

What Partners Really Want to Say to Young Professionals

By Melinda Guillemette

After a few years of listening to partners in CPA firms discuss the challenges of managing our newest generation of workers, I find that what you partners say privately is much more revealing than what you usually say in front of your teams. There are so many things you might like to say to the young 'uns, but the paucity of professionals (young and not-so-young) seems to having you doing a long dance on thin ice. Publicly, you tiptoe oh-so-carefully around those budding (if arrogant and entitled) young professional spirits, but you privately gnash your teeth and pull your hair.

The following message is one you might consider sending to those intelligent, irritating, fascinating Millennial members of your team.

Memo

To: Professionals Between 21 and 30-ish

From: Beleaguered Baby Boomer Managers and Partners

Subject: Don't Scare the Old People

You young CPAs are finding opportunities as never before. Your salaries are high, work is flowing in, and we old people who run your firm are desperately trying to figure out how to make you happy. If we don't, there's another firm just down the block that's aching to hire you. Life's pretty good for you, right?

If you want to keep life running smoothly, and if you want to be successful over the long haul, you might want to look at your career as a constant relationship-building effort. Relationships with people from every generation will sustain you and help you succeed professionally. You will need them all your life.

You already know that miscommunication and misunderstanding abound among the four generations in the workplace. If you're smart, you may even be trying to figure out how best to deal with us old-school types who lead this firm. As a Baby Boomer myself, I thought you might want to know a few things about my generation.

You see, whether we're your partners, co-workers or clients, those of us who are older than you may not look like it, but we scare easily.

- We're scared of your tattoos, your iPods and your technological savvy.
- We're afraid you're better couples, parents and friends than we are because you're putting more time into it than we have done.
- We're afraid we're not ever going to feel as good about ourselves as you do (and we should know how good you feel because we raised you).
- We're scared to death that none of you will want our firms when we're ready to retire.
- And speaking of retirement, we're afraid of that, too. We

don't know how to retire well, because we've never done much else other than work.

Understanding that we have these fears (and trust me, there are countless others; we're a fairly neurotic group) may help you to understand us. This isn't an act of kindness toward old people. It's an excellent strategy for your success. Remember, as your employers, we still control your financial well-being to a great extent, and we're still working in just about every firm you could go to. Clearly, it is counter-productive to scare us.

Following are a few easy tactics for building better relationships with the less cool, but more experienced, people in this office. If you do these things, you're on your way to being a whole lot less scary and a lot more successful over the long haul.

Chill a little. Remember that our firm ran pretty well, at least from the owners' perspectives, before you arrived on the scene. You're dealing with people who have been successful on many levels by doing what we have done in the past. We fully realize that what got us here won't necessarily take us to the next level, but we need time to ease into change. Do not for a moment doubt that the senior people in this firm have heard your ideas, your challenges and your complaints. It just takes longer to respond to them than you would like. Consider the possibility that there's more going on in the firm than your particular issue and

that the partners really are trying to do better. Give it a little more time than makes you comfortable, and you might find the geezers have made some progress.

Remember that you're special, but other people are on the planet, too. Your workday isn't just about you. It's about the rest of us, too: your co-workers, your partners and your clients. We constitute your professional marketplace, and you need to be responsive to us. Our firm is working hard to allow flexible work hours, because you said it was important to you. But it works both ways. In thinking long-term, it's a good idea to know when the partners, clients and other team members will want your services. You need to be available in those periods of time. Flex-time is useful when you want to reconcile a bank statement at 2:00 a.m. It's not so useful when one of our partners is searching for help on an interesting project, when a client is calling you at 8:00 a.m. or when someone on your team needs help and you're still getting your beauty sleep. Successful people everywhere respond to the needs of key people (clients, co-workers, partners), and their needs are not always built into your flex-time schedule.

Dress for your profession, not your personal preference. Perhaps it is contrary to your fashion sense to iron, to tuck in your shirt or to wear tailored pants. But it's worth the effort if you consider that you are trying to build relationships with people (clients, partners, colleagues) who are often older and stodgier than you.

Many people will not give their hard-earned money—or

a promotion—to a CPA who greets them in worn-out jeans or a skimpy tank top. When we oldsters see you in very casual attire, we often conclude that you don't care about your own appearance, so you probably don't care about me or my problems, either.

You don't have to buy Armani suits, but you may need to take a look in the mirror before you go to work. Kiplinger, a bastion of business and financial advice, says on www.kiplinger.com that “flip flops, short skirts and exposed undergarments, cleavage and midriff are off limits—even in a casual workplace.”

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Yes, you're still intelligent and capable in your Saturday barbecue wear. But it makes us partners and some clients uncomfortable, and discomfort between people gets in the way of a strong relationship. If you make partners and clients too uncomfortable or embarrassed (which is what happens when we see body parts and other oddities we shouldn't see on you), we're likely to take our business or our great opportunity elsewhere.

When the day comes that you run a firm, you can set the standard wherever you like or think is prudent. In the meantime, all studies show that the trend is moving back to more conservative professional dress. Take a few extra minutes in the morning and you might be surprised at how much better people respond to you.

Remember what your mama taught you about manners. The world is more competitive every day, so it's hard to set yourself apart. Etiquette and civility will make you stand out, both here and in your personal life.

All studies show that you belong to an ambitious generation that wants to be successful from your first day on the job. One of the ways to do that is to be your best self when you come to work. Civility helps you to be your best.

Good manners are not mystical. They simply involve thinking about others before you think about yourself. Here are a few easy things that will not rob you of your uniqueness, but will put you head and shoulders above the rude, the ill-mannered and the scary:

- a. Look up from your keyboard when someone comes into your cubicle.
- b. Ditto for cell phones: quit staring at them when you're cruising down the hallway. Look up at the people around you and acknowledge them.
- c. Take out your iPod headphones when talking to someone.
- d. Greet people by name when you see them, and make eye contact.
- e. Don't take calls or respond to e-mails when you are talking with someone in person.

- f. Text *after* the meeting, not during.
- g. Put your cell on vibrate and keep personal conversations to a minimum when you are in a public area (*i.e.*, anywhere without a door).

Spell Check is your friend.

Communicate more formally in writing than you would verbally when you are dealing with partners or clients. Be clear and concise in your style. Avoid exclamation points, bad grammar and slang ("let me know whatcha think!" in an e-mail to the managing partner is not going to help you). You're smart, educated people. Make sure your writing reflects your intelligence rather than calling it into question.

Give yourself and everyone around you some time. Those of you who are 30-ish and younger are changing the workplace in ways we oldsters would not have thought possible. Many of those changes are for the better, and Boomers know that's true. But understand that it doesn't really make us any less afraid—at least not yet. We still might continue to behave in ways that baffle you because we have so many years of habit to break. So bear with us. We're worth the effort because the stuff we know about this profession came to us through experience, and that's something you don't have yet. We will share it if you give us the time and room to do so.

There is little doubt that you young CPAs will keep pushing the envelope to create a more balanced and happy working life for everyone. As you do this very important work, remember to carry it out with kindness, with strategic thought and with your own long-term interests in mind. ✦

About the author: Melinda Guillemette is an empathetic Baby Boomer who consults with CPA firms on recruiting, retention, and marketing. She is the creator of *Firing on All Cylinders: How to Energize Your Firm*, a video and audio set available at www.melindamarkets.com.

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