

# teaching note

## *Who's the Boss?: Millennials managing across generations in the hospitality industry*

### Summary

This case examines the challenges faced by a new hospitality restaurant manager, Gladys, also a member of the Millennial generation. Upon graduating from college two years ago, Gladys was accepted into a manager-training program for a large corporate hospitality firm. Working her way through the various departments of the hotel, Gladys was recognized early as a leader and was soon promoted into a restaurant manager position.

Gladys was immediately challenged by her former peers, uncertain as to how she should manage subordinates from her own generation. Later, as she gained more experience, Gladys was tasked with training eight additional supervisory employees prior to the busy season; however, two of these employees would be much older and would possess considerably more industry experience than Gladys.

Jorge was 40 years old and an experienced restaurant entrepreneur who left the industry due to a medical emergency. Interested in working again, but not in an ownership role, Jorge became a valuable resource for Gladys and oversaw the restaurant's wine program. Esmeralda was a grandmother and was hired as a pastry chef. She agreed to work part time to keep herself busy in semi-retirement.

Gladys experiences several interactions with her former peers and with older employees, which she perceives as positive. Unbeknownst to her, Gladys is informed upon her annual review that she has fallen short in the effective management of her crew. Her boss, Phillippe, put Gladys on probation for poor performance with an action plan for immediate improvement.

### Theoretical Background

As the Baby Boomer generation prepares a mass exodus into retirement, significant intellectual capital will leave with them. This is a critical time for service organizations to pass on the wealth of knowledge accumulated by the Baby Boomers to the incoming Millennial generation (i.e. Generation Y or Gen Y), who are in the early stages of leadership within organizations. The impact of Gen Y as a new generation of employees in the hospitality workforce has profoundly impacted operations due to their work attitudes and beliefs in contrast with previous generations (Solnet & Kralj, 2011). The dependency of young recruits into the industry due to the physical demands and low wages (Walker, 2011) has made this generational transition more challenging for hospitality managers than in previous years (Solnet & Kralj, 2011).

Numerous studies and trade publications have explored various strategies for traditional mentoring models. In recent years, reverse mentoring has been introduced as an alternative form of mentor-

ing which cultivates intergenerational relationships in the workplace (Murphy, 2012). The objective of reverse mentoring is to pair junior employees, who act as mentors, with senior colleagues, who take the role of mentees (Murphy, 2012). The purpose of this exercise is to transfer knowledge, increase intergenerational communication, and prepare younger generations for leadership roles (Murphy, 2012). Based in social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and later, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), reverse mentoring benefits both parties involved by sharing resources regarding strategic advice, social support, and reciprocal feedback for improvement (Murphy, 2012).

This case study seeks to improve the understanding of multiple generations currently in the hospitality workforce by providing the unique characteristics of each generation along with potential strategies for management. As an increasing number of Gen Y employees enter managerial levels in the hospitality workforce, the potential for challenges in effective management across generations will become more apparent. This case study provides an opportunity for students to explore diverse generational perspectives along with potential strategies for achieving effective cross-generational team management.

### Target Audience

This case study targets undergraduate hospitality students, however it could be adapted for graduate level course work by incorporating the reference materials as required reading. Under this recommendation, hospitality graduate students will be exposed to current literature in academic journals, thus enhancing the lesson at a more advanced level. A check for understanding among graduate and undergraduate students will be explained more thoroughly in the "ASSESSMENT" section of this teaching note.

### Teaching Objectives

The main learning outcome of this case will be to enhance hospitality undergraduates' understanding of the benefits and challenges of working in and managing a multi-generational workforce. By the conclusion of this case analysis, activities, subsequent assignments, and assessment, the student should be able to:

- Define the four generational cohorts currently in the workforce.
- Describe several key events and issues which occurred in each generation.
- Analyze the typical characteristics of each cohort as they relate to the key events and issues.
- Evaluate the challenges and potential solutions Gen Y managers might encounter in leading the various generations

presently in the hospitality workforce.

## Instruction Plan

This lesson will require at least two hours for full exploration of the themes. Ideally, the total time should be split into two class meetings, where during the break between classes, students will work on the themes independently, thus returning to the group environment more prepared. Prior to the lesson, students should read the case and accompanying appendices and come prepared to class to discuss the questions following the main storyline.

### Part 1—First Hour

Students will be organized into groups of four (4-5 minutes) and an easel pad with markers will be provided for each group. Given 20 minutes, students will be asked to brainstorm answers to the following questions, while recording their answers on the easel pad:

- Reflecting on your current job or past interactions with people from other generations, describe how people from these generations are different from you.
- Name 2 historical, political, economic, or technological changes during each of these four generations: The Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y.
- List the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each of these generations.
- What would be the best strategies for managing hospitality workers in each generation?

Four groups will be chosen at random to each present one of the generations with regard to questions 1-4 above. Twenty (20) minutes should be provided for this portion of the exercise, allowing each group 5 minutes to present their answers to the rest of the class.

