I take them aside privately, we have a conversation—what each person's learning style is, or the specifics of how each person likes to do their job.

Millennial – Spend time proactively and intentionally to create more informal events. Assume a structure, create the expectations, create the time for more brainstorming events or things that don't follow a specific agenda. Makes it easier to interact.

Gen X – We need to work hard for each other, and assume everyone has good intentions. We need to be positive but realistic—what do we need to do to help you smile a bit? No one's ecstatic going to work early and not sleeping in, but it's an honor and a privilege to do what we do. I love doing it with my team.

Baby Boomer – You address the different ages appropriately. You know what's important for someone who's retiring vs. kicking off their career. You learn what's important to them to build trust and learn what makes them happy. I think once you manage to build those relationships, you get the best of teammates, regardless of their age.



2 Deliver Excellent Work

Research Definitions

Teams working together to deliver exceptional work is a fundamental expectation of any organization. Researchers describe team performance in this way:

Teams outperform individuals acting alone or in large organizational groupings, especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments, and experiences (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993B).

Shared values leads to team cohesiveness: Cohesiveness is viewed as a positive team characteristic, resulting in low levels of interpersonal conflict, the perception of shared goals, similarity in preferences for team regulation, and commitment to the task. Cohesiveness has been related to better performance (Dose & Klimoski, 1999).

How interviewees described it

- **We have a strong work ethic and are results and solutions-focused.**
- **We deliver with excellence and are success-oriented.**
- **We can be counted on: Dependable, reliable, accountable, proactive, and responsive.**
- **We focus on clients and jointly own problem solving and share ideas for improving our work.**
- **We support a growth mindset—both for individuals and our teams. We want to learn.**



Quotes from interviewees

Gen Z – I respect the work that I do. Whether that's working for this company or for any job. I treat my work with respect. I don't call in if I just don't feel good—only if I'm really sick basically. I signed up for this role.

Millennial – If something is worth doing, it's worth doing well. If you're willing to put your signature on your work, it must represent you.

Gen X – Make sure we're all on the same page and are coming together to work toward a common goal. Listen to what is needed and really dig in to get the work done. Ask clarifying questions to get direction on what's being asked, then get it done.

Baby Boomer – Adhering to everything I signed on the dotted line to do. I know what the goals are. I'm doing my best to meet those goals.

3 Ensure Psychological Safety

Research Definitions

Psychological safety is the foundation for any functioning team. It has been described as: “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking . . . it alleviates excessive concern about others’ reactions.” (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety doesn’t just prevent negative team dynamics; it truly empowers the team. We define a psychologically safe team as: “A team that feels like family and moves mountains together . . . they are speaking up, open, courageous, flexible, vulnerable, learning, unafraid, and having fun together in their bubble while having a sense of accomplishment about their exceptional performance.” (Blomstrom, 2021).

“Increasing intellectual friction while decreasing social friction.”
(Clark, 2020).

How interviewees described it

- We develop trust among team members and are ourselves trustworthy.
- We exemplify integrity and make ethical choices.
- We communicate honestly and transparently and listen to others; we have the courage to hold hard conversations to get through issues.
- We appreciate the perspectives of team members with social identities different from our own.
- We support fairness and equal opportunity.



Quotes from interviewees

Gen Z – Something that doesn’t foster collaboration is keeping quiet when you don’t agree with something. When something happens that I don’t understand, I won’t stay quiet. People quietly message me afterward saying “I felt the same way.” I don’t think it fosters collaboration to sit idly by.

Millennial – Checking in is something I value. I hope others do, too. If someone asks me, “can I get this from you,” I let them know I don’t have anything yet, but I’m working on it. That’s better than not saying anything. Those quick courtesy emails and check-ins build trust and make someone feel valued.

Gen X – Have an open mind and listen, and maybe both sides will share their feedback and put it together instead of shutting it down. Some shut down because they don’t want to hear it. Get all the feedback out, then work on putting it together as a team.

Baby Boomer – Everybody has an opinion. Not all are the same. No one’s right all the time, no one’s wrong all the time. People ask me if I want to rethink something. It’s not always easy, but we can have mutual respect. I listen to your opinion, you listen to mine.



4 – Foster a Growth Mindset

Research Definitions

Growth mindset is “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts...everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2006). It enables employees to learn from each other and empowers their roles, skills, and career, fostering healthy risk-taking and innovation (Harvard Business Review, 2014).

By fostering a learning and development culture, employees receive resources from their manager and other organizational supports to realize their full potential (Flink, 2024).

How interviewees described it

- Empower employees to grow their skills and career.
- Acknowledge and reward employees for a job well done.
- Share knowledge so that employees can learn from each other.
- Have employees develop a baseline level of skill in areas that are essential to the team’s function.
- Be receptive to feedback to help the team function better.
- Establish mentorships to give employees a reliable place to go for insights.



Quotes from interviewees

Gen Z – The most rewarding thing for me is identifying opportunities for improvement. Coming up with solutions is more likely with people who are objective. Having different perspectives is okay but have mutual understanding and respect. There is no right way.

