

Minimizing Conflict within the Business Family

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July 2014

This is a true scenario that happened recently in an area company:

Susan, a 35-year-old Vice President and niece of the company founder, is frustrated after meeting with an older direct report, her cousin Jill. Susan has been in her position for six months and she has no problems providing – and receiving – feedback from direct reports (family or not) her own age. Jill, a 54-year-old Sales Director, appears to Susan to be extremely needy. Jill wants a weekly update meeting with her. Susan doesn't have time. Jill doesn't want to try new approaches to her tried and true sales model, nor does she accept Susan's offers to join her in sales calls. When Susan offers what she views as straightforward, constructive criticism, Jill sulks for days. Susan doesn't have time to coddle Jill, yet she doesn't want to fire her cousin.

Depending on which side of the fence you're on in your own organization in terms of age and position, you may be siding with one person or the other in this scenario. Conflicts around work ethic and work methods are abundant in today's family business enterprises.

First, I'll share what I uncovered about different responses to conflict across the generations in recent interviews with 250 people in each workplace generation. Then I'll offer an approach for giving effective feedback.

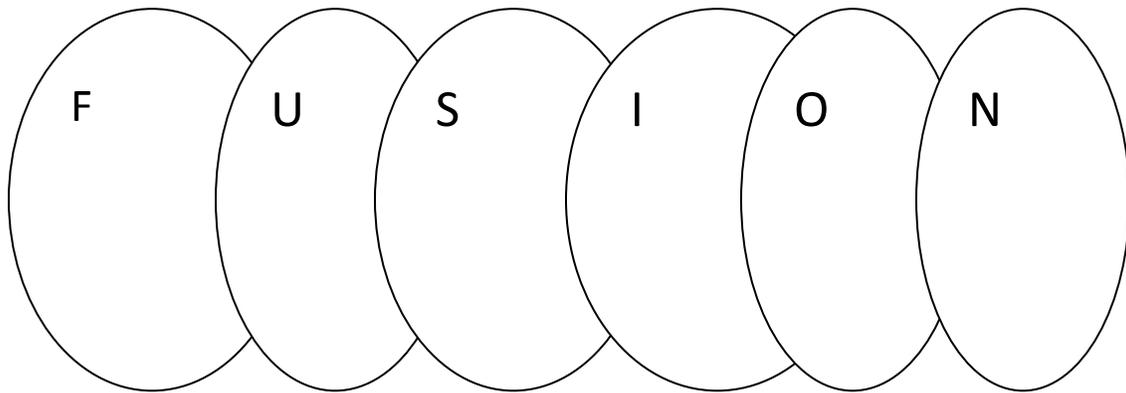
Radio Babies (born between 1930 – 1945) often avoid directly confronting their supervisors or those they perceive to be “in authority.” Ask open-ended questions such as, “What do you think?” to engage them and initiate discussions.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946 – 1964) are happiest resolving conflict through consensus building. They prefer to work through misunderstandings and disagreements in a team setting, which can diffuse individual accountability. Taking a laser-like focus on issues involving them is important, ensuring that the discussion is in a one-on-one setting.

The Gen Xers (born between 1965 – 1976) I interviewed tended to be very straightforward in expressing their point of view and had very little difficulty telling the truth as they see it when providing feedback of any type. Xers appreciate specific, straightforward conversation., although this does not always result in a productive, tension-free workplace.

Gen Yers (born between 1977 – 1991) often confessed to me an inability to cope with conflict in any form and said many of their peers are highly sensitive to any type of criticism. It's important to listen to Yers and let them share their ideas or point of view before sharing the “why” behind a specific approach or method you want them to try.

I'd like to share a model for constructive, effective feedback that will maximize productivity and minimize conflict, regardless of the age of the person for whom you're providing the feedback. This approach is called the FUSION Model© and could certainly help Susan in the scenario above:



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Throckmorton, Bridging the
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- **F**ocus on the issue at hand and key points related to that issue.
- **U**nderstand the other's perspective and point of view.
- Be **S**pecific about what you think or want.
- Use "**I**" language and own your feelings and beliefs.
- Ask **O**pen-ended questions to encourage two way dialogue
- **N**o "hot button" language such as "you kids have no work ethic".

The bottom line is that there is no "magic bullet" when it comes to dealing with conflict in the workplace. Responses to conflict will vary based on numerous factors, including one's age, and careful thought should go into handling each situation on an individual basis.