



# **Young blood**

**Bridging the  
generation gap**



## Letting go of age stereotypes and learning from each other's strengths can create a better working environment for younger managers and their older employees. By **Leon Gettler**

**D**emographics are reshaping management. The managers are getting younger. Demographers say Generation X and Nexters make up about 45 per cent of the workforce. As a group, these 18-to-41 year olds equal the same percentage of the workforce the Baby Boomers compose. The difference is that the boomers are more likely to be retiring over the next few years.

The result: more boomers will be working for younger managers. Some of them might end up working for managers young enough to be their children.

This can lead to tensions. A 2009 study by Mary Hair Collins, Joseph Hair and Tonette Rocco found older workers expect less from their younger supervisors than do younger workers. Older workers also don't think much of the management skills and leadership abilities of these younger bosses.

Peter Cappelli, a professor at US business school Wharton, has found older workers are more likely to be discriminated against by younger managers. "If you look at the research on older workers, you see an incredible amount of discrimination against them, bigger than race, bigger than gender," Cappelli said.

A case in point is Allan Gibson, a 65-year-old who retired from full-time employment almost three years ago. Gibson had a career that spanned 47 years across three of the major financial institutions – Westpac for about 34 years, eight years with the ANZ and then four years with the CBA.

"It was probably not until I reached the age of around about 50 that I started to encounter a shift between working for older managers, older than me at the time, to what then emerged as a changing workforce in terms of younger managers in positions," Gibson said.

"I have to admit it never worried me, although at times, I sensed a degree of immaturity by some of those managers."

He says immaturity often came out as a lack of awareness of the bigger picture. They would see a short-term benefit without a long-term assessment of what else needed to happen.

"They were being driven by a marketing desire to achieve a desired outcome, usually with a sense of personal gain by way of bonus or incentive, and making them look good at the expense of good management," Gibson said.

One example was a marketing manager who could not comprehend Gibson's approach to work.

"There were times when I was in a

lending role and exercised my delegated authority in terms of making decisions on credit assessment. I was challenged by a younger marketing manager who was only looking at the marketing benefit of doing that deal as opposed to the credit risk involved through doing it.

"I had the benefit of being able to draw from a wealth of background knowledge of past events. That other person didn't have an appreciation for it."

The result: Gibson was sent to Coventry. "I was seen as not being a team player and part of the gang," he says.

Juliet Bourke, a national lead for diversity inclusion and consulting partner at Deloitte, says managers, and for that matter the older workers, need to leave stereotypes at the door.

### "PEOPLE OFTEN RELATE TO EACH OTHER IN TERMS OF AGE, AND AGE IS A PROXY FOR SOMETHING ELSE"

Juliet Bourke, consulting partner at Deloitte

"People often relate to each other in terms of age, and age is a proxy for something else," Bourke says. "That something else being hierarchy, we assume if someone is older we should be giving them greater deference. It can also be the stereotypes around young and dynamic and creative versus 'can't teach an old dog new tricks.'"

She says the first thing to do is to change your mindset, to see a person in front of you rather than a stereotype. The second is to change your behaviour such that you see it from the other's viewpoint.

Bourke says the older worker could

actually take the lead here to reframe the relationship. "In some ways, it's easier for someone who has been around the block a few times to take that mature approach and say to the younger leader: 'This must be hard, I don't quite know what I would do if I were in your situation, I feel for you', rather than playing the victim role and stamping your feet and going on about getting recognition and saying: 'In my days this was how we did things.'"

"Really what you're aiming for as the older worker is to become the trusted advisor, that's why it could be golden."

Jo Smyth, who runs change management programs at ANZ, says the older workers in her team have completely different priorities to the younger ones.

"I've found that older workers' priority for their job is not necessarily career driven. Certainly by contrast to the younger workers, it's all about career and how quickly they can take over my job," Smyth says.

Many older workers, by contrast, are more focused on issues like retirement, learning or doing the job really well.

She says it's the manager's job to understand that. She says managers have to get to know each worker on their team really well, regardless of their age.

"It is about the individual and everyone has a different motivator coming into work and doing their job," she says.

"Understanding people's motivations for work and then making sure everyone is on the same page in terms of the quality of the work that they need to deliver, gives people a different perspective on their role.

"I think people in leadership roles come unstuck when they don't take the time to do that." **MT**



### ON FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Ben Willee, the general manager of advertising agency Spinach, says smart companies would see the older worker as a valuable resource. Unusually for an advertising agency, 80 per cent of the Spinach workforce are in their late 30s and above and 15 per cent are in their 50s.

He says with training budgets cut back since the GFC, older experienced workers are now more critical than ever.

"We're finding in the advertising industry there is often this desire to do something new for the sake of doing something new at the expense of doing something right, that is proven to sell product," Willee says.

"The older workers are really good at what we call 'crap testing'. Older workers are good at saying: 'What's the benefit for consumers? How does that help me sell more product and change perceptions?'

"Smart companies recognise the value of that experience and choose where and when to overlook that and calculate what risks to take. Management gurus tell you that the most successful and productive teams have that combination of all those personality types and here at Spinach we try very hard to have a range of skills and personality types because it means the best results for your clients."