Millennial – It’s all about career development for myself and teammates and peers—anything I can do to help you develop. That is my work value, adding value to others. Having experiences that I can share with them—helping the up-and-coming generations. Generation-wise, I’m middle of the road.

Gen X – Recognize the value that each person brings to the collaboration. It’s so important. Regardless of their age, you always learn something from your teammates, young or old.

Baby Boomer – Listen to your younger counterparts. We have to try new ideas/things that they’re putting on the table. We have to take a certain amount of risk on that. They may feel we don’t take any risk because we’re stuck. We need to try it because it might be a quicker way.





Why Does Friction Happen?

Though work values are shared, differences in behaviors and perceptions create friction.



I felt like imposter syndrome all the time. How do I sit back down with a 50-year-old and give THEM advice? I worked on this, the way I dress, my conduct as a professional . . . the difference in a suit, you get called SIR vs. the difference when wearing a polo and jeans, 'here you go man.' – **Gen Z**

Innovation is huge, we are coming up with new ways of doing things that older generations haven't thought of. They are set in their ways and want to keep doing it that way. Younger generations are interested in taking shortcuts to get things done, innovative, older generations might say, you didn't do the work, when in fact they got to the same result, and it frees up time for other things. – **Millennial**

Points of reference, it's harder to relate to someone who doesn't have the same shared experiences and cultural knowledge, the cultural references. The bigger the age gap, the more difficult it is for people to understand, the sense of humor is different. People may go in with assumptions like 'this person is not at my level' or the other person feels inferior to them—a younger boss than the employee—both sides may struggle with that. They say, 'I don't know what they're talking about.' – **Gen X**

Younger generations are quick to come to solutions without thinking things through. They are quick to solve a problem and want to present a solution that works for all. I'm always that one person that takes it back a bit—I need to understand the inner workings, sometimes the solution is not correct because they do not understand the full story. They just want to solve it and move on. Or they forget about the change management that is needed. – **Baby Boomer**

Teams are walking on eggshells as they navigate the friction points that make intergenerational collaboration hard.

That leads to distrust, the inability for individuals to be authentic and bring their best selves to work, and impedes business growth.

Organizations are missing opportunities to leverage the talented individuals that are the heartbeat of our organizations.



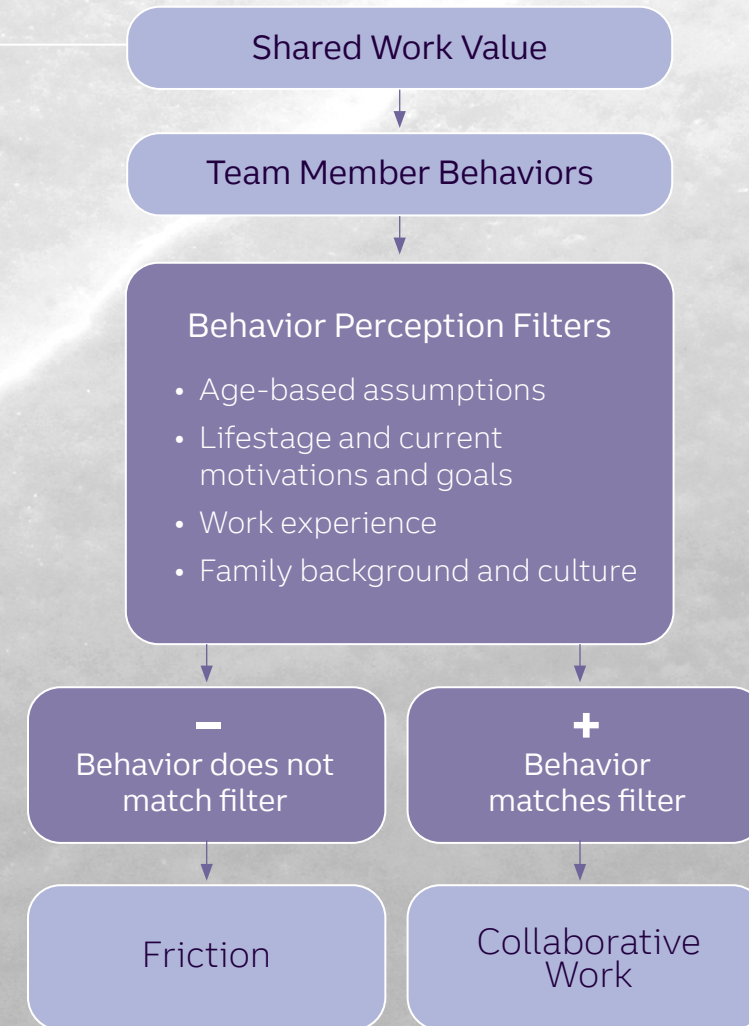
Differences in perceptions of behaviors create friction

It is easy to believe that we understand the intent and outcomes of others' words and behaviors. In fact, the same behavior or comments can be interpreted quite differently by two people who see or hear the exact same thing but come to very different conclusions about its meaning.