The remaining 15 minutes of class time for the first 1-hour session will be used to disseminate and discuss the key major events of each generation (see Appendix A). Finally, students will be given homework to prepare individual answers to the following questions prior to the next class period:

- What were the mistakes Gladys committed in managing her Gen Y peers, Jorge, and Esmeralda?
- What plan would you recommend to Gladys for improvement in her cross-generational management strategy?
- Why is it important to cultivate a multi-generational workforce?
- What are the benefits to the operation?
- “Reverse mentoring” is a process where younger generation employees are paired with those from older generations. In this case, the person from Gen Y would become the mentor and a Baby Boomer or Gen Xer would be the mentee. What could be gained from this relationship? What would be the challenges?

### Part 2—Second Hour

In the second hour (or second day) of the case analysis, students will return to their groups of four to compare notes from the previous homework assignment (10 minutes). Next, the groups will be given a business scenario from the following list (or similar relevant scenario):

- A new coffee shop near a retirement community.
- An established diner in a blue-collar neighborhood.
- A fine dining restaurant near an upscale shopping mall.
- A retail store located in a cruise terminal.

Students will be supplied with easel pads and markers and will be given the following instructions to be completed within 20 minutes:

- Estimate the number of employees for the various positions you will need to staff your business.
- Determine and justify which generation(s) would be optimal for staffing the variety of positions estimated in #1 above by preparing an organizational chart with job titles and specifications.
- Explain how these staffing choices would contribute to the success of the business.
- Identify strategies that a Gen Y manager would need to best lead the various inter-generational employees.

All groups will then use the next 20 minutes to present how they staffed their businesses, the justification for their choices, and an example of best practices for Millennials managing across the generations. The final 10 minutes will be used to disseminate and explain the assessment.

## Assessment

### Undergraduate Level

Undergraduate hospitality students will be assigned a 2-3-page reflection paper to internalize their newly acquired generational knowledge. Multiple articles have been provided as references in addition to the in-class discussions and presentations of the case. Instructors may choose to disseminate the materials in Appendices A and B as additional resources. The reflection paper should be written in three sections with answers provided to the following questions:

- What did you learn about the four generations presented that you did not know before?
- How was this new information relevant to you as a student and a future hospitality manager?
- What will you do differently as a result of what was learned during this case study?

### Graduate Level

*Assessment Option #1:* Based on the case, recommended, and referenced readings, graduate level students will work in groups of 2-3 students and assigned a written paper with an accompanying 10-min-

ute presentation and a focus on one generation. Perceptions of how major life events helped shape the characteristics of each generation (see Appendix B) should be included. Emphasis shall be placed on Gen Y management strategies within a hospitality organization including a plan for how members of the Millennial generation can be more effective as leaders of The Greatest Generation, the Baby Boomers, and Gen X. During the presentations, instructors could seek opportunities to weave in probing questions about a world without the initiatives, inventions, and public policies from each generation which greatly enhanced society and working life. Examples include a world without:

- The Greatest Generation who provided cars, trains, and air travel.
- Baby Boomers who created and advanced the personal computer, smart phones, and music on demand.
- Generation X, the first cohort to actively seek work-life balance.
- Generation Y who raised issues on environmental consciousness in private and public life.

*Assessment Option #2:* This assessment can either be assigned as a group project, or as an individual paper. First, graduate students will select a hospitality business organization, public or private, domestic or international. Second, based on the current workforce demographics, students will create a “reverse mentoring” training program to include all or some of the following issues:

- Intellectual capital of the firm
- Succession planning
- Preferred method/mode of training delivery per cohort
- Number of employees retiring within next 5-10 years
- Impact on customer base
- Pressure from competition

## Analysis of Discussion Topics and Questions

The following is an analysis aimed to address the first section of questions posed in the case study:

1. Who are the current generations in the hospitality workforce today?

The current generations in the hospitality workforce include those members from the Greatest Generation (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1964-1979), and Gen Y (1980-2000) (see Table 1).

2. What are the key events and major issues of each generation?

Appendix A provides a condensed list of the key events and major issues concerning each generation. Additional information is also provided in Table 1.

3. How did these events and issues lead to the defining characteristics of each cohort?

Using the information provided in the appendices (A and B),

students should identify how the major events impacted and shaped the worldview of each generation. Beginning with their own generation to capitalize on their own experiences, students will then move through each generation examining the events and their consequences on the characteristics of each generation.

4. What are the best strategies for managing hospitality workers in each generation?

Given what the students now know about each generation, they should determine which managerial approaches are most effective. Additional information is provided in Appendix B to assist students with managerial approaches.

