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Intergenerational Connections: What Unites Us Matters More Than What Divides Us

Much has been written about generational differences. Headlines and memes often emphasize contrasts in work ethic, communication styles, values, and expectations. While these distinctions can be useful, they can also distract from a more strategic question: What human needs unite us across generations?



Hemenway & Barnes recently explored this question with the goal of identifying shared emotional priorities that can foster stronger connection across age cohorts. In collaboration with Human-ology*, a research firm utilizing a unique longitudinal data instrument, several important insights emerged.

Generational Cohorts Defined**

Boomers	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z
Ages 61-79 Born: 1946-1964	Ages 45-60 Born: 1965-1980	Ages 29-44 Born: 1981-1996	Ages 13-28 Born: 1997-2012

**While there are additional cohorts the data in this research supports the four that are highlighted.

A Shared Response to Uncertainty

Over the past several years, individuals across all generations have been navigating sustained volatility. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic disruption and inflation, political polarization, social unrest, and rapid technological transformation—including the emergence of AI—have created a backdrop of ongoing uncertainty.

In response, a clear pattern has emerged: regardless of age or life stage, people are prioritizing personal power.

Since 2019, every generation has increased its focus on what can be controlled—personal safety, agency, and wellbeing. The research identified a 63% increase in the importance placed on “having the freedom to make my own choices,” alongside a 43% increase in prioritizing safety.

This is not simply a cultural trend. It reflects an adaptive human response to complexity and unpredictability.

The Emotional Priorities That Unite Us

When stripped of generational labels, the core emotional priorities are remarkably consistent. Across cohorts, individuals express a desire for:

- Safety and security
- Being a good person
- Resilience and perseverance
- A stable and comforting home environment
- Emotional wellbeing

These shared drivers transcend age. They form a common foundation upon which more productive dialogue and stronger relationships can be built.

Boomers

The Protectors

Gen X

The Orchestrators

Millennials

The Validators

Gen Z

The Authenticators

Implications for Families, Firms, and Philanthropy

Understanding generational nuance remains important. Life stage shapes perspective, risk tolerance, and priorities. However, meaningful connection begins with recognizing shared humanity before focusing on difference.

Within families navigating wealth transfer, within firms leading multi-generational teams, and within philanthropic initiatives seeking broad engagement, this perspective matters. When we approach others through a lens of common emotional priorities—rather than assumptions about generational traits—we create space for trust, alignment, and collaboration.

A reference guide summarizing both the unifying trends and generational distinctions can be accessed [here](#).

As you engage colleagues, clients, and family members across generations, consider beginning not with how they are different—but with what they are seeking. In today's environment, that answer may be more aligned than we assume.

Ready to apply these insights?

Hemenway & Barnes is happy to support you in building strategies that honor each generation's priorities while building lasting legacies.

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Wired for Connection: Generational Reference Guide

Building Future-Forward Legacies Through Understanding

What Unites All Generations

Despite differences in age and life stage, we all share some core emotional priorities.

- #1 A safe and comforting home
- #2 Staying safe
- #3 Being a good person
- #4 Not giving up
- #5 Emotional wellbeing

Universal Human Trend

Since 2019, all generations have increased focus on **personal control** as an adaptive response to ongoing uncertainty:

- Freedom to make choices **+63%**
- Staying safe **+43%**
- Emotional wellbeing **+13%**

Generational Framework for Understanding

Generation	What They Want for Themselves	What They Want from Business
Boomers Ages 61-79 <i>The Protectors</i> How do I protect what I've built while staying true to myself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal authenticity and happiness • Health preservation and security • Freedom from daily obligations • Recognition of their legacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wisdom and risk management role • Preservation of what they built • Gradual transition, not an abrupt exit • Institutional knowledge transfer
Gen X Ages 45-60 <i>The Orchestrators</i> How do I provide security and create something lasting for my family?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial pragmatism and stability • Emotional validation and support • Work-life integration • Family-centered security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical leadership and operations • Family benefit considerations • Clear advancement pathways • Operational excellence focus
Millennials Ages 29-44 <i>The Validators</i> How do I feel valued and emotionally secure in this uncertain world?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose beyond just career success • Emotional security and belonging • Balance of stability with autonomy • Delayed milestone achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive culture and collaboration • Transparent communication • Team connection and validation • Emotional intelligence application
Gen Z Ages 13-28 <i>The Authenticators</i> How do I find meaningful work while protecting my mental health and well being?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful work aligned with values • Mental health and wellbeing • Community and chosen belonging • Authenticity without compromise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose-driven projects and roles • Innovation and digital fluency • Skill development opportunities • Mental health support systems

Critical Career Insight

Gen Z is the only generation where career fulfillment is increasing (+28% since 2020), while declining for **Gen X** (-24%) and **Millennials** (-26%). Unlike older generations retreating from career ambition, **Gen Z** sees meaningful work as essential to their identity and mental health.

Key Strategies for Building Connection

What Gets in the Way

- Assuming career motivations are the same across generations
- Overlooking the emotional needs behind financial decisions
- Using one-size-fits-all approaches to engagement

What Overcomes

- **Acknowledge** each generation's distinct emotional priorities
- **Validate** their concerns while finding common ground
- **Adapt** communication and engagement styles accordingly

What Endures

- Safety, moral grounding, resilience, and peace of mind
- The desire to build something lasting for family
- The fundamental need for respect and understanding



The Bottom Line for Connection

Each generation has developed different emotional strategies for navigating uncertainty.

Success comes from **honoring these differences** while **leveraging shared values** to create sustainable family dynamics and business structures that meet everyone's core emotional needs.

Ready to apply these insights?

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