The way we filter information depends on our perspectives. For the four generations in today's workforce, those filters can be based on the key motivations at one's current lifestage, work experience, the shared characteristics of a generational cohort, family background and culture, and assumptions and biases we have about people who older or younger than ourselves (Lester et.al, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017).

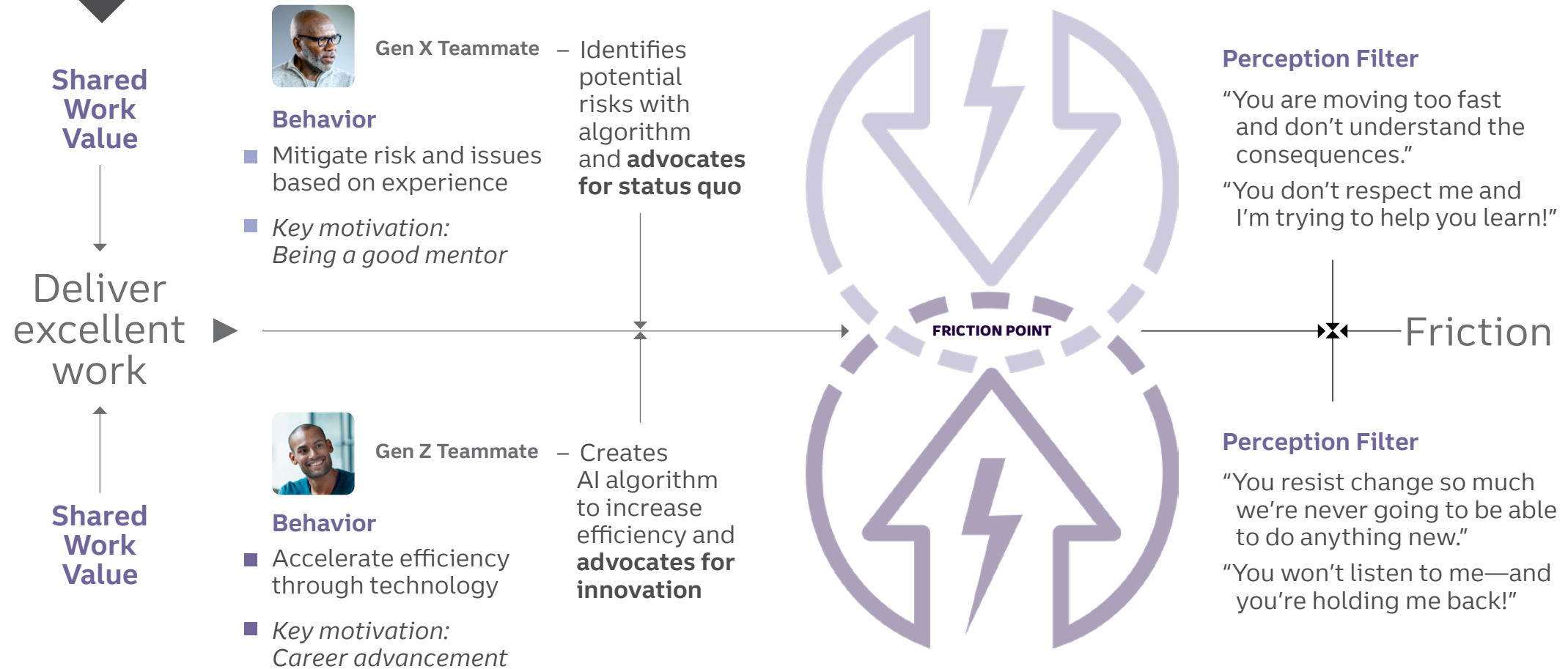
And therein lies the rub. These filters create friction between generations. Behaviors are interpreted differently, and critical motivations may remain hidden. What one person assumes is a reasonable and positive behavior that will create collaboration becomes a friction point.

This cycle is illustrated on the next page, where two people are assigned to work on a project together. One comes from Gen Z, one from Gen X, and they are driven by a) very different motivations based on lifestage; and b) have different approaches based on experience.



The model in action: Illustrative Example

Scenario: Two teammates, one from Gen X and one from Gen Z, are tasked with creating process efficiencies that result in cost savings.

