BRIDGING THE GAP
YOUR EXPERIENCE MATTERS;
YOUR YOUNGER COLLEAGUE’S DOES, TOO

by Robert L. Dilenschneider

If you’re fifty-plus, younger generations think you’re old. And they’re right. They think you look tired, out of shape, and pathetically out of style. They’re dismissive of your musical tastes and contemptuous of your computer skills.

Yet the younger generation wants everything that you want, including love, money, personal fulfillment, and success in their chosen fields. They just don’t want to wait for it the way you did.

Your job, if you want to get along with them, is to help them get what they want—not to prove how misguided they are. The first step is to understand something about them.

Mission impossible? Not at all. I knew a wonderful older man at an insurance company who had a supervisor almost thirty years younger than him. Some older people in that situation might feel bitter. This man took the opposite approach. He assisted the younger man every step of the way, never seeking praise for himself, always seeking to advance the other fellow. Over the years, these two forged a bond, with the older man imparting to the younger man everything he knew about business. In time the younger man, bolstered by his elder colleague’s mentoring, became the CEO.

Sooner or later, you will find yourself having a professional discussion with someone who is twenty-five or thirty years younger than you, young enough to be your child. And yet you will be talking to that person as an equal.

That person could be your customer, your client, even your supervisor. Here’s how to hit it off:

Don’t Patronize

Don’t pander. They can see through that kind of condescension, and they don’t like it.

Adapted from 50 Plus! Critical Career Decisions for the Rest of Your Life (Citadel, 2015).
Mission impossible?

Not at all.

At the same time, recognize that young people need encouragement, sometimes in ways that will strike you as childish. When dealing with them, it’s important to withhold judgment and make that investment.

Understand that by living more than half a century, you have gained a historical viewpoint. Within your field you know what has worked and what hasn’t—that some efforts sound good but fail miserably, while others are hugely effective but take time. You know that traumatic events can throw everything into chaos. And you know that, as a rule, chaos subsides and order returns. Young people don’t—can’t—know that.

In the weeks following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, young people were profoundly shaken. The New York Times addressed this, noting that the Greatest Generation remembers Hitler. Baby Boomers remember air raid drills and the Cuban Missile Crisis. But Generation X experienced none of those calamitous public traumas, and as a result, many were unprepared to deal with our latest one.

If you’re in touch with young people, part of your role is helping them understand the forces of history and come to grips with the realities of our time.

Don’t Try to Fit Into Their Milieu

I don’t mean you should avoid their milieu. On the contrary, seek it out. But pretending you belong there, hoping they’ll see you as one of them, will only earn their contempt. Better to think of yourself as a tourist in the country of the young.

Once in a while, when I’m in the city late after a television appearance, I’ll stop in at a club on the way home, have a cup of coffee, and chat with the young people milling around. I am always stunned to realize how different their perspectives are from mine. Being with them, in however casual a way, helps me feel more in touch.

Build Their Confidence

Understand that no matter how confident young people pretend to be, they are riddled with insecurities, even when they are hugely successful. You have to be able to deal with those doubts.

One way is to share your knowledge. Many times, younger people are put into supervisory positions by top managers and urged to fly on their own. Unfortunately, they don’t have the experience to do that. You have an opportunity to help. First, understand that you’re not in the running for that job, whether you want it or not. You’re not a threat. Second, recognize that you can transfer your experience to the younger person in a way that may ultimately help you. I’ve seen it happen.

That’s not a reason to extend yourself, however. You should do it because it’s the right thing to do.

Understand

You must realize that what motivates young people is not what motivates you. You may be motivated by working with a team; younger people may find it more exciting to work independently. Your goals, interests, and turn-offs are not theirs. And it’s a sad fact that the stories it has taken you a lifetime to accumulate are of little interest to them.

Stories told in a vacuum drive young people crazy. They don’t want to hear about it. But they’re hungry for ways to think about their own lives and challenges. That’s why stories you tell young people should always relate to the present. If there’s something in it for them, they’ll listen.

Recognize

Recognize that younger people want to do things fast. They seek instant gratification. You’ve learned the importance of patience and deliberation.
When I was a young man in a hurry I wanted to open new offices and hire people and offer new services. I drove my boss crazy. He repeatedly told me not to push him. I thought my ideas were good, and he would occasionally tell me to do a quality assurance study, or get a second or third opinion, or even write a paper on one of my ideas. This truly frustrated me. I wanted to see my idea bear fruit in the real world.

In retrospect, I can see what a pain in the neck I was. I can also see how he could have dealt with me more effectively—sat me down and talked about my ideas and their consequences. I believe I would have understood that their implications were more multidimensional than I realized.

