

The New York Times

CAREER COUCH

When the Manager Is Half Your Age

By MATT VILLANO

Published: November 26, 2006

Q. *Your new boss is young enough to be your daughter, and the age difference makes you uncomfortable. How can you overcome these feelings and get on with work?*



Illustration by Chris Reed

A. By putting the business first. David Sirota, chairman emeritus of Sirota Survey Intelligence, a consulting firm in Purchase, N.Y., said the new boss was likely hired on the basis of talent, which means that her age is immaterial.

“Good management is good management,” Mr. Sirota said. “Although there may be resentment at first when a young person is appointed to lead older workers, what matters most is the competence of that manager.”

Q. *Is it common for employees to work for a younger boss?*

A. Increasingly, it is.

“Across the board, the work force is getting younger,” said Steven A. Miranda, chief strategic planning and diversity officer for the Society for Human Resource Management, an industry organization in Alexandria, Va. “If you don’t have a younger boss today, you very well might have one tomorrow, next month or next year.”

Q. *Why do some employees have trouble reporting to younger bosses?*

A. Ego, for one. Bernadette Kenny, senior vice president of Adecco, a Human Resources outsourcing company in Melville, N.Y., says that many older employees feel that because they have been around longer, they have earned the right to be in charge.

“Many older employees have a sense of entitlement because they feel they’ve paid their dues,” she said.

Other problems pertain to perception. Cam Marston, president of Marston Communications, a consulting firm in Charlotte, N.C., says younger managers who prefer e-mail and instant messages may seem stand-offish to older employees who have spent their careers communicating in person. Even if a young manager stays late or works at night from home, Mr. Marston added, older employees may interpret the boss’s two-hour lunches and midday gym workouts as evidence of a poor work ethic.

“Older generations might think that in order to be successful, they need to put in 60-hour weeks, but younger people say, ‘I define success differently,’ and usually do what they want,” Mr. Marston said. “Sometimes, especially when the younger folks are in charge, this latter approach gets the older people pretty upset.”

Q. *What’s the best way for older employees to address their discomfort?*

A. Discuss it, but be respectful. Most new managers meet with employees to discuss expectations and goals. Dr. Jerald M. Jellison, professor of psychology at the [University of Southern California](#), said employees should approach this meeting with a positive attitude. They should avoid phrases like “youngster” or “old-timer” in addressing the situation, and shouldn’t bring up how things were done in the past, unless the boss asks.

“Approach the situation the same way you would with any new boss,” said Dr. Jellison, author of “Managing the Dynamics of Change: The Fastest Path to Creating an Engaged and Productive Workforce” (McGraw-Hill,

2006). “Remember that it’s your job to adapt to the boss, not the other way around.”

Q. *Do younger bosses struggle with age differences, too?*

A. The 2004 film “In Good Company” focused on a young manager’s difficulty in supervising his girlfriend’s father. While this plot was fictitious, in some respects it wasn’t far-fetched. Terry Bacon, president of Lore International Institute, a consulting company in Durango, Colo., says younger bosses who supervise older employees deal with similar struggles all the time.

Mr. Bacon, author of “What People Want: A Manager’s Guide to Building Relationships That Work” (Davies-Black, 2006), says the situation creates a “generational warp” because the roles of parent and child are reversed.

“The parent becomes the child and the child becomes the parent,” he said. “There’s no question that it’s weird for both of them.”

Kenneth Kramm, chief executive of FlavoRx, a company in Bethesda, Md., that makes flavors for medicines, said he found himself in this situation after founding the business at the age of 34. He said he clashed with a 50-something employee about the strategy they should use for an important presentation.

“I feel that respect for your elders is a very important ideal, so there was a lot of inner conflict,” said Mr. Kramm, who is now 45. Ultimately, he said, he persuaded the employee to accept his approach.

“I didn’t want to demoralize him, but told him that for the good of the company he had to change,” Mr. Kramm said.

Q. *How can employers address age issues before they fester?*

A. One way is to raise awareness about things that make each age group unique. At companies like General Motors, Best Buy and Philip Morris, this process revolves around “reverse mentoring” — through which younger employees coach older ones on technological innovations.

Other companies incorporate age sensitivity into more comprehensive diversity training. Dena Wilson, talent manager at Aflac, the insurer in Columbus, Ga., said her organization offers a training segment on generational differences in its “Diversity Day” events, which also include workshops on racism, sexism and religious tolerance.

“It’s all about broadening perspective,” she said. “Younger, older, whatever – differences will always play a role in the workplace, and understanding them makes overcoming them that much easier.”