5. Why is it important to cultivate a multi-generational workforce? What are the benefits to the operation?

Using an example of diversity in travel and tourism in the hospitality industry, people from all generations travel and eat and enjoy entertainment. A diverse staff makes the work and customer environment more welcoming for all nationalities and all generations. In addition, we learn from the experience of the eldest team members as much as we benefit from the technological skills of the youngest generation. Multiple generations in the workplace helps to balance risk and status quo.

6. What are some of the defining characteristics of each of Jorge’s and Esmeralda’s generations which have shaped how they both like to work and be led (Appendix B)? Research one of the events from each generation (Appendix A) and link how this event might have produced a defining generational characteristic.

According to the materials provided, members of Gen X have a strong preference to work independently and without micromanagement. They enjoy tackling big projects and derive much satisfaction from accomplishing larger tasks on their own. Members of the Baby Boomer generation, enjoy assembling teams and creating cohesion among these groups. Other examples are provided in Appendix B.

Answers will vary for the researched events and how they helped to shape a generational characteristic. Instructors should be prepared to relate 1-2 events from each generation to a general characteristic (i.e. Gen X and ‘latch key kids’; Baby Boomers and the Vietnam War; The Greatest Generation and World War 2).

7. How could Gladys have better managed her Gen Y peers, Jorge, and Esmeralda? What could Gladys have done to improve the supervisor-subordinate relationship between herself and employees from the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y?

Most important is that Gladys must know and acknowledge generational differences between herself and her subordinates.

Once she has an awareness of these generational characteristics and the events which helped to shape the perspectives of the meaning of work within each generation, Gladys can apply her understanding of generational differences to her management style. For example, Gen X typically does not like to be micro-managed and so Gladys should have given Jorge more “breathing room” in his wine list project. In managing Esmeralda, Gladys should have included Esmeralda in launching the dessert initiative, exploiting Esmeralda’s Baby Boomer desire to make a difference. For those students who perceived Esmeralda as a member of The Greatest Generation, Esmeralda’s loyalty could have been called upon to support Gladys’ leadership in enforcing a dessert menu change.

Students should also be able to identify and synthesize a strategy Gladys could have used to manage her Gen Y subordinates, who took advantage of the relationship they enjoyed with Gladys. After gaining confidence in examining the management of other generations, students should be able to quickly and succinctly analyze the management techniques for their own generational preferences.

8. How would you create and organize a mentoring program for Gladys?

Based on previous knowledge, students might suggest a mentoring program of some sort. Using students’ suggestions for a structured mentoring program will provide an excellent platform to introduce the concept of “reverse mentoring,” which is included in Part 1 of the lesson plan. Scaffolding “reverse mentoring” on top of a traditional mentoring perspective will provide students with an opportunity to see the potential for themselves as leaders after gaining valuable insight from those members of an earlier generation.

### Analysis of the Teaching Objectives

- *Define the four generational cohorts currently in the workforce.*  
Students can decipher the four generations, recognizing that only three are predominant in the hospitality industry.
- *Describe the key events and issues which occurred in each generation.*  
In small groups students can identify these key events, while learning from other groups reporting different viewpoints.
- *Analyze the typical characteristics of each cohort as they relate to the key events and issues.*  
Students synthesize the available reference materials provided in the appendices and are able to connect the generational characteristics to the key issues.

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Generations Currently in the Workforce (adapted from Murphy, 2012)**

| Generation              | Key Events   | Characteristics  |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Gen Y                   | Rapid technological advances<br>Globalization<br>Immigration<br>Internet and social media<br>9/11<br>Al Qaeda<br>The Great Recession | Enticed by praise and rewards<br>Values work/life balance<br>Connected 24 hrs/day<br>Prefers to work in teams<br>Seeks to be heard |
| Gen X                   | Conclusion of Cold War<br>Gulf War<br>MTV<br>Aids<br>High divorce rates<br>Computers & video   | Skeptical of institutions<br>Require immediate feedback<br>Acknowledge diversity<br>Values stable family life                      |
| Baby Boomers            | Kennedy assassination<br>Vietnam War<br>Martin Luther King<br>Watergate<br>Woodstock   | Want to make a difference<br>Values individuality/integrity<br>Builds consensus for change   |
| The Greatest Generation | World War 1 & 2<br>Great Depression<br>The Cold War  | Loyal and patriotic<br>Seek job stability  |

- *Formulate potential strategies for managing each generation based on the cohorts' strengths.*  
Students will learn that every generation desires to be respected as individuals and recognized for their unique contributions.
- *Evaluate the challenges and potential solutions Gen Y managers might encounter in leading the various generations presently in the hospitality workforce.*  
Students will learn in general that every generation has faced the challenge of learning from their predecessors. As previous generations have struggled and learned how to lead and manage successfully in the hospitality industry, so too will Millennials.

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## Appendix A

The following is an abbreviated list of historic major events which occurred within the current and previous four generations (Infoplease, n.d.).

### Millennial Generation, Generation Y, Gen Y (1980-2000)

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