

Surviving the younger boss

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SO you've got a new boss. It sounds exciting; the potential to gain a new mentor, someone fresh to learn from, someone to impress.

But then you find out they're just "a kid". How can you possibly answer to a manager the same age as your son or daughter? It just doesn't feel right.

Well you'd better get used to it.

Generation X now makes up 34 per cent - and Gen Y 26 per cent - of Australia's working population, threatening the demographic hold of the previously dominant Baby Boomers.

Business coaches say older employees often feel ashamed to work for a younger boss, thinking it a reversal of the natural order and reflecting poorly on their achievements.

But the conflict is typically not one-sided, younger bosses can also feel threatened working with someone older and with more industry experience.

Simple remedy

The answer is simple. Apply common sense, says business coach Tina Monk from Monk & Associates.

"In any workplace it is best to have an approach of mutual respect rather than judgments about age as members of each generation bring different experiences, skills and knowledge," Ms Monk says.

The key challenge of working for a younger boss is dealing with different generational work styles and perceptions.

And judging your boss on their age can also become a discrimination issue if you aren't careful - just like judging someone on their gender or race.

Criticisms of older workers include they are set in their ways, resistant to change and can be obnoxious know-it-alls. Equally, 20-somethings just starting work can be painfully hyperactive and still believe being a workaholic is admirable. Many are energetic, ambitious and outspoken - all traits work-weary, mature-age staff love to hate.

But Ms Monk says it's up to the older employee to lead by example.

"Some longer-serving employees try to parent the younger boss and this is a subtle put down even if it isn't intended to be. It goes on in many workplaces and it just creates resentment.

"A younger boss also needs to realise that they are not putting themselves down by asking for input from an older colleague, they are developing a mutually beneficial relationship."

Jon Dale, a director at Small Fish Business Coaching, says organisations regularly call in external help to address the issue.

A younger boss should try running workshops and training on how to create a respectful workplace, Mr Dale says.

"When we are coaching a young boss that's where we start. By encouraging the boss to be inclusive, to respect and involve the older employees and to actively seek their experience and input."

Technical divide

Differences in technological smarts can also be a major source of tension for the younger boss.

They may become frustrated that some of their older colleagues are digital dinosaurs, with little knowledge of internet platforms and social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace.

Ms Monk says older workers tend to believe in face time instead. They are used to meeting more regularly to discuss projects and goals while younger workers tend to say: "Just send me an email."

She says it's not that older workers aren't willing to learn, you just have to walk them through it.

"Some organisations try to make this easier by having a reverse mentor - an older person has a younger person to mentor them on updating their technology skills."

While older workers may not be as internet savvy, younger bosses will benefit from tapping into their knowledge base. The boss may have been in the organisation just six months while some of the staff have been there for decades. These veterans can offer insight into the company's culture, past projects and business cycles.

On the client side, managing director of Reload Consulting Llew Jury says they are becoming more accepting of dealing with younger bosses.

"As long as the young manager reassures the client that they have the knowledge and some practical experience, clients are generally fine," Mr Jury says.

"We have a 21-year-old general manager in our digital marketing business, who with me (at 36) work together to train and mentor the staff in Australia and overseas. As long as we do the leadership together, the staff don't feel the younger manager is giving all the direction."

He admits, though, that good working relationships don't easily cross generational divides - every age group believes it possesses the most desirable skills.

"But as any good boss knows, it doesn't come down to age. They know they need to build credibility and industry knowledge to gain respect from staff."