Today, I meet plenty of young people who are eager to leap into the fire, and I’m the one who has to slow them down. The way to do that is to respond immediately. I generally suggest that we go downstairs, have a cup of coffee, and discuss the idea. I say, You’ve got the kernel of something important, let’s see if we can make it work. And we both learn whether there is something there or conclude that there’s nothing. If you don’t discuss it with them, you don’t get to that point of resolution.

**Listen**

Consider the possibility that, despite their inexperience, young people might have something to say. Unfortunately, listening has become a lost art. Most people don’t understand that there’s strategy and skill in simply listening to what people say. They want to do all the talking.

To get along with younger people, you have to stifle that urge. I believe it’s important for me to sit with my two sons and their friends and listen to what’s on their minds. Sounds easy. It’s not, because the minute you succumb to the urge to share your accumulated wisdom, the conversation ends.

In the workplace, the dynamics will differ but the same rules apply. Listen with an open mind. Postpone your urge to make momentous pronouncements or to lob small criticisms their way—and that includes criticisms couched as suggestions. You need to listen without judgment.

**Listen with an open mind.**

**Ask Questions**

Deep in their hearts, young people recognize that they don’t know it all. The best way to help them is to ask a series of constructive questions about who they are and what they want to do. Then let them reach their own conclusions.

Young people will benefit from this, because if you ask questions in the right way, they will be encouraged to consider various courses of action. You will benefit, too, because talking to young people about their lives can be unbelievably illuminating.

**Never Betray Their Confidences**

I work with a lot of young people, some quite prominent. I always begin by telling them that I will never betray their confidences. You and I can discuss any issue under the sun, I say. If some terrible problem is weighing you down, I’m here to help. I will work through the matter with you, and it will never become public knowledge. That declaration helps build a bond of trust.

**Keep Up**

This is an essential part of getting along with the young. You have to be tuned in to the present. One aspect is media awareness. I try to read a wide variety of periodicals, including the alternative press. I regularly check news websites and watch several TV news networks because I want to know what people are thinking across the political spectrum.

I try to be aware of what’s on the best-seller lists, what’s hot on Broadway, the significant art shows in town. I make an effort to catch the movies that receive Oscar
You have to be tuned in to the present.

nominations. I try to watch big television shows, at least once. I even keep up with popular music.

Another important way of keeping up is talking to people—lots and lots of people. I talk to strangers all the time. When I go to a Yankees game, I make a point of visiting with the security guard and of having a beer in the Legends Club at Yankee Stadium with a bunch of fans who are probably truck drivers. I ask what’s going on in their lives. That may sound intrusive, but most people seem happy to answer. I ask questions all the time of people who are outside of my usual sphere. I seldom get rebuffed.

Finally, remember that young people communicate through texting and social media. A friend of mine recently took a language class. A few weeks in, she missed out on something because her classmates communicated the news to each other via Facebook. It never entered their minds that someone might not be on Facebook.

Tap the Power of Biography

Young people want role models, though they seldom admit it. That role model might be you—but unless you are one impressive human being, it might not. Better for them to find a public figure, someone they can read about and emulate, if only in a limited fashion.

Recently I spoke to a young woman about the late Katharine Graham, publisher of the Washington Post. Kay Graham arrived at a place in life that was extraordinary for her generation, and she did it with style and conviction. The young woman wasn’t convinced. She said, “I’m not Katharine Graham.”

I said, “But you can learn from Katharine Graham.” Reluctantly, she agreed to read Personal History, Graham’s Pulitzer Prize–winning autobiography. We went through the book and picked out a dozen lessons that were helpful for her.

I also know a young man who wanted to be a heavy hitter in venture capital technology. I said, “Let’s dissect the life of Warren Buffett.” Oh, no, he said. He didn’t want to be like Buffett.

I said I know that. But Buffett conducted himself in ways that are important for you to understand. For example, Buffett chose to invest in staples, items everyone wanted to have, like Coca-Cola or razor blades. In his business life, he made it a point to give responsibility to others. Those are two lessons you can apply in your own life.

He bought all the books about Warren Buffett he could find. He didn’t try to become Buffett, but I’d say he was influenced by seven or eight ideas that Buffett used to guide his life and his business. Reading the book was a thought-provoking experience for him.

Accept the Changing of the Guard

That means being willing to help younger people succeed, even when they’re placed in positions above you—a situation that’s as awkward for them as it is for you. I know a company that recently went through a period of upheaval. In the midst of it, a group of older workers walked into a younger supervisor’s office and, to his astonishment, announced they were there to help. We have some ideas to offer, they said, but whether you accept them or not, we’re behind you. The younger person was knocked off his chair. He accepted their help; they accepted his authority; the company flourished.

Seek a Mentor

One of the best ways to connect with the younger generation is to become a mentor. Another is to allow a younger person to become a mentor to you. Either way, mentoring is a time-honored way to impart information and to connect one generation with the next.
When I graduated from Notre Dame, I didn’t know what to do. So I asked my father. He said to me, You have three choices. You can join the Army. I can help you get a job in a local department store selling shoes. Or you can go to graduate school.

