

107,866 views | Feb 12, 2013, 12:56pm

4 Mistakes Not To Make When Managing Older Employees



The Muse Contributor ①

My first couple management gigs were very similar—both were at [small businesses in college towns](#), where the majority of my employees were undergrads who only worked part-time. I was just a couple years out of college, too, and the fact that I was so close in age to my workforce made it easy to relate to them and get to know them personally and professionally.



Then, while I was still in my early 20s, I moved into a management position at a much larger software company. And my first day on the job, I noticed what was bound to be quite a challenge: My direct reports were, on average, 10 to 15 years older than me.

Immediately, I formed some judgments about these workers and how our relationships would be, which all turned out to be pretty off the mark. I learned (very quickly) that when you make assumptions, you make—well, you know the rest.

If you're a new manager, don't follow in my footsteps. Throw these four myths out the window, and you'll be a much more successful coach and authority figure from the get-go.

Myth #1: You Just Can't Relate

When I managed college kids, I knew exactly what their lives were like—they worked a couple hours between classes, took a few days off before finals to [cram in a semester's worth of studying](#), and really just wanted to earn some extra cash. Since I'd been in the same position just a few years before, it was easy for me to relate to them on a daily basis.

So when I started managing employees who were a decade older than me, I didn't think I'd be able to relate to their lives. They had spouses, children, and even grandchildren—and I wasn't at that stage of life yet. So I held back, and figured that the less I got to know my employees, the less they'd notice the disparity in our personal experiences.

MORE FROM FORBES

Looking back, this was an extremely naïve way to approach the situation. Even if you're not in the exact same position in life as your reports, you can still take an interest in their lives. You may not be able to offer advice (and that's not your job anyway), but you can ask about their families, past work experience, and career aspirations. You have all those things, too, even if they look a little different.

Forging a personal connection with your subordinates will help you understand them better—what motivates them, how they learn and communicate, and what matters most to them—and that will help you become a more effective leader.

Myth #2: You're the Boss, So You Know More Than Everyone

When I accepted a management position at a software company, my technical skills didn't extend much beyond [Microsoft](#) MSFT +0.77% Word. And I certainly [didn't want my employees to notice this lack of knowledge](#), so I made decisions and formed processes on my own, without consulting them. When

projects (inevitably) didn't go the way I planned, I realized that without their input, I wasn't making smart moves.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a manager (of any age) is to refuse to learn from your team. In fact, your older employees are one of the best resources you can use to adapt to your new position. They've been with the company (not to mention in the industry) for several years—which means they're aware of what works and what doesn't, they've seen almost every possible technical problem, and they know the company's clientele better than anyone else.

So every day, I learn from them. I ask them if they've seen a particular problem before, and if so, how they solved it. I ask their opinion on new processes that I'm thinking of implementing, or how they would suggest making the department more efficient.

Most of the time, they have great ideas that they're more than willing to share. They want to be part of the decision-making process, and they're eager to spread their knowledge. Their lengthy duration at the company is usually a sign that they're invested in it and want to see it succeed.

Myth #3: They Don't Need Training (or They Need More Training Than Anyone Else)

This assumption is two-fold: When I first started [managing my older team](#), I assumed that since many of them had been working at the company for more than 10 years, they knew all there is to know about the software and the company's internal systems.

However, it would have been equally easy for me to assume that my older employees weren't as tech-savvy as their younger co-workers, and would need exponentially more training in order to pick up on the intricacies of the programs.

And, wouldn't you know it? I was wrong on both accounts.

No matter his or her age, every person learns differently. So at the end of the day, forget what you've heard and get to know your employees individually. I found it

most helpful to sit with each of my techs separately to watch their workflow. I quickly saw what each person struggled with, and in what areas he or she could use extra training.

This can also provide the perfect opportunity for team cross-training—the employees who are strong in one area can teach employees who are struggling with that skill, and vice versa. With this approach, everyone will get the chance to be the trainer and trainee—and [that will create a culture of teamwork](#).

Myth #4: They Don't Respect You Because of Your Age

When I noticed the age difference between my colleagues and me, I immediately thought, “There’s no way they’re going to respect a young girl who’s fresh out of college.” And what’s worse: I let these thoughts infiltrate my management style—I [avoided confrontation](#) with the older employees, figuring that they wouldn’t be receptive to my coaching or feedback because I was so young.

And that was my biggest—and most costly—mistake. I didn’t hold my employees accountable, and let their poor performance slide. Since I wasn’t actually managing my employees, I wasn’t doing my job as a boss: helping them succeed.

So who knows? Maybe my employees did consider my age at some point. But the real issue here is that you earn respect by doing your job, and doing it well. As a manager, if you effectively coach your team, help them understand and work through mistakes, [provide the training they need](#), and recognize their successes, you’ll gain their respect—no matter your (or their) age.

[4 Mistakes Not To Make When Managing Older Employees](#) was originally published on [The Muse](#). For more management advice, check out:

- [What Your Employees Won't Tell You \(But Wish You Knew\)](#)
- [The Control Freak's Guide to Delegating](#)
- [Confronting an Employee? 3 Communication Mistakes Managers Make](#)

Photo of [managing older employees](#) courtesy of Shutterstock.

We are your ultimate career destination, offering exciting job opportunities, expert advice, and a peek behind the scenes into fantastic companies and career paths. We believe that you can and should love your job—and be successful at it—and we want to help make that happen.... MORE