

### Younger Managers leading Older Employees

It is very common in today's workplace, for young achievers to suddenly find themselves leading and managing other people. This situation is challenging for all new leaders, not just the young ones, but another layer of sensitivity can be added when managing a team of people that are from a different generation or peer group. Whether the age difference is just a few years, or leaders find themselves leading teams with people their parents' age, it is not surprising for new leaders to find themselves feeling uncomfortable, or even a little anxious.

This tips and hints guide provides some ideas for young, people leaders. Some of the tips here are just as relevant for new leaders in a team of any shape and size, however these ideas are particularly effective for young leaders of teams that are not just from their peer group.

#### Some context...

Good managers disregard age and focus on what each member of the team can contribute - but your age as a manager may be an issue for some people! Even for you...

Older people may be guilty of thinking things like this :

- *She is not up to this job. She has no experience, she is barely out of school. What has she done in the 'real world'?*
- *Young people think they know it all. He had better not tell me what to do - I have been doing this job since he was in nappies!*
- *Why did he get the job over me? I have plenty more runs on the board...!*
- *Young people can't be relied on. They'd rather go surfing than solve serious problems. Young people are impatient - they want everything now.*

And younger people may be guilty of thinking things like this :

- *Older people are stuck in their ways. They will resist any change I try to bring about.*
- *Older people are not able to cope with the technology changes.*

- *She might have it in for me because I got the job over her.*
- *I'm not totally sure I know what I am doing but I can't let them smell my fear!*



Younger leaders should be mindful of the possible dynamics they may be walking into, but one of the first things new younger leaders need to do is

**throw out all the assumptions they may have about working with older people.** It can be self fulfilling and quite frankly wrong. The opinions we form of people influence the way we deal with them, so start by thinking of team members as individuals not stereotypes. This will help you to have the right mindset to lead your new team.

#### Reality Check

I am on track if:

- I invest in the relationships of all members of my team, taking time to get to know team members, and building rapport and trust.
- I show empathy for those in my team, and create space to reflect on what they may be thinking and feeling.
- I appreciate the differences within my team and seek ways to take advantage of those things.

Warning signs are if:

- I try to play the 'I'm the boss' card. This does not win respect.
- I try too hard to be liked and don't address performance issues in the team. Leaders are there to help set expectations, set people up for success and keep team members accountable.
- I think I need to make decisions on my own for people to respect me as a leader.

### Things I can do to improve my effectiveness as a leader of older workers:

- Focus on building trust and confidence.** Your older team member may be quite wary of the new younger boss. Trust should be a key focus in the early days. Trust is often associated with credibility, reliability, relationships and 'agendas'. Work on gaining their trust by keeping your promises, communicating in a variety of ways, and by being available. Show a genuine interest in them as a person, being honest and reliable in all your dealings, keeping them informed and seeking their input on important team issues. Show your employees that you support them by giving them the necessary authority to do their job, by handling sensitive issues with discretion and publicly backing them up when they need you to.
- Take the time to get to know all of the people in your team.** Make time to sit down face to face with each team member one on one. Inquire about their roles, some of the challenges they face and ask them about what they think could make the department / team better. Older workers may offer a unique perspective, having potentially been in the organisation over a number of years. Develop a mutual understanding around how you will work together, inquiring about preferences in work style and communication.
- Invest in the new relationships.** Even though your music tastes, social circles and ideal vacations may be quite different from your older team members, try to find something in common; that you can both connect to. Work or personal. Share things about yourself and find out more about the 'whole person'. And sense when it is ok to inquire about how they are feeling. Getting some stuff on the table might help you fast track this relationship.
- Be sensitive to emotional issues.** Have empathy for the older worker. Just as it is hard for you, it may hard for them. Their confidence may be shaken. Their identity now questioned. They may be embarrassed, or jealous, or if they went for the role themselves, may want to prove the decision was a wrong one. The person you first deal with may be quite different from the person they usually are. Tread carefully but not on egg shells. They are adults after all! Explore issues privately. Help them to save face. Invest in the relationship and give it time.
- Take the time to get to know what motivates your older team members.** Everyone is motivated by different things, some of which you may never have thought of. You might be surprised by what you hear! Research suggests 'veterans' (born between 1922 and 1943) and 'baby boomers' (1943-1960) value teamwork over individual achievement, 'Gen-Xers' (1960-1980) enjoy opportunities for independent achievement, like to be in control and need fast feedback. 'Gen-Y/Gen-Nexters' (1980-2000) love to learn fast, make progress and use technology. But remember age is not the only reason for difference in your team; individuals may have other motivation drivers as well.<sup>1</sup>
- Be respectful of the differences.** Take the time to understand the differences in lifestyle. Older worker will value time with their families, may be protective of their leisure time, and may appreciate more flexibility in working arrangements. Some will have more responsibilities outside work - due to young families, older parents or community roles. Take an interest in their lives even if you have different priorities, have mutual respect for differences. Consider this when deciding meeting times, and anything that may traditionally be outside 'work hours'.
- Don't be afraid to be the boss but don't advertise it at every opportunity!** You've earned your current position by proving you are capable of handling a managerial job and people believe in your potential. Your confidence in yourself will go a long way to helping you establish your authority. Remember that one of the primary roles of a manager is to *set expectations* and *hold people accountable*. This means it is *ok* to set direction, allocate work to people and provide feedback on their performance - even if they are much older and experienced than you; in fact your team members *need* you to do that. *But be mindful of the way you do this*. Do it humbly. Respect their knowledge and experience. Playing the 'but I said so' card won't impress anyone! Collaborate yes, but still be strong.
- 'Fake it till you make it' - but don't pretend to be the expert when you are not!** You might find one of the biggest early obstacles is your own thinking - your own self doubt. And your desire to prove to everyone that you are worthy of the appointment (including yourself) may be to try to know everything. Given your age and experience, you are unlikely to be the subject matter expert on everything! Respect the expertise of your team. Listen to them rather than