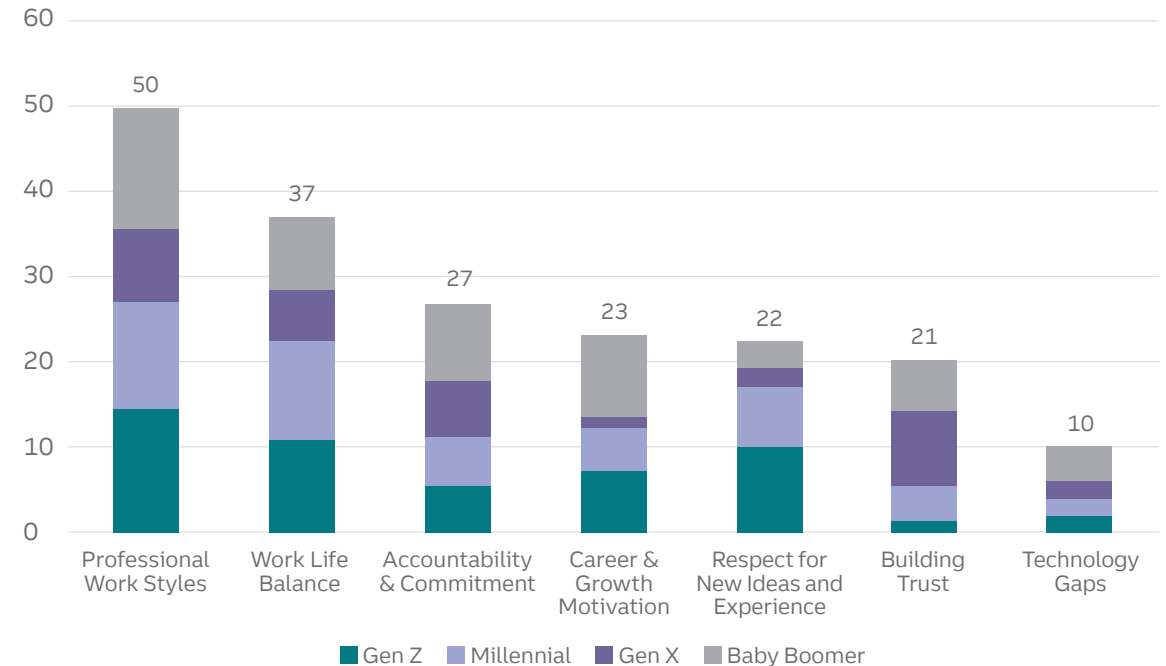


Seven common friction points between generations

We asked interviewees to identify common areas of friction that can occur between generations. Seven friction points emerged that can impede intergenerational collaboration:

- 1 **Professional work styles:** Appropriate behavior in shared work-spaces with an emphasis on a) smartphone etiquette; and b) language.
- 2 **Work life balance:** Understanding of the meaning of flexibility, importance of mental health, and completing work and team obligations.
- 3 **Accountability and commitment:** Importance of following rules, meaning of "quality deliverables," and impact to teams.
- 4 **Career and growth motivation:** The speed at which careers can advance, expectations for using and learning new technology, and upskilling.
- 5 **Respect for new ideas and experience:** Differences in orientation and goals to drive new innovations vs. seeing potential issues from previous experience.
- 6 **Building trust:** Differences in perspectives on a) honesty and transparency; b) showing vulnerability and authenticity; and c) the importance of relationships and how to build them.
- 7 **Technology gaps:** Differences in experiences over time, technologies, job expectations for innovating, and gaps in learning.

Friction Points: Total # of Comments by Generation



Generations showed high agreement about what creates friction. One key area of difference: **Gen Z** commented much more about friction that occurs when respect for innovation and respect for experience come into conflict.

