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# How to Train Young Managers to Supervise Older Employees

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Perhaps no one knows better than HR professionals that the workplace is aging, and teaching younger managers how to work effectively with older employees who report to them is becoming a critical workplace exercise.

There are several drivers of this phenomenon. The pandemic that ripped many older workers from the workplace is easing—and with it, older workers are starting to return. At the same time, inflation and an impending recession have nudged many retired workers who are in need of extra income back into the workforce. In many cases, their managers are one or more decades younger than them.

In fact, 4 in 10 employees say they have worked for a younger boss, according to a Harris Interactive survey conducted for CareerBuilder. Even more compelling: The fastest growing workplace demographic is employees age 65 and older, which leaves HR professionals with no option but to properly train these younger managers on how to uplift the older workers they supervise.

To help with that effort, here are 10 tips for younger managers who work with older employees:

**1. Avoid asking ages.** It's critical that HR trains managers on the importance of avoiding age discrimination. Employees age 50 and older make up more than one-third of the workforce, and 78 percent of those workers say they have faced some form of age discrimination, [according to a 2021 AARP report](#).

"Age discrimination is nuanced and insidious, and most people don't even realize they are doing it," said Ashley Stahl, speaker, career coach and author of *You Turn: Get Unstuck, Discover Your Direction, Design Your Dream Career* (BenBella Books, 2021).

Most managers don't realize that it's inappropriate—and in some cases illegal—to ask an older worker's age. "So, it can be a smart thing to remind managers not to ask it," Stahl said.

**2. Learn how they like to communicate.** Many workplaces use online platforms like Slack or Flock to communicate with employees. But for some older workers who might not be nimble with their smartphones, requiring the use of those tools may lead to miscommunication, Stahl said. She suggested asking older workers how they prefer to communicate. Or, if the company widely uses those platforms for communication, provide training and support.

At Stahl's publishing company, which employs several older workers, training videos are available for necessary communication platforms. The team also has a designated point of contact to answer any technology questions, including those from older workers.

**3. Find commonality.** The best way for younger managers to foster communication with older workers is by finding things they have in common, said Tracey C. Jones, a career coach and author of eight books, including *A Message to Millennials: What Your Parents Didn't Tell You and Your Employer Needs You to Know* (Tremendous Leadership, 2017).

"There can be no communication without identification," said Jones, president of Tremendous Leadership in Boiling Springs, Pa., a leadership training firm.

To begin learning about the older workers who report to them, younger managers can do online research via LinkedIn or other social media sites to discover what they might have in common with each other, she said. However, they should be respectful with that information and make sure employees are OK with their past accomplishments being reviewed via social media.

**4. Seek feedback.** Older employees in particular want and deserve respect. Many have worked for their company for years and are a treasure trove of information, Jones said. When you pick their brains, in most cases, they will be thrilled that you are coming to them for their input, particularly if you actually use it, she said. Among the best questions to ask: "What is the greatest opportunity for growth at this company?" and "What is the company's greatest weakness?"

**5. Offer career growth.** About 3 out of 5 Baby Boomers say they want to learn a new skill set, according to a recent AARP survey. These Boomers typically rank among the most engaged

workers, and it is well worth the time and financial investment to train them, Stahl said, adding that younger managers should "specifically ask them what skill set they want to be leading with."

**6. Leverage their experience.** The insider knowledge of many older workers can be incredibly beneficial to younger managers, Jones said. "If you're a new manager, use the corporate knowledge of older workers before you open your mouth at any meeting—and you won't regret it," she advised.

**7. Meet them one-on-one.** It's especially helpful for younger managers to ask older workers about their individual goals and aspirations. Some will be more relationship-oriented and others will be more task-oriented, Jones said. But it's important to see who wants what. While meeting with them, an especially good question to ask is: "Who is the best leader you ever worked for, and why?"

**8. Focus on results.** Some older workers, like all workers, may have a different approach to achieving results, Stahl said. "Let them know that they have the space" to take the approach they like best, she suggested. For example, she was once creating a new online program with a content team, most of whom worked digitally. But one older worker asked to contribute with sticky notes on a wall. Stahl thought it over and approved it, asking the worker to document the wall with good photos. The older worker had some of the best ideas.

**9. Earn their trust.** The key to success with an older worker and a younger manager is to act like a manager, not necessarily like a good buddy, Jones said. "Your job is not to get them to like you, but to get them to trust you."

**10. Give grace.** Younger managers working with older employees will make mistakes, and vice versa.

"Maybe someone who is old enough to be your grandparent will view the world a bit differently from you," Jones said. But it can be hugely beneficial for a younger manager to find a good mentor among the older workers and to let older workers coach them, as well, she added.

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