GENERATION GAP

veterinarians cite lack of support and mentorship as the second-most important factor that influences their decision to leave a practice, which can lead to frequent job changes during the first 2–3 years after graduation.1

“The younger generation needs way more reassurance and way more positive reinforcement and feedback, and in my experience the older generation is of the opinion, ‘Well, if I didn’t tell you you did it wrong, then just assume you did it right,’” said a veterinarian in her third year of practice. But, she said, “We as a generation maybe need to hear ‘You’re doing a good job.’ I frequently have to remind myself that that is just not how they operate.”

Stereotypes, or Naked Truth?

Add the rapid growth of technology, which has strongly impacted younger generations’ communication styles, and opinions decline even further. With the proliferation of email, texting, and social media, managers say the younger generations lack face-to-face communication and leadership skills, especially “soft” skills such as a positive attitude and the ability to succeed on a team.2

But are these perceptions accurate, or are they merely stereotypes? Although generational differences can contribute to conflict when it comes to leadership and communication, there is another piece of the puzzle.

Different Expectations

Consider this scenario: Practice co-owner Dr. Johnson asks Lisa, a veterinary technician, to provide an updated drug inventory when she has time. Later, the other owner, Dr. Smith, texts Lisa: “Where are you? We need that inventory now. The price break ends tomorrow.”

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**Tips to Bridge the Generation Gap**

1. **Recognize the benefits of working with different generations.** Some of the healthiest practice teams succeed because their members bring a variety of perspectives and styles to the table. When these differences are appreciated and nurtured, people feel more valued and engaged. This, in turn, leads to better performance.

   Older workers offer experience that surpasses classroom teaching, as well as stability, because they have been seeing clients for years, said fifth-year veterinarian Jeff Davis.

   Younger workers may have less experience, but they can provide a practice with the latest knowledge, especially when it comes to newer equipment, said Ken White, who has been a veterinarian for 44 years.

   Most importantly, new veterinarians’ enthusiasm can invigorate a practice. “We inspire the older generation to remember what’s great about the practice of veterinary medicine,” said third-year veterinarian Abby Whiting. “If you’re looking to inspire the team, maybe a new face that’s excited about being there is the right way to do that.”

2. **Understand that generations, as well as individuals, have different communication styles** (see Communication Styles). When facing generational or style differences, the first step to building great teams is teaching awareness about how these factors impact communication with others. Individual awareness will then lead to team awareness, no matter the “gap” between team members.

   Communications consultant Rebecca Jones said understanding the various styles people use, and especially your own preferred styles, is essential to develop effective communication skills.

   Becoming aware of your own styles can sometimes be difficult, but there are tools that can simplify the process. One example is the DISC profile, an assessment that measures your communication and behavioral style. The University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine has used the DISC assessment for 10 years to help incoming veterinary students develop awareness of their preferred styles.

   “Understanding styles allows you to change your style to communicate with others in the way they need to ensure the most effective communication,” Jones said. “Effective communication is proven to have a direct effect on client and clinic success through improved diagnosis, improved satisfaction, improved time management, improved compliance, improved bill collection, and reduced malpractice claims.”

   Understanding your style also helps with client and team conflicts, she said.

   “We can predict how and why other styles may rub us the wrong way or how and why our style may affect others,” she said. “This doesn’t necessarily help us avoid conflict, but if we know the source, we can certainly seek to manage it more effectively.”

   Managing your styles means being able to vary them to meet the needs of the situation. For example, the style you use with team members may not be the same style you use when communicating difficult information to a client.

   “I believe the nature of running a business, managing employees, and dealing with clients requires a certain communication style. For example, a level of directness and decision making is required, regardless of who the individual is,” Jones said.

   “Individuals who are striving to be successful at running their own practices are going to take on those communication characteristics when and where needed. A practice owner with whom I worked described his preferred communication style as steady, diplomatic, and accommodating. Yet, when a particularly difficult communication issue arose, he easily moved into a direct and decisive style where he told his employ-
es exactly how he wanted that situation to be handled.”

Furthermore, identifying and accommodating your team members’ styles can help them become more engaged.

“Research suggests that an environment that encourages and reinforces an individual’s preferred behaviors and styles generally leaves the person more satisfied and fulfilled, and thus more likely to stay in that line of work,” Jones said.

3. Encourage mentoring relationships. Young veterinary professionals—and all young professionals—are increasingly seeking mentors. However, the stereotypical mentor is a wise, older figure who gives sage advice to a younger team member, who happily follows in the mentor’s footsteps—an image that may deter someone from seeking such a relationship.

Potential mentors may lack confidence in their leadership skills or worry mentoring will be too time-consuming, and mentees may be concerned that they will lose their independence or be seen as needy.

In reality, the mentor does not need to be older, but should simply have more expertise. The relationship does not require a large time commitment; the pair can arrange a manageable, realistic format.