That made it easy. I said I want to go to graduate school. My father then suggested I talk to a journalism professor named Walter Seifert, who handed me a stack of papers he had written and said, I don’t have a lot of time to spend with you, but take these and read them.

I read everything Seifert gave me. When I went back to see him, we developed a relationship that lasted until his death. As my first mentor, he propelled me into my career. Even as I became more seasoned in my business, I continued to ask him for advice. He made a huge impact on my life, and I’ll never forget him.

After I started working, other people also became mentors to me. One was a colleague in his late sixties. He dropped by my apartment every morning and we walked to work together, discussing sports and politics and, most of all, business. He was teaching me lessons that he thought were important. He was smart enough to know that he had to tell me these things in a low-key, offhand way that would be easy for me to accept.

Today, when a young person comes to me for guidance, I remember what I learned from my mentors, and I try to pass it on. At the same time, my days of being mentored are not over. It’s important to be mentored by people who are older, younger, and in entirely different fields. A younger mentor can give you insight into what’s hot, what’s happening, how business operates today, how young people think.

Fortunately, it’s not difficult to find a younger mentor. Here are a few ways to do it.

Look for Someone at Work

You don’t have to announce that you want that person to be a mentor. In fact, it’s best not to if the person is significantly younger than you. It sounds too intimidating. But you can certainly find someone to ask for advice or opinions.

My days of being mentored are not over.

From time to time I eat lunch with a younger man who works in my building. We’ll pick up a couple of hot dogs from a vendor and sit together on a bench. I don’t ask him how to run my business. But over the years he’s given me a lot of insight into how younger people think, and that has been very helpful.

Consider a Night Class

Take a night class and look for a young professor—or another adult student—with whom you might be able to connect.

Work with a Trainer

That might mean a career coach. But it could also mean a physical trainer, someone who can talk to you in an out-of-the-box way while you’re on the treadmill. It’s a given that not all well-muscled young people are up to the job of advising, but some of them are. I’ve been surprised recently by the number of people who have quoted their personal trainers to me. Sometimes all a mentor needs to be is a sounding board with a sensible mind and the ability to motivate, which is precisely what trainers do for a living.

Join a Group That Includes Young People

Seek out younger people. I have made it a habit to extend myself to trade groups as a speaker or program participant, partly because it’s an easy way to meet the younger people in my profession. I don’t want to become a dinosaur in my own field. Hearing their ideas, watching their responses, and talking with them helps keep me current.

And I think they enjoy sharing their thoughts with someone as obviously senior as myself.
Yes, the younger man became CEO, and when he did, he brought his mentor along as part of his team. Despite his age, my friend had a future with the company.

It’s easy, as we get older, to pull back, to stop reaching out to new people or visiting new places or contemplating new ideas. But your world should continue to expand, and one way to make sure that happens is to maintain an open dialogue with the young.

Robert L. Dilenschneider formed the Dilenschneider Group in 1991 after serving as president and CEO of Hill and Knowlton. He has counseled major corporations, professional groups, trade associations, and educational institutions, and assisted clients with regulatory agencies, labor unions, consumer groups, and more. Dilenschneider provides commentary and strategic public relations insights on major news stories for the media.

Bridging the Gap was established in 2008 and has helped thousands of business analysts take their careers to the next level. Bridging the Gap provides online training to new, aspiring, and I’ve-been-doing-this-forever-but-no-one-ever-taught-me-how business analysts. We build our profession one business analyst at a time. Success starts with you. When you join a Bridging the Gap program, and do the work, you’ll experience immediate improvements in the work you are doing NOW. Your employer will love it and you’ll get on track with your career, perhaps for the first time (or the first time in decades). Click here to download your copy of the Bridging the Gap Course Guide.

Meet Our Team. Founder and CEO, Laura Brandenburg. Bridging the gap: your experience matters; your younger colleague's does, too. June 2016. Leader to Leader. Robert L. Dilenschneider. Neither does it affect the hydrolysis of nucleotide triphosphate. Like xanthine-nucleotide-specific EF-Tu, xanthine-nucleotide-specific Ras and related proteins will be useful tools for elucidating cellular systems containing multiple regulatory GTPases. Read more. The student experience. Do you know what it’s like to be a student in today’s education system? Do you know what it’s like to be a physically or neurologically challenged student in today’s education system? Would it surprise you to learn that there is still a significant gulf between the two? During my research I met a young man named Hassim (name changed to protect privacy). Hassim is a law student at U.C Berkeley. He has Cerebral Palsy and Balint’s Syndrome. He was told that he was too high achieving, meaning too smart, to actually be disabled. Sadly, this isn’t as uncommon as we might like to think it is. MYTH: Students with disabilities are less academically capable than their able-bodied peers.