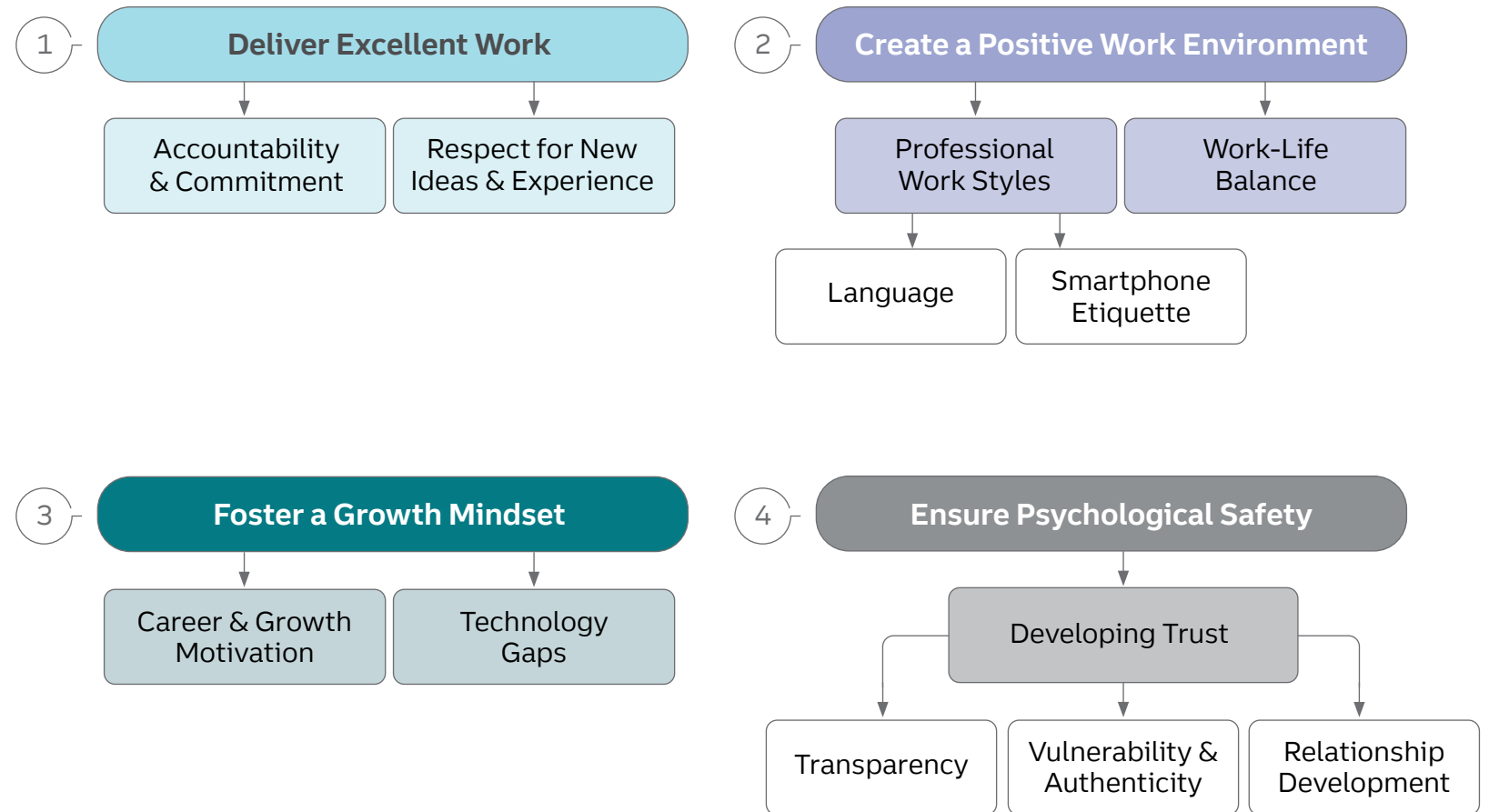
Shared work values are challenged by specific friction points

Friction points are most likely to occur when specific behaviors challenge a person's beliefs about a specific work value. When the behavior "shows up differently" than how they think the value should be expressed, friction occurs.

For example, older and younger generations **both** want to create a positive work environment—and a part of that positive work environment is attending to teammate well-being. However, when older and younger generations discuss balancing work and life, friction begins to occur because expectations and needs vary (Tanveer et.al., 2020).

We have mapped the shared work values to the friction points that provoke the biggest challenges to intergenerational collaboration. Four shared work values are mapped to seven friction points.

We follow with details for each work value and their associated friction points.



1 Deliver Excellent Work — Key Friction Points



Accountability & Commitment



Respect for New Ideas & Experience



Older Generations

- Respectful of work rules and importance of supporting team by showing up for assigned work shifts on time; likely to believe that work = time
- Focus on delivering high quality work and may place high value on accuracy (spelling, grammar) and on-time delivery
- *Friction trigger: Stressing teams by not being dependable, perceived indifference to delivering high quality work, taking advantage of others*

Younger Generations

- Value flexibility over exact adherence to rules (e.g., being on time for work); high value placed on completing work efficiently; likely to believe work = task completion
- Focus on delivering high quality work but may judge quality based on efficiency
- *Friction trigger: Seeming intolerance for small rule infractions, not understanding how tech proficiency helps them expedite work and frees up time; others' beliefs that fast does not equal quality*

- Value their own experience and understanding of the why behind the "way things work"
- Have in-depth knowledge of existing platforms, processes, and products and may have a focus on ensuring business continuity
- *Friction trigger: Lacking respect for knowledge and experience; being viewed as change resistant rather than pragmatic*

- Value new skills and "fresh thinking" they bring to the organization
- May be tasked as change agents to re-invent processes, products, and systems using these fresh approaches
- *Friction trigger: Shooting down new ideas and not supporting innovative project work; being viewed as reckless rather than innovative; older generations appearing "change resistant"*

2 Create a Positive Work Environment — Key Friction Points



Work Life Balance



- View “Work Life Balance” as discretionary and value traditional definitions of “work hours”
- Had to learn to balance work and life later in their careers—for some, concept did not exist
- *Friction trigger: Perception that teammates are not available during work hours or not prioritizing team and getting work completed on time*

Younger Generations

- View “Work Life Balance” as critical and value flexibility and autonomy in defining “work hours”
- Emphasize importance of mental health and have strong belief it’s a requirement to overall well-being
- *Friction trigger: Perception that others believe they are “not working” when on flexible schedule; being pressured to value work over relationships, family, and well-being*

Language



- Formal, correct language conveys respect and commitment to quality
- Brief and direct feedback is honest, focuses on issues, and clarifies concerns
- *Friction trigger: Perceptions of disrespect for self and work when informal language is used or written communications have grammar and spelling errors*

- Informal language fosters relationships and develops trust
- Feedback should couple acknowledgment for good work with constructive feedback
- *Friction trigger: Perception that feedback is blunt or mean and fails to acknowledge (or denigrates) the person’s contributions and capabilities*

