

BRIDGING — THE — GAP

Closing The Divide
Between Generations

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Early in my career as a media buyer in North Carolina, I had a “radio buy” to execute in a specific market. I detailed the client, the target demo, the flight, and my objectives, then sent it to all the radio reps for consideration. Almost immediately, packages began arriving, except from one rep. When I called, he explained that his station’s audience wasn’t a good fit and recommended competing stations instead.

At first, I was puzzled. Why forgo immediate revenue? But what he did was far more valuable in the long term. He chose trust over short-term gain, prioritizing a win-win relationship over a quick commission. That act transformed him from a vendor to a trusted partner.

The lesson here is simple. Building trust is essential, not only with clients and vendors, but also with your own team. If you can’t trust the people you work with day to day, collaboration, creativity, and performance suffer.

We’re Not Buying It

Trust isn’t universal; it’s generational. For Baby Boomers, trust is earned through loyalty; tenure is proof of reliability. Gen X doesn’t care how long you’ve been here; they care whether you deliver consistently and correctly. Millennials look for empathy, for leaders who feel human and emotionally intelligent. And Gen Z?

They demand authenticity—integrity that shows up even when profits are on the line.

The problem isn't that trust is disappearing. It's that everyone thinks they're building it, while speaking completely different languages. A Boomer leader assumes the title and tenure; a Gen Z employee waits for honesty and vulnerability. Miss that translation, and collaboration doesn't just weaken—it quietly fractures.

Permission to Speak Freely

For trust to thrive, team members must feel safe to speak up. Too often, employees stay silent, worried about the consequences of challenging authority or sharing a new idea. This “play it safe” mentality stifles innovation, reduces creativity, and fosters “yes people” rather than problem-solvers.

Psychological safety allows individuals to brainstorm, take risks, and build on one another's ideas. In multi-generational teams, it ensures that no one fears being judged as “too old,” “too inexperienced,” or “off-target.” When leadership models vulnerability, shares mistakes, and invites feedback, it signals that risk-taking and learning are not only tolerated but also valued.

Psychological safety starts at the top. Leaders must go first, showing vulnerability, adaptability, and openness. By doing so, they model behavior that encourages employees across all generations to follow suit.

Being a leader who embraces feedback and admits mistakes is not a sign of weakness; it's a demonstration of strength. It builds credibility and trust. Teams will respond with engagement, creativity, and loyalty. Leaders can foster psychological safety by admitting they don't have all the answers and actively soliciting input from the team. Share personal failures, lessons learned, and how you adapted. Ask for feedback consistently and demonstrate that it is valued and acted upon.

No Surprises

Every generation walks into work carrying a different, unspoken rulebook, and when those expectations collide, trust erodes quietly. What feels obvious to one person feels unfair to another. The fix isn't more effort; it's more clarity. Define how you will communicate. Set deadlines that don't drift. Establish feedback loops before the work begins. Most importantly, agree on what "done" actually means. One teammate may stop at completion; another may expect refinement, review, and documentation. That gap is where frustration breeds. But when expectations are explicit, the process becomes predictable. Predictability creates fairness. Fairness builds trust. And trust is what makes real collaboration possible.