Questions and Answers

*Sticking Points: How to Get Four Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart* by Haydn Shaw

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.

Why do you say generational sticking points are the people issue of the next decade that
organizations will face?

For the next decade, generational differences will be organizations’ biggest people issue for the next
decade because they will force every type to make significant adjustments to succeed. Barack Obama was
lifted to the White House both times by Millennials. Associations struggle to attract Generation Xers and
Millennials. Hospitals are surprised the younger doctors and nurses want to redefine the demands of the
job and older patients often don’t rate them as highly. Schools are finding teachers from younger
generations are less patient with politics and half of them leave teaching in the first five years.
Government had trouble attracting Generation Xers and faces the prospect of leadership or management
shortages as 65 percent of its employees will be eligible for retirement soon. Differences in generational
perspectives are the single biggest problem facing churches and synagogues. Families have never had
people live as long so there’s never been five generations to coordinate.

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.

What’s the bottom line to leading multiple generations effectively?

Organizations, teams, and families must know five things to lead multiple generations:

- For the first time in history, we have four different generations in the workplace (and five in families). These generations might as well be from different countries, so different are their cultural styles and preferences.
- Of the four approaches organizations can take to blending the generations, only one of them works today.
- Focusing on the “what” of generational differences pushes teams apart, while focusing on why the generations are different pulls teams together.
- Knowing the 12 sticking points can allow teams to label tension points and work through them—even anticipate and preempt them.
- Implementing the five steps to cross-generational leadership can lead to empowering, not losing, key people.

What are the 12 sticking points and can you give an example of a question that each generation answers differently in that point?

Absolutely. The 12 sticking points along with corresponding questions are:

1. Communication
   “Why won’t they put down their phone and make eye contact?”
2. Decision Making
   “How many years do I have to sit here before they’ll listen to me?”
3. Dress Code
   “What’s wrong with flip flops if I’m not meeting with clients?”
4. Feedback
   “Where will I find the time to give Millennials all the feedback they think they need?”
5. Fun at Work
   “When did work have to be fun?”
6. Knowledge Transfer
   “How do we get the know-how to the next generation when the Boomers won’t write it down?”
7. Loyalty
   “Why don’t people stay around anymore?”
8. Meetings
   “Why can’t we send an email and cut the report-outs and the icebreakers?
9. Policies
   “With four generations, how can leaders hope to come up with a policy that doesn’t make some generation mad?”
10. Respect
   “Why don’t these younger employees think they have to pay their dues before they start telling people what they think?”
11. Training
   “How do we keep four generations engaged in training?”
12. Work Ethic
   “Do they really think I’m going to put my life on hold and work late a couple times every week?”
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.

How can a team that’s experiencing generational tensions put Sticking Points to use?

Most books out the last 10 years focus on one of the generations because it’s hard to cover all four generations and keep the book a readable length. But I wrote about all four generations (with extra attention to Millennials since they are new) so a whole team could read it together and then put it to work. The book gives a recipe for better working relationships. All the team leader has to do is hand out the book, and start following the five-step process with the sticking points their team is facing. The teams can use my explanations of how the generations see each sticking point differently to start their own conversation so they learn how each person sees it. And that’s the most important thing: to get team members talking about how they see a sticking point so they can leverage their differences into better ways of working together.

What is the five-step process?

1. Acknowledge: Talk about generational differences.
3. Flex: Agree on how to accommodate different approaches.
4. Leverage: Maximize the strengths of each generation.
5. Resolve: Determine which option will yield the best results (when flexing isn’t enough).

It’s easy to see how a manager could use the five-step process for leading through generational differences with their team. Can team members use them?

I didn’t write this book only for leaders and managers. After speaking to and teaching thousands of people, I’ve seen the influence a team member can make. So if you don’t think you can lead because you’re not a born leader or you don’t have a management position in your organization, you miss a great opportunity to make a significant impact. Whoever you are, whatever your role, you can help your colleagues work through generational differences by using the five steps. Of course if you’re not the manager it will be strange if you hand out copies of the book at your next staff meeting and then insist that the team start addressing their generational sticking points. But you can use the book to learn how to speak the language of the other generations as well as to separate the facts from the generational urban legends floating around your workplace. The book will help team members quit stereotyping and start
looking for better ways of working together. A manager can introduce the five-step process in a meeting, but a team member can use the five-step process in informal conversations to make a huge impact.

**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.”

**You say that many of the things people criticize about the Millennial generation are a product of a new life stage called Emerging Adulthood. What is Emerging Adulthood and why do you say that?**

Most of the workplace complaints I hear about Millennials’ lack of commitment, loyalty, and work ethic can be tied to the dynamics of emerging adulthood, a new life stage that sociologists have identified from ages 18 to 28, because it comes after adolescence and before early adulthood. As a result, some Millennials take longer to figure out what they want to do than members of the older two generations did. It’s only been widely talked about for the last ten years or so, but it’s not new. It started with Baby Boomers when four years of college extended their freedoms by delaying when they entered the workforce. The older generations back then complained that the Boomers were goofing around rather than getting serious. But today it takes longer to get an education and surveys show that society doesn’t consider young people adults until their late 20s, so it’s harder to find meaningful adult roles until later in life compared to past generations.

Most of what parents and other older managers worry about usually works itself out. Most Millennials are not lazy; they’re just not sure they’ve found what they want to do, what organization they want to do it with, where they want to live, and who they want to live with. A couple days ago I was sitting with a table of Millennials in a class I was leading. They were all well respected and productive, but they articulated the freedom of the 20s this way: “I tell my friends, ‘You’re not married; you’re only 25. This is the time to hike through Europe and Asia for a year. You’ll never get this chance again because you’ll settle down and have a house and a family. Enjoy the freedom and opportunities while you have them. Do what you really want to do now; don’t put it off till later.”

Most of the worries older generations have in the workplace about Millennials and their work ethic will end up dissipating just as they did for Generation X 20 years ago. With the Millennials, it will just happen a bit later.
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.

What’s the most practical idea in the book?

Focus on “why” the generations see things differently, not “what” those differences are. Until the people on your team understand why other generations work differently, they will remain irritated, and the team will fall apart rather than stick together. Getting stuck complaining about what is different is the biggest cause of generational tensions. Sadly, focusing on the differences is so common that I have seen generational training programs built around the what’s. They give long lists of characteristics of each generation and techniques to manage them. Instead of beginning with understanding, they begin with differences.

Focusing on the “why” rather than the “what” works. The Baby Boomer head of diversity for a large food company told me that my speech on generations changed things for her. She discovered she didn't want to fix the Millennials now that their behavior made sense. She said, “I no longer see them as feeling entitled. They have just been marketed to so much. When you said Millennials expect a toy in the bag with every meal, it clicked for me.”

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.