Smartphone Etiquette



- An adopted technology that can be a useful tool
- When used for communication (texting) can seem impersonal and distant; may indicate not “working”
- *Friction trigger: Perceptions of personal use on corporate time; distractions created by conversations in shared work areas*

- Digital native and an essential tool for both work and life
- Fast and efficient communication that creates fluidity between work and home
- *Friction trigger: Perception when using as “not working”; not understanding or dismissing needs to stay connected, particularly with children*

3 Foster a Growth Mindset — Key Friction Points



Career and Growth Motivation



Older Generations

- Place a high value on experience gained over time; want to learn and remain relevant and may continue to seek advancement
- Focus on coaching and developing younger generations as part of their legacy; may be wrestling with retirement
- *Friction trigger: Perceptions they are irrelevant and should move out of the way; perceived desire of younger generations to advance with little experience and proven contributions*

Younger Generations

- Place a high value on new knowledge they bring to the organization; willing to learn but may be impatient with pace
- Desire swift career advancement coupled with tangible rewards and recognition for accomplishments; now is the time to drive career forward
- *Friction trigger: Perception that career is stalled because they must "do their time"; perceived lack of opportunity; inability to use skills*

Technology Gaps



- Have adapted to multiple technology changes and experienced both positive and negative outcomes
- May feel vulnerable because not up to date on the latest technology development opportunities; organization may not have invested in re-skilling; asking questions may be hard
- *Friction trigger: Not listening to potential issues; new technology adoption based on experience; lost productivity moving to new platforms; inadequate training; assumptions of incompetence*

- Educated using newest technology tools with expectations of continuing to do so in their new role
- May feel frustrated when trying to explain technology to older generations who do not understand concepts; lack of shared language to understand advancements
- *Friction trigger: Expectations they will explain technology to others who do not have basic skills; being blocked from innovating with technology; lack of access to modern tools*

4 — Ensure Psychological Safety — Key Friction Points



Transparency



- Couch information carefully and may be tasked with doing so
- Value fully listening to others' perspectives; aware of assumptions about their own generations (e.g., change resistant) and keen to break down barriers
- *Friction trigger: Not understanding role constraints, perception that being direct equals a lack of empathy, biased assumptions based on age*

Younger Generations

- May be hyper-sensitive to "marketing spin" about team and organizational performance vs. full transparency
- Value fully listening to perspectives; aware of assumptions about their own generations (e.g., entitled and/or lazy) and keen to break down barriers
- *Friction trigger: Perceptions that others' are withholding information, micromanagement (always looking over my shoulder), perceived lack of empathy, biased assumptions based on age*

Vulnerability & Authenticity



- Aware of own status (seniority, experience) and desire to pass down knowledge
- May want to appear invulnerable by taking a formal, mentoring approach—and may have concerns about obsolescence
- *Friction trigger: Perception of not being valued; ignoring advice, not accepting direction*

- Feel vulnerable to the perceptions of older generations who have status and may influence career advancement
- Feel particularly vulnerable when managing older generations; may engage in code-switching (dress, language) to emphasize authority
- *Friction trigger: Perception of not being valued; feeling patronized, "do what I tell you"*

Relationship Development



- Highly value in-person interactions to develop relationships
- Willing to invest the time to fully develop relationships and may feel use of technology to do so (social media, texting) is isolating rather than inclusive
- *Friction trigger: Feeling left out; perception others don't make an honest effort to reach out and connect with them; may prefer more formality than informality*

- See value in both virtual and in-person interactions to develop relationships
- Willing to invest time to develop relationships but may value technology to stay connected; may place high value on social settings and after-work get togethers
- *Friction trigger: Formal settings for developing relationships, not being willing to "meet halfway" in learning about one another, perceived lack of sincerity in wanting to build relationships*



Bridging the Gap: Best Practices

Best practices to foster collaboration and disrupt friction

The world is changing at breath-taking speed (Accenture, 2024) and organizations are increasingly pressured to quickly change and adapt in order to remain competitive—or even viable. Better intergenerational collaboration is a key leverage point and merits our time and attention because of the tangible benefits to both corporations and general economic outcomes:

- Increase in GDP by 19% and a company's total worth by 1.8% (OECD.org).
- Enhanced ROI evidenced by better stock market performance, increased innovation and infrastructure, and ability to relate to a wider array of clients (AARP, 2021).
- Increased job satisfaction (Dietz & Fasbender, 2022) and reduced health risks and turnover (Becker & Fiske, 2022; Marchiondo et al., 2016).
- Improved knowledge co-creation (Madhavanprabhakaran, 2022; Singh et al., 2021).

Establish
Norms

Foster
Inclusion

Tell
Stories

Provide
Hands-On
Experiences

Lead with Intention

To realize these benefits, we must **lead with intention**. All generations identified this as a critical work value—either for the people who led their teams or for themselves as they led others.

