

How to manage employees who are older than you

The delicate art of overseeing staff who were collecting paycheques when you were collecting LEGO

The first employee Gerrit van Bruggen ever managed was 30 years his senior. Van Bruggen was an ambitious 21-year-old who had just bought a safety-equipment business in Sturgeon County, Alta., and with the acquisition came a single middle-aged staffer. “I felt a little insecure,” van Bruggen admits. In the 10 years since, van Bruggen has been boss to many people whose age and experience far eclipsed his own, as he turned a micro business into a multimillion-dollar enterprise now known



as [Barricades and Signs Ltd.](#) He dealt with their skepticism, apprehension and covert “I have underwear older than you” sneers, and learned the pitfalls of generational stereotypes. “We young managers tend to get defensive as we try to make older people respect what we want to do,” he says. “And that ends up backfiring.” Situations like van Bruggen’s used to be rare. Traditionally, one’s workplace seniority moved in lockstep with experience. That is rapidly changing as scores of highly educated Gen Yers enter the workforce, expecting to become managers either via early promotion or entrepreneurship. Factor in a growing desire among retirement-age boomers to keep working and you get an environment in which more young people are supervising their elders than ever before, notes Adwoa Buahene, managing partner of Toronto-based consultancy [N-gen People Performance](#), which helps companies manage multigenerational workforces. “That creates a lot of hurdles for the younger boss.” To succeed, you have to gain respect, compensate for experience gaps, understand different work styles and, importantly, handle the often raw emotions that emerge when power doesn’t correlate with tenure.

Clear the air

During peak season at Winnipeg-based [M&L General Contracting](#), up to 150 people call Reece Tomlinson boss, and rarely does someone question his authority. However, the 28-year-old CEO knows he has a lot less hands-on experience than his 40- and 50-something charges. Rather than pretend otherwise, he's upfront about the gaps in his expertise. "I try to make it clear to older employees, who were hired for a skill I may not know well, that my objective is not to tell them what to do but to help achieve a mutually beneficial outcome," Tomlinson says. "I find if I ask questions about why things are the way they are—and admit when I'm wrong—it helps to relax the situation." This approach becomes especially useful when you manage someone older who wanted the job you got, says Gisele Kovary, who runs N-gen with Buahene. Instead of ignoring the elephant in the room—which will only make the other party resentful—Kovary recommends acknowledging that you know they wanted the job, explaining in a non-defensive way why you're qualified to fill the position and stressing your hope you can work together. "That may not be a comfortable conversation," she says, "but it clears the air."

Check your assumptions

"The largest mistake young leaders make," says Sarah Thompson, "is generalizing about a generation instead of paying attention to the individual." The executive coach and founder of Cambridge, Ont.-based leadership training firm Lead by Design knows a woman in her 50s with a master's degree in IT sciences who recently interviewed for a tech position. The 30-something interviewer actually asked her whether she knew how to use a computer. The candidate was so offended, she nearly walked out. While certain generational stereotypes are broadly true—for instance, most boomers prefer face-to-face meetings while most millennials are happy to rely on e-mail or social media—experts agree it's dangerous for any young manager to assume anyone over 50 is a Luddite. Boomers have passion for their work, and someone with decades on the job may be an innovation powerhouse. "I've hired people in their 20s who were much more set in their ways than older employees," says van Bruggen, who takes his management philosophy from leadership guru Stephen Covey: seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Lose the attitude

Perhaps the most important thing when managing people older than you is to

adjust your attitude. That means avoiding the three Cs: cockiness, control-freakiness and condescension. (The last tends to be the biggest problem for hyper-educated Gen Yers.) These traits do little more than foment disengagement among the people whose respect you want to earn. “When you try to assert your dominance, people who have been in the workforce don’t enjoy it,” says Tomlinson. “I’ve never seen it lead to good results.” For Punit Dhillon, humility has worked better. Dhillon was 30 when he co-founded biotech firm OncoSec four years ago. Since most of his staff (not to mention his entire board) have 20 years on him and much more executive experience, he decided early on that the iron-fist leadership style wouldn’t benefit anyone. So while he’s made it clear he’s in charge, he solicits feedback and even mentorship from his direct reports when making big decisions. “There’s a lot of opportunity in making sure you have a connection with your older staff,” says Dillon. “Why reinvent the wheel when you can build on what our predecessors did before?”

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