

* V. Michelle Obradovic, Esq.

**Pez, Rickie Tickie Stickies,
Pet Rocks and MySpace.com**

*If you are doing what you love to do,
and doing it honestly,
and with your whole spirit and heart,
then I think that is as good as it gets.*

*Kris Kristofferson
CBS News Interview*

From the International Chamber of Commerce, our multi-national group could look across the Seine to see the Eiffel Tower. The City of Lights was mesmerizing. The food was fine – somewhat small portions - but that turned out to be a good thing. Actually, lots of things were small; cars, elevators, coffee cups - not purses and not scarves though; they were huge and Italian made - Brilliant! Despite the potential for fabulous distraction, the communication obstacles we were negotiating at the ICC left little time for anything else. It was a competitive environment, but to be successful, we knew we would have to quickly form productive relationships. We had to be careful with each other in the beginning; assume good intentions; listen closely; pay attention to our words and watch for signs of understanding. We could not allow differing views to frustrate our purpose or allow misunderstandings to escalate into skirmishes and potential mutual annihilation. The risk of failure was too great. The more frequently we were successful in our interactions, the greater the level of trust between us and the more progress we made. Those who arrived treating everyone else as adversaries or who were willing to use any means to gain an advantage were quickly shut out. Those who at first seemed genuine, but proved hostile, were rusticated, neutralized and given the stink eye.

Reflecting on the experience, it puts me in mind of another variety of cultural conflict that is becoming more prevalent in mediation; generational workplace conflict. Almost like people from different countries, an executive who remembers WWII and values humility and sacrifice is likely to have a vastly different ideology from a colleague who is exceptionally well educated, expects a work/life balance and never knew a world without MTV. Although cultural conflicts may not be at the top of everyone's list of fires to put out, when people don't communicate well, it's hard for the work to get done, which impacts profitability. Today, that already challenging task of leading and motivating people with different expectations and backgrounds may be even more difficult because our U.S. workforce is comprised of four generations of people – Millennials, Gen X, Boomers and the Greatest Generation. It's about to get worse. Demographers working with data from the 2000 Census and 2004 Current Population Survey tell us that the majority of the remaining WWII workforce will likely be retired within three years; some of the 70 million Boomers are also considering retirement; but there are only about 45 million Gen X. Sixty million or so Millennials won't peak until around 2011. The U.S. workforce will be very different tomorrow. For those already facing this issue, it may be helpful to think of cross-generational communication as an adventure to a strange and foreign land - it helps to have an appreciation of the culture and a basic understanding of the language before you go.

** V. Michelle Obradovic, Esq. is the owner of Wise Resolution, LLC. She is a mediator, an adjunct Law Professor and is the Director of the Jefferson County, Alabama Mediation Project.*

For example:

- Millennials ages 10 to 24, 1982-1996, are shaped by the Internet, instant messaging, reality TV, microwave meals, complex schedules, Columbine, 9/11 and the Gulf War. Millennials are social, prefer collective decisions, are achievement oriented, vocal and street smart. They are tenacious, future oriented and generally optimistic.
- Gen X ages 25 to 45, 1981-1961, are shaped by latchkey and blended parenting, Atari, Three Mile Island, the Iranian Hostages, Reganomics and the Challenger disaster. Gen X is self-reliant, techno-literate and concerned for global issues. They want to give and get instant feedback and don't focus on rules, but on getting the job done.
- Boomers ages 46-63, 1960-1943, are shaped by TV, Vietnam, Woodstock, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, Women's Lib, prosperity, the growth of suburbia and having their children in the spotlight. Boomers have a love/hate relationship with authority and are driven to work hard and play harder.
- The WWII group, ages 64-81, 1942-1925, are shaped by production oriented families, patriotic ideals, the Great Depression, the New Deal, the Korean War and the golden age of radio. They value honor, duty, restraint, respect for authority, and have an appreciation of history more so than valuing visioning and innovation.

Two related concepts are often at the heart of the generational conflict issue; trust and risk. Trust generally comes in two forms: competency based trust and trust in another's motives. Motives based trust is what most people think of because it is the basis of our personal relationships. It is a belief that another's intentions and values are closely aligned with one's own, and it may be the result of intuition and subjective interpretation of another's behavior. Competency based trust is confidence in another's abilities. The difficulty here is that it is hard for most of us to accurately assess the full range of a colleague's knowledge, skills and abilities because we have imperfect information. In either motives based trust or competency based trust, uncertainty is the big barrier. The more your professional reputation and income depends upon someone else's performance, the less likely it is that you will be willing to relinquish control of a critical task to them, especially if you have no clue what makes them tick or their aptitude for the task. You may have to share responsibility, but it does not necessarily mean that you trust that person to get the job done and to protect your interests.

There are several ways to manage this situation: First, incentives can be created to bring interests into alignment, such as public acknowledgment of another's responsibility for a project or putting a reward into place for successful completion. For long term relationships, unity can be created by giving equity in the business with the opportunity to increase that share should the relationship and performance develop as expected. The following systems based solutions can also help: Good hiring practices – assures that employees can manage tasks assigned to them, even if their approach is different from what another might choose. Good training practices – assures that employees will gain the skills necessary to perform in an area as the need arises. Good assessment practices – assures impartial evaluation of whether objectives have been set appropriately, and met, as well as providing a method of positive reinforcement and constructive feedback. These approaches reduce uncertainty for everyone and make both motives based trust and competency based trust easier to achieve. In such an environment, it is less likely that unproductive cross-generational conflicts will occur.