We also need to have a toolkit of best practices. On the next page, we discuss what it means to lead with intention and then follow with four best practices that can disrupt friction and foster intergenerational collaboration.

Best practices: Disrupt friction by **leading with intention**

Nearly all interviewees discussed what they want to see in leaders and/or how they want to conduct themselves as leaders. Their descriptions of what leadership means are inspiring and clarify that what they seek is not necessarily focused on specific actions but rather a way of being. Key components of this vision of leadership included:

- Have empathy and patience to accept others and build a truly accepting and positive work environment—and be aware of the broader goals individuals may have for their careers.
- Show some humility and allow yourself to be vulnerable. Show others that you don't know everything, you make mistakes too, and you will take accountability for those mistakes.
- Be authentic and allow others the same so they can bring their best skills and talent to the team. That also breaks down barriers for relationships and friendships to form.
- Assume positive intent. Teammates want to deliver good work, and no one comes to work with the intention of being disruptive or difficult. Check the negative filters and biases at the door and look for that positive intention.
- Have courage. Have the courage to express your opinion, address difficult situations, and help foster the collaboration needed and wanted.
- Lean into purpose. Stand for something important—and let others know what that is.

These are lofty goals. How can leaders—whether frontline or executive—live up to these ideals? The place to start is by examining and reflecting on our own leadership and determining how we want to be at work rather than what to do. That fundamental shift requires a good long look in the mirror. What is reflected there? Developing self-awareness to understand why we behave in the ways that we do will help us disrupt the automatic patterns of leadership that prevent us from effective and even inspirational leadership (Côté, 2017).



Shift from “What to do” to “How to Be.”

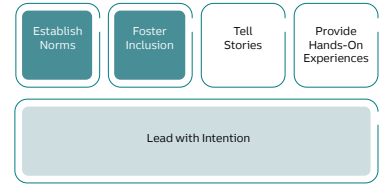
I've been here for five years. There are things about my area I truly don't know. It's a bit of vulnerability. That has implications for trust building. Vulnerability is very important because others have expertise, and I need them to understand that I'm not here to tell others how to do their job. – Gen Z

When people do or say certain things, I try to understand why. I don't get offended. I know it's due to different experiences. I haven't had a lot of conflict, maybe because I try to understand. Respect, kindness, and patience. Without that, it's hard to work with people because people can be complex. – Millennial

I am the type of person that likes optimism. Sometimes that's not real life because there are different personalities. We all have problems. I love to work with a team that tries to bring a positive outlook on things rather than pessimistic view. That makes it a lot better to work together. – Gen X

Don't be afraid to say 'I made a mistake.' We need to be okay with making mistakes, telling others 'I'm sorry,' and do everything to fix it. You must be comfortable as a leader saying, 'I didn't have all the information.' They need to see that in order to trust you. Be honest when working with a team. – Baby Boomer

Best practices: Create norms and foster inclusion



1 Establish norms and common ground.

Emphasize shared work values. Our current dialogue about generations working together tends to focus on the negative. Much is written about the differences; little is written about the common ground. Hold discussions with teams about their shared work values and their meanings focus on that common ground. (Partners Universal cite).

Create shared agreements. Some things are simple. Encourage teams to have candid conversations about office etiquette, smartphone usage, and what is expected when clients will be in the office. Listen carefully for what is needed and why so that the entire team develops empathy and understanding. Codify the agreements. Existing team members and new team members will need to remember and act on these shared understandings (Williams & Andersen, 2023).

Tailor the onboarding experience. The employee onboarding experience is a significant predictor of retention, job satisfaction, and employee engagement (Patel & Mohanty, 2023). Tailoring an innovative onboarding experience for Gen Z employees with multigenerational leaders can create favorable impressions of the company—and immediately set the norms for working together (Mosca & Merkle, 2024).



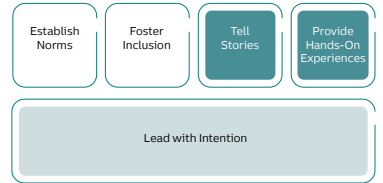
2 Foster inclusion.

Challenge harmful stereotypes (George et. al., 2024; Waldman, 2021). Discuss biases about generations. Discuss why those perceptions are in place and acknowledge the harm that can occur when we fail to recognize how those biases can negatively impact others.

Develop flexible work policies. Flexible work arrangements are for **everyone** and may include everything from flexible hours to phased retirement plans. Inclusive design work can help identify the policies that best meets the needs of various age groups. Importantly, managers must encourage the flexibility offered by those policies.

Encourage bi-directional mentoring. Numerous research studies now document the importance of bi-directional mentoring (Collinson & Hodin, 2023). Make it fun, like “slice of advice” rounds or sharing meme humor. The key is to pair experienced leaders with newer employees to establish goals and share bi-lateral knowledge. Emphasizing the value of one another’s knowledge is another way to build inclusion.

Best Practices: Tell stories and provide hands-on experiences



3 Practice innovative story-telling.

Use immersive technology. Take advantage of new digital games and apps that foster intergenerational collaboration and knowledge sharing (Reis et. al, 2021). These digital tools can help generations bring their stories to life and create the additional bond of working together on a tech platform.

