Q & A with Haydn Shaw
Author of Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart

What are generational sticking points?

Sticking points result from questions that the generations answer differently because of their unique experiences and perspectives. For example, are flip-flops acceptable in the office? Can I work from home? Why can’t we use Facebook at work? How long do I have to work here before I earn respect? The different answers the generations give to these questions create tensions and frustrations that lead to miscommunications and ultimately stereotypes. Team members of the same generation begin tossing around stereotypes, making jokes to each other about the “offending” generation. Each generation attempts to maneuver the others into seeing the sticking point their own way.

That’s the first mistake—viewing a sticking point as a problem to be solved rather than as an opportunity to be leveraged. The goal becomes to “fix” the offending generation rather than to look for ways to work with them. The irony is that when we say another generation doesn’t get it, we don’t get it either. Once we get it, we realize that these sticking points are more than intergenerational differences. They are catalysts for deeper understanding and appreciation that can make teams stronger and better balanced. Sticking points can be negative if you see them as problems or positive if you see them as opportunities for greater understanding and flexibility. Sticking points can make things worse or better, depending on whether the four generations can work together in the 12 places they naturally tend to come apart.

Why did you write Sticking Points?

When I speak and consult on generations, people frequently ask me to recommend a book to help them handle generational differences in their workplaces. They say they don’t have time to read three or four books. They want something that’s up-to-date and covers all four generations—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and especially Millennials—and is an easy-to-read book that both managers and associates of all generations will like. They want practical ideas they can put to work, not just research or theories that don’t translate into concrete results. When I told them there are great books out there on generations but I didn’t know of any one book that would do all that, they told me I’d better start writing.

In this book, I wanted to provide a practical resource for those people who approach me—a guide to all four generations, following a methodology that has helped thousands of people deal with the 12 issues most likely to pull teams apart.

Who did you write Sticking Points for?

This book is specifically written for the workplace context, but it has much broader applications. Generational differences don’t just show up in the conference room. They surface in the home, on the school or nonprofit board, and at religious organizations. Wherever people get together, each generation brings with it their specific mind-set shaped by their unique experiences, which affects the ways they interact. When we understand why another generation thinks the way they do, we are much more likely to appreciate their differences and speak their language. We are more likely to stick together. In the first chapter of my book I describe how generational sticking points are impacting hospitals and medicine, government, political campaigns, the military, religious organizations, schools, not-for-profits/foundations, and associations. Because people frequently tell me how much understanding those sticking points helps them even at home, I put in quite a bit for families as well.
What do you cover in the book?

The book has two main parts. In part one, I explain the key “ghost stories,” the historical influences that shaped each generation. In part two, I explore the 12 sticking points, how each generation understands each point and then provide a five-step process to help organizations lead through the generational differences. Throughout the book I also explore such topics as:

- why generational sticking points is the people issue of the next decade
- why four generations in the workplace and five generations of customers (or citizens or family members) for the first time in human history has created new challenges and made the old approaches ineffective;
- why managing generational differences no longer works and leading is the only approach that’s effective now that we have four generations.

How will generational sticking points increasingly impact organizations?

Generational sticking points will affect organizations in six ways.

1. There will be more conflicts around generational sticking points.
2. Leadership must figure out how to manage and motivate different generations.
3. Organizations will face shortages of leaders and managers because Generation X is a smaller generation and Xers do not tend to stay in one company throughout their careers.
4. Now, organizations must replace the Baby Boomers now that they are finally starting their recession delayed retirements.
5. All organizations must stay ahead of shifting consumer, voter, member, parishioner, or patient demands.
6. Sales people must connect with five generations of customers or miss half their market.

You say myths about the generations do unseen damage to teams or families. What do you think are the biggest generational myths?

- Millennials think they know it all and that they ought to be running the place.
- Baby Boomers and Traditionalists are resistant to change.
- People over 65 aren’t as productive.
- Millennials are motivated by meaning more than money.
- Gen Xers care more about work-life balance than getting ahead.
- Millennials have stunted social skills because they’ve always been on their computer or their phones.
- Baby Boomers are going to retire.

In what ways does Sticking Points apply to families?

Sticking points in families are a huge reason I wrote the book. In my speeches and workshops, people talk as much about their families as they do their teams. The insights they gain into why the generations think differently helps them appreciate the different generations in their own families and get along with them more easily. So while the book focuses on the workplace, I’ve added scores of illustrations and applications for families. I think Jim Thyen, president and CEO of Kimball International, a billion-dollar company, explains it perfectly in his endorsement: “Sticking Points contains insights and processes that do indeed work. We’ve had Haydn back many times to teach our managers the tools he has put into this book. I found it so valuable and enjoyable that I invited my wife to come hear his presentation. You’ll come back to this book again and again when you run into a new generational challenge. But more important, it will improve your ability to speak the language of other generations at work and in your personal life.”
Please share some examples of how organizations have used this content?

- Cactus Feeders, the largest independently owned cattle feeding company in the world, stopped trying to turn Millennials into Traditionalists when they understood why they think differently. They recognized that things are changed and a feedlot was no longer the job Millennials would brag about with their friends. Instead, their leaders sped up a cultural change process that unexpectedly engaged all generations, not only their Millennials.

- Payless ShoeSource brought the content to all of their managers and saw turnover of Millennials decrease in sales in the stores that embraced the tools.

- An energy research office of the United States federal government retained more Millennial scientists and engineers after teaching all their managers about how to lead through generational sticking points.

- A major pharmaceutical company saw sales efficiency go up after they asked their Millennial sales reps for ideas on what needed to change. The literature box in the back of the trunk is gone, and everyone is on iPads.

- A major energy company in Canada found it easier to attract new petroleum engineers after they adjusted their campus recruiting approach.

Some people object that the differences between the generations are being overblown because every generation acts similarly at each stage in life. Are you making generational differences seem larger than they actually are?

Pew Research Center discovered that 79 percent of the public sees a generation gap, defined as “major differences... in the point of view of younger and older adults.” That’s 5 percentage points higher than when Gallup asked the question in 1969! But ultimately, we don’t need researchers to tell us that a 75-year-old votes, works, or buys differently from a 35-year-old. We see it for ourselves at family reunions or meetings at work. The significant gap between Traditionalists and Millennials has shone prominently in the last two US presidential elections—Traditionalists have voted overwhelmingly Republican and Millennials Democratic.

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