<sup>1</sup> Seven ways to effectively manage older workers, advisor today, articleID=857

assume you know best. Taking into account more experienced people's perspectives can make you a much better manager.

- **Have confidence in your decision making and own the calls you make.** Whilst you don't want to look like you are indecisive, it is perfectly understandable to not know the right decision immediately. Seek the contributions of your older team members, but make it clear you are the one ultimately to make the decision. And if you need more time, give yourself a 'leave pass' by saying confidently - I take this decision seriously so I am going to reflect on that a little more before I decide. If you choose to go another way, explain the reasons for your decision. And if you make mistakes, don't blame others or find excuses. Older people will respect you for accepting the responsibility for decisions.
- **Set clear goals, but leave the path to achievement undefined.** Resist the temptation to micro-manage anyone in your team, but especially the older ones. Cooperation, creativity and commitment increases when the roles of the team members are sharply defined yet team members are given latitude on *how* to complete the task.
- **Make communication one of your top priorities and a very deliberate part of your leadership actions.** Keep the lines of communication open. Talk to them, listen to them, brief them on changing expectations. Don't assume they know because they have been around for a while. And take into consideration their communication preferences. Many older people like face to face contact. Follow up with email later if you feel this is still needed. The more human contact you give older workers, the more respect they'll have for you.
- **Use the expertise of your team and be open to learning from them.** They have survived for a reason! Validate them, seek their input and show their opinion counts, even if there are times you may choose to go another way.
  - Ask great *questions*. A person who seeks to understand is less likely to be seen as a 'know it all'.
  - Seek opportunities to *collaborate*. Un-tap the collective value and possibility the diversity in your team offers.
  - Try to work with mindset that there is value in each interaction and there is always something to *learn*. Seek feedback often.

- **Be consistent and fair in your interactions with all members of the team.** Whilst the relationship with each person is going to be unique, try to be consistent in the way you deal with issues and people. Try to be equitable and fair when allocating work, and when giving people your time. And be mindful of the little things. *When you are the leader people notice what you do much more than you may realise!* For eg, don't have a laugh with the guys in your peer group and only be serious with the older ones. It creates a divide.
- **If people step out of line, deal with it quickly and respectfully.** This applies to all members of your team - not just the older ones. This doesn't have to be a dressing down in front of others: treat them like everyone else in the team.
- **Things will get better, slowly, if everyone sees that you're working hard and making good decisions.** Don't expect things to happen fast. Aim for quick wins. Winning the team's respect may take 6 months. It just takes patience.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Employees older than you are? How to win respect, Anne Fisher, Forbes, July 2013