Leverage Business Resource Groups (BRGs). Organizational BRGs can be a great way to bring together people for volunteer opportunities, camaraderie, and the ability to hear about one another's journeys and experiences. Sharing personal stories can break down barriers (Rezvani & Gordon, 2021).

Curate shared experiences (field trips!) Bring teams together in forums that extend beyond day-to-day tasks and help team members connect to other parts of the organization. These might include visits to an innovation center, a tour through a manufacturing facility, or a walk-through of a branch office. The goal is simply to help people gain a better understanding of the work being done.



4 Provide hands-on experiences.

Interactive, hands-on work can quickly break down assumptions and get teams working together. Researchers and organizations are experimenting with various methodologies to focus on collaboration:

- **Innovation engagement.** Implement incubator-style experimental R&D pods and incorporate rotations where multiple generations get to play and learn; consider “tinker task forces” where teams attempt to solve problems using technology.
- **Action-based problem solving.** Deliberately involve multi-generational teams to solve real-world problems; teams can practice sharing perspectives and solutions and the “whys” behind their approaches (Brooks, 2010).



Summary

Summary

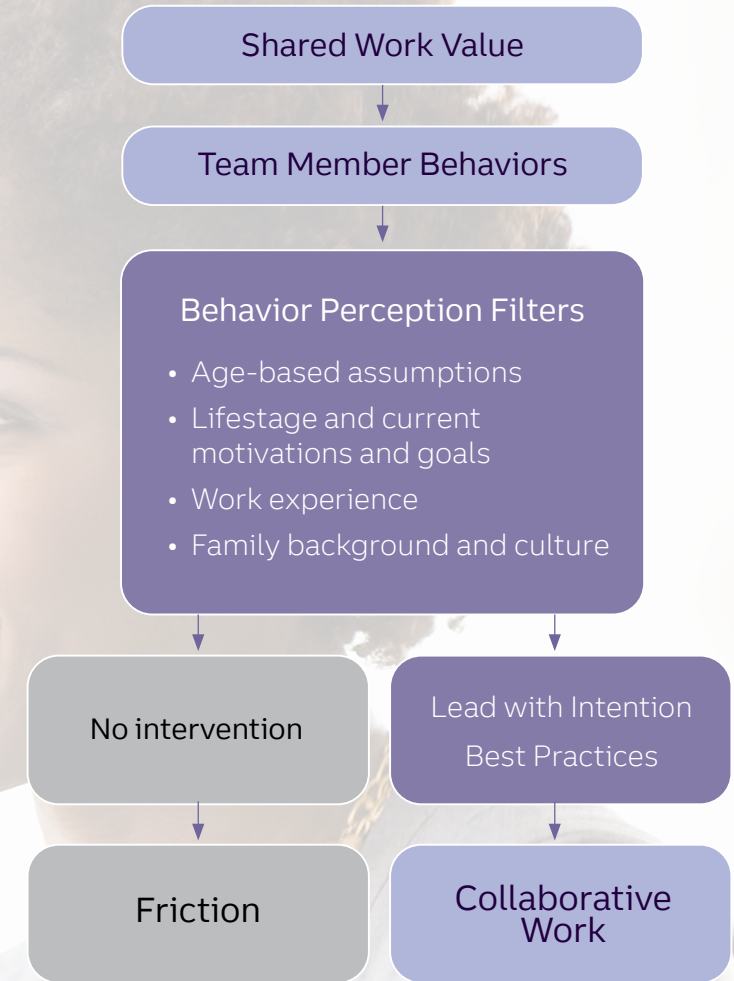
Numerous research studies have investigated the potential shared characteristics of generational cohorts, the biases and assumptions they have about other generations, and their preferences. Other research argues that the concept of a “generation” does not stand the test of scientific rigor and may reflect differences due to lifestage rather than generational differences.

However, few research studies examine the common ground held by different generations in the workforce. This research illuminated exactly that: The shared work values held by all teammates as they strive to create collaborative work environments that allow them to deliver at their best. We found five work values that all generations hold dear, including: Ensuring psychological safety, delivering excellent work, creating a positive work culture, leading with intention, and fostering a growth mindset.

We found that friction occurs when work values “show up differently” than we think they should—based on our own age-related biases, differing motivations and goals, and work experience. Differences in the interpretations of those behaviors create friction because they challenge closely held beliefs about how to behave. Those beliefs may impede our ability to achieve our own goals and motivations. We then identified seven key sources of friction and illustrated how older and younger generations commonly interpret the same behaviors differently.

We argued that in order to disrupt these filters, we must focus first on leading with intention, moving from “what to do” to “how to be.” We noted the importance of addressing age-related biases and summarized the best practices that will help do that.

Disrupting our own patterns of leadership and collaboration creates the roadmap for nurturing collaborative work rather than allowing friction to hold our teams back.





Parting Words

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”

— Henry Ford

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