

4 Ways to Improve Inter-Generational Decision Making

By Jill Johnson



Making decisions is always difficult. It is hard enough when the decision needs to be made by a group of like-minded peers; but the hardest type of decisions to make are those in which there are multiple generations involved in the process. So what do you do? Bringing out the best in the generations impacting your decisions requires four critical approaches to ensure their decision-making involvement stays on track and is focused on moving to a decision outcome that matters.

1. Don't Assume Everyone Has Enough Insight

Decision making does not get a participation trophy. Just showing up is not enough in today's fast-paced business environment. Careful consideration of the available decision options is important. Frequently, the assumption is made that everyone at the table has enough insight and information to participate effectively in the process. All too often they don't.

Make sure your inter-generational team has enough information so they can be more mindful in evaluating your options. Established professionals can get grounded into a black or white point of view that makes them hold fast to historical assessments of potential options. Younger participants can have a limited viewpoint about possible options and consequences. This is not because they are incapable of complex thought; it's just they often don't have enough experience to engage in a more nuanced deliberation.

Prepare them for participating in this process. Do they need advance reading material, such as an article about the critical issue you are going to address? Write up a summary of the critical elements of the issue and why a decision needs to be made. Set the stage at the outset by doing a comprehensive presentation at the first decision making meeting. Provide them with clarity about how the decision relates to your organizational business strategies and why this is an area of concern. Don't assume they understand this; consider this an educational opportunity.

2. Clarify the Decision Parameters

Keeping an inter-generation group focused is a challenge. They will careen from issue to issue unless you frame things up clearly for them. Establish a framework of what must be considered and the boundaries for how far they can go with the decision options. Set limits. If there are budget or staffing limitations, say so.

Make sure to clarify the boundaries of the group's role in the decision-making process too. Are they the decision maker, serving in an advisory function to others who will decide, or an influencer with critical insight into key decision options? Put this in writing so no one can say later that they misunderstood or did not hear you say there were limits to work within.

It is easy to defer to a group of enthusiastic young professionals, but unless you stay on top of them, they can go way beyond the appropriate parameters. This can result in very treacherous consequences; both in them going too far and in you dampening their enthusiasm for participating again. Have tons of interim check points and keep re-directing the discussion as needed. It is also easy for younger team members to defer to older professionals. Of course, they are seasoned and have experience. But they can also fall into the trap of only thinking within a box of historical options that limit consideration of new approaches to solving problems. You need the insight of all generations at the table. But it has to be effectively channeled.

3. Manage the Decision Discussion

Don't abandon your team to work without your involvement. You don't have to be there for every workgroup conversation, but you still need to manage the discussion. Most importantly, encourage candid dialog. Clarify for everyone the stakes, the resources of information you need, and begin discussing the decision parameters.

Have them walk through the potentials outcomes of the options under consideration. Require them to discuss the pros and cons of each option. Encourage them to ask questions of each other to explore the consequences of the ideas being suggested. Challenge them to ask if there is an element of this option that could be combined with something already reviewed to make a stronger option.

Approach this in a respectful manner. Carefully manage how the group communicates so those with strong voices do not drown out innovative ideas from more introverted participants who may lack confidence in speaking up in the group. If you get each of your participants deeply involved in the discussion, they will develop mutual respect and learn from each other. This enhances inter-generational communication and encourages a more collaborative decision dialog.

4. Manage Expectations

With inter-generational teams, also manage their expectations about how much influence they will ultimately have on the decision-making process. It goes back to the role they play in the decision. Will they get a vote in the decision? Or will they be influencing how you decide? Carefully managing their expectations at the front-end will help manage angst at the back end if you are the final decider and go a different way than they recommend.

Make sure you develop feedback loops and mechanisms for follow-up. You will lose your younger team members if they don't get periodic follow-up on the decision outcome. If possible, continue to involve the decision team in reviewing the progress of the decision implementation. Then they can help you adjust and adapt your decision strategy based on the evolving outcomes.

Inter-generational groups can provide you with significant ideas beyond options you initially considered. When you can do this effectively with inter-generational teams, they bond more effectively and can learn from each other. They can also find unexpected approaches linking possibilities in powerful, and sometimes unexpected ways that may create amazing results.

Final Thoughts:

If you effectively manage your inter-generational decision making efforts, you will create a team dynamic that is powerfully focused on resolving issues. At the same time, they will be building critical thinking skills and learning how to work together for future decision making.

What are the ways you can strengthen your inter-generational decision-making to get better results?

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