# The Generations

While serving on a board, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, sexes, personalities, and generations are brought together for the common purpose of running an organization, company, nonprofit, or other group. The characteristics of each board member play a part in how well the board operates.

In this section of the Board Leadership Training, we will look at five generational profiles and how they affect the operation of a board. The starting and ending dates of the generations vary from source to source. However, it is the characteristics of each generation that are important as we look at how they relate to each other.

## Greatest Generation

**Born:** 1901 – 1924

**Size in the United States:** Approximately 1.7 million World War II veterans were estimated as part of the population in June 2013.

**Key events:** This generation was born in high times, experienced the Great Depression, watched the New Deal take shape, fought and won World War II, and returned to build the strongest economy in history while also giving birth to the Baby Boomers.

**Key values:** Financial security, patriotism, belief in the power of institutions, respect for authority, selflessness.

**Critical technological change in their lives:** Rural electrification, commercial radio.

**When working with this generation, focus on:** Tradition, helping others, being part of a large-scale, valuable change.

## Silent Generation

**Born:** 1925 – 1945

**Size in the United States:** Nearly 50 million Americans born into this generation.

**Key events:** Most of this generation missed serving in World War II, but lived through it as children and adolescents who matured in the 1950s. They grew up with a military draft, came of age during the tension of the Cold War, experienced a long period of social stability and family unity, and then experienced significant disenchantment when the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal challenged their core beliefs about authority. More than 40 percent of the men in this generation served in the military, and they believe in top-down control and centralized decision making.

**Key values:** Loyalty, self-sacrifice, stoicism, faith in institutions, intense patriotism.

**Critical technological change in their lives:** The spread of private automobile ownership, use of early office "machines," massive industrialization.

**When working with this generation, focus on:** Tradition, loyalty to a key issue in their lives, value of joint work ethic.

## Baby Boomers

**Born**: 1946 – 1962

**Size in United States in 2010:** Approximately 78 million or 26 percent of the U.S. population.

**Key events:** This generation, the largest

in U.S. history, grew up in an era of huge social change, but in a wealthy nation, often overindulged by their parents. Because of the Cold War, Boomers — until they were well into their adulthood — lived in a world that might be snuffed out in a day. This was the first generation in nearly 200 years to rebel openly against the government, and nearly every social, scientific, and cultural institution underwent significant change during their adolescence.

**Key values:** Sense of entitlement, optimism, cynicism about institutions, competition, focus on career, endless youth.

**Critical technological change in their lives:** Television. In 1952 there were 4 million privately owned televisions. By 1960 there were more than 50 million.

**When working with this generation focus on:** Their value to the team, your need for them, their ability to improve services, that the team is young and "cool," they can help "change the world," public recognition.

## Generation X (Gen X)

**Born:** 1963 – 1980

**Size in the United States:** A significant drop in the number of births occurred during the mid-1960s and 1970s, but a steady flow of immigrants helped pad Generation X's numbers. The generation's diversity has shaped how members of this cohort behave.

**Key events:** This generation has always worked in the shadow of the Boomers, who in many cases held back Gen Xers' careers because they filled all the jobs and refused to retire. Gen Xers are interested in stability, but that does not translate into the idea of staying with one organization. They are confident and focused on their career path. Influential events that occurred during their lifetime include fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger disaster, the energy crisis, Watergate scandal, Three Mile Island meltdown, Iranian hostage crisis, Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill, and terrorism at the Munich Olympics.

**Key values:** Diversity, self-reliance, practicality, informality, work/life balance, flexibility, and technology.

**Critical technological change in their lives:** Rise of the personal computer, cable TV, and video games.

**When working with this generation, focus on:** Their value to the work of the organization, value of independent thinking, alignment of the organization's values with theirs, and your organization's focus on work-life balance.

## Gen@ (also known as GenY, Generation Me, or Millennials)

**Born:** 1981 – 2002

**Size in the United States:** Approximately 75 million (almost the size of the Boomer generation).

**Key events:** These children of Boomers are the first generation born into a true high-tech society, and one in which their personal lives have become public. Growing up, this generation did what was asked of them, stayed in school, and became college graduates. They were engrained with the notion that the keys to financial security and success were education and hard work. But as this generation left college they encountered a recession, and Boomers were not leaving the workforce. Their value structure includes lifelong learning and work-life balance. More than any other generation in American history, they are wired for collaboration and working in groups.

Another way to define this generation is to look at the people they went to school with and saw on television: everybody. More than any generation in American history, Gen@ has had a diverse educational experience. And not just racially, although that is crucial. Gen@ is also the first generation to go to school with people of all abilities and to see real ethnic diversity in action in advertising, television — and most important — in political and business leadership. This is not to say that there are not racial divisions and tensions in Gen@. There are. But while Boomers at this age might have said, "Some of my best friends are black…" and stretched the facts, for Gen@ multiracial groups, having friends from multiracial homes, and seeing the world as a naturally multiracial environment is so common as to be invisible.

**Key values:** Work-life balance, confidence, social commitment, complete comfort with technology, networking, realism, staying well-informed, superb time management skills.

**Critical technological change in their lives:** The connection of Internet to everything in their lives, with an added dose of the rapid pace of technological advances and innovation. They grew up, and remain, connected.

**When working with this generation, focus on:** The good they and their peers can do by working with you, the challenge of doing good in the community and doing it well, the need for their new perspectives and ideas.

## Generation Z (also known as the Net Generation, Post Millennials, and Plurals)

**Born:** Mid-1990s — 2010

**Size in the United States:** 68 million

**Key Events:** Generation Z grew up with great uncertainty. They grew up in times of war and, because of technology, they have been exposed to information others had not seen until adulthood. As "digital natives" they can look up anything they're interested in — sometimes even to their own detriment. Generations Z, whose oldest members have recently or soon will graduate from college, grew up way too fast and never grew up at all. They've come out with radically different prospects of what they need to do in their work lives.

Generation Z is more ethnically diverse than any other generational cohort. Not only do the faces of those in Generation Z look different, but their social circles are also more diverse.

**Key Values:** Insatiable media appetite, researched answers and informed decision-making, connection with friends.

**Critical technology change in their lives:** They are digital natives and do not discriminate with use of digital methods. They use it all and are not emotionally attached to a particular network or a brand; they will simply use what best fits their needs.

**When working with this group:** Digital technologies enrich their social interaction. Members of this generation react best in small, highly defined work groups with a strong peer leader. Keep work structured and show them the prize.

## References

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