Aging Workforce, Closing the Communication Gap

By Carl Potter, CSP

Closing the communication gap between generations is a step toward a safer future workplace. Each generation has worried about the future based on the current generation of 20-30 year olds. Hopefully we can improve the future safety of worksites by improving communications among all generations of workers. Have you ever noticed that the younger workforce of 20’s and 30’s just does not seem to listen?

They are listening, but in much different ways than those in their 40’s, 50’s and 60’s. In many cases the 20- and 30-somethings are challenging what is being said to see what is correct and incorrect based on the behavior of who is doing the talking. For them actions speak louder than words. They are also living in a world of a lot of answers without really understanding the question. If you want to know something, “Google it.” So for any group of 20-30 year olds they want to see if what is being said is believable. Sometimes what is said may not match the behavior. Sometimes it takes decades to change the beliefs and behaviors of a generation.

Even the Bible tells how God confused the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness. They wandered around lost until the offending generation was gone, then they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. For each generation there is a testing time of beliefs and values. This testing time tends to mold the generation’s actions based on what the previous generation told them, what they observed, and the history of the previous generation. Hence we have the old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.”

The behavior of every generation of 40-50 year olds was established in their 20s and 30s. Today’s 20 and 30 year olds are being shaped by a world that has experienced technology that could never be imagined by previous generations of 20 and 30 year olds. Not only the internet, but the ability to instantly communicate to another person around the globe has changed everyone’s ability to process information. For past generations in their 20s and 30s changing technology was approached with caution and the acceptance curve was long. Today’s 20 and 30 year olds are creating their world in open architecture where they can instantly test their ideas and innovations to see if anyone is interested. If no one responds instantly, the 20’s and 30’s move on to another technology. They are moving on while the rest seem to be stuck on a learning curve at times.

In my research on this subject I found 7-tips that might help to close the communication gap and improve safety in the workplace:

1. Understand the Audience
   When communicating be sure you understand your audience. In the case of our current 20-30 something people, they are driven by family. According to research I have reviewed this may be due to the fact that family was important to generations beyond the most resent one. They have seen their parents place a high value on working and getting “stuff” while their grandparents placed a higher value on family. For this reason they place more value in spending time with friends and family than they do in having a house, two cars, and a boat in the garage. Sometimes their means of ‘spending time’ is via technology such as the internet, texting, Facebook, etc.

   For this reason we may interpret their lack of commitment to their work as lazy and being self-absorbed. But if we change the way we view them and approach them as family and friend we may find someone who listens to our counsel. To be listened to, we need to do more listening.
2. Listen to the conversation
Listen to the conversations and you will find a generation who is not impressed by bravado as much as by action. Many of the 20-30s I interact with will send me notes about YouTube videos or “cool” sites that I can join to find information about mutual interests such as flying and Jeeps. They are not interested in sites about how to make more money; they are interested in how to spend more of their free time with me. Everyone and every generation has developed their own normal behavior and they can be challenged without causing a fight.

3. Challenge the norms
Challenging someone’s behavior is simply challenging the norms. When we see a 20-30 year old texting during work times it tends to go against the norms of people in their 50’s and older. Our norms came from a generation where work time was so specific we punched a time clock and could not leave the workplace 30 seconds early without written permission. We couldn't make a call or communicate with family while we worked because we had to find either a phone with outside lines or a payphone. Most of the norms that really bug us about the 20-30 generation is driven by technology. The only way to deal with it is to embrace it.

4. Embrace technology
Stop saying, “I’m too old to learn new technology” - that’s’ wrong and you know it. The only reason we say things like that is because it challenges our norms (sound familiar?). Embrace technology and don’t be afraid to say to a 20-30 year old person, “Wow, that’s interesting! Can you show me how that works?” You will be surprised how much the technology is just an improvement of what you have done in the past.

5. Be interested and become interesting
My son who manages information for a large petroleum company has shared a lot with me about database work that he is doing. At the same time I was able to tell him about the vast rows of filing cabinets where I had to go to find information to plan a job in years past. Suddenly I am interesting because I was interested. When we take time to talk to each other with mutual respect and admiration for our different knowledge and experience we find our uniqueness. Then we can truly work together and find ways to participate in creating a safer and more enjoyable workplace.

6. Create real opportunities to increase participation
Participation is key to building bridges of understanding and success in the workplace. People in their 20-30s are not robots, slaves, or lazy but they are different for many reasons. Finding ways to allow them to participate as leaders gives them a chance to exercise responsibility. Tailboard discussions should not be the only time they are asked to participate in the work. When planning a job ask their opinion and don’t knock their thoughts. You may find that they have some interesting viewpoints that can make the job go smoother, but the more critical part is that they have been asked for their vision of how things should be done. Keep in mind that the future belongs to them so we need to take the long view.

7. Think 10 years ahead
Thinking ahead ten years gives us a better way of communicating with 20-30s. The future is always uncertain to everyone, but sometimes it scares us to think about what might be coming. As a leader in your industry it is important to think ahead just like it is important to look as far down the road as possible when driving a vehicle. Looking in the future helps us to make decisions based on what we think will create a safe and successful workplace. The next ten years will bring challenges because of change in technology and values of the next generation of worker.

*When one bases his life on principle, 99 percent of his decisions are already made.* ~ Unknown
When people who are now in their 20-30s are 40-50 they will be asking, “How do I communicate with these 20-30 year olds?” and if they base their life on key communication principles they will already know how. The generation of people ahead of our generation was no different. They looked at us and shook their heads wondering what we were thinking.

Our future is uncertain, but what you do to improve your ability to communicate and help the current 20-30 year olds to improve their communications will lead us into a better future where everyone will take responsibility for safety, so that everyone can go home every day without injury.

About the Author

Carl Potter works with organizations that want to put safety first in the minds of their employees, so that everyone can go home every day without injuries.

Carl knows safety! After working in the electric utility industry for over 17 years, he started Potter and Associates International in 1993. Through his presentations and consulting, he now spends his time bringing his frontline, hands-on experience of personal responsibility and safety to companies all over the country.

Carl is a certified safety professional, certified management consultant, and certified speaking professional. He is the author several books the challenge the reader to take responsibility for their own safety. In addition, thousands of safety professionals around the world depend on Carl's weekly safety blog at: www.safetytopics.com to guide them in targeting a zero injury safety culture.

As a pilot who flies his own plane, he brings different perspectives to workplace safety. He is involved in a number of humanitarian efforts that involve safety and aviation including Angel Flight of Oklahoma, Mission Aviation Fellowship, and the US Coast Guard Auxiliary – a division of the US Homeland Security.

His unique background and frontline experience have made Carl Potter the go-to person when it comes to creating a safe work environment.

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