By encouraging mentoring relationships, veterinary professionals are helping ensure the success of the practice. (See Benefits of Mentoring.)

Veterinarian Jeff Denny, who owns a small animal practice, said he has heard horror stories from team members about their first job. He encourages fellow owners and managers to be available and prepared to teach when hiring new veterinarians. Do not be understaffed or stressed when they come on board, he said.

White has found that leading by example can be effective with new, younger veterinarians.

“My theory is you kind of lead by example for a period of time and see if they don’t pick up on that,” he said. “By and large, most of them will. You may have to say something like, ‘I don’t want you wearing a sweatshirt and a ball cap in the exam room.’ If you say it once, then mostly they pick it up on it.”

New veterinarians should have the confidence to seek guidance when necessary, because feedback or criticism can present an opportunity for growth. “Have the courage to ask for feedback,” Whiting said. “You may not get it unless you seek it out.”

Complicated cases can require a special balance between diplomacy and individual opinions, as well as an open mind when disagreements arise.

New veterinarians should stand up for their beliefs while also recognizing senior veterinarians’ knowledge and experience, Whiting said.

“When I first got the job, I was eager to please and make sure that I made a spot for myself,” she said. “Now it’s important that I stay true to myself and what I think is right for the patient’s best interest.”

Conclusion
Multiple generations commonly work together in veterinary practices, and although teams can benefit from the variety of perspectives, differences can also cause tension.

Expectations or work styles, such as younger veterinarians’ greater tendency to develop more informal relationships with their clients, often vary among generations. Generational differences can also play a role in communication, but blaming all workplace communication problems on age differences would be unfair, because communication styles preferred by individuals also contribute to conflict.

Having a better understanding of your team’s generational differences and communication styles can make you a more self-aware and effective team member. You will inevitably encounter these differences in practice with team members or clients, and how you handle them can greatly impact your practice success.

References
The co-owners are nearly the same age, yet their styles of delivery vary dramatically. Each owner conveys different expectations. Dr. Johnson casually makes his request in person and fails to define a timeline. In contrast, Dr. Smith conveys the urgency of the situation electronically and adds a layer of ambiguity because his exact emotion is unclear. He may be angry or simply stating a fact, but Lisa will make an assumption about his feelings that will affect her reaction and could cause further problems.

The generation gap often gets blamed for such conflicts, but as this situation demonstrates, communication and leadership styles also vary within generations.

**Repertoire of Styles**

Rebecca Jones, a business and management consultant with 20 years’ experience delivering communication, leadership, and training solutions, said it can be tempting to stereotype based on age. Multigenerational differences do exist, she said, and they can be particularly evident in communication preferences, such as the use of email, texting, or face-to-face communication.

However, she believes factors such as gender, industry, experience, and situational needs all impact our communication, so we should not blame miscommunication solely on a generation gap.

“We believe that every individual likely has a ‘comfort style’ that is their preferred way of communicating,” Jones said. “However, rather than trying to attach it to their generation or upbringing, it’s more productive to teach professionals to read the communication signals and nonverbal cues of the other person. These cues tell us how we might choose to respond to ensure an effective and healthy interaction.”

When our preferred style conflicts with someone else’s, we do not have to accept that every interaction will be difficult, she said. Being a strong communicator means developing a repertoire of styles, regardless of what comes most naturally.

“While we are certainly influenced by our generational upbringing, our styles do not have to be defined by it,” Jones said.

With the variety of leadership, communication, and work styles seen both between and within generations, navigating a multigenerational practice is challenging. In **Tips to Bridge the Generation Gap**, page 42, we offer advice to help overcome these differences. ■

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**References**


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**PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

**Older Generations**

- Hardworking (73%), a productive part of the organization (69%), team players (56%), and nurturers of colleagues (55%)²
- Delay retirement because of a desire to work and the economy turn-down
- “Live to work” rather than “work to live”: 74% of the public believes older adults have the best work ethic; 68% below age 30 agree²
- Believe good workers “come early and work late”
- Emphasize time worked rather than results
- Believe those who have “paid their dues” earn respect
- Believe loyal workers should be retained through promotion, salary, and status
- Prefer structure.

**Millennials**

- Less independent than previous generations because of increased parental supervision and financial dependency
- “Entitled and concerned primarily about individual promotion,” according to 68% of the workforce,² with academic research indicating increased narcissism⁴
- “Work to live” rather than “live to work”
- Believe work should be valued based on results, not time spent at the practice. Want time away from work for family and friends
- Value balance and moderation
- Seek work with meaning that demonstrates potential for growth: are prone to job-hopping, but can be retained with flexible schedules and measurable outcomes
- View bosses as mentors and coaches giving guidance
- Are the most tech-savvy
- Have unrealistic compensation expectations and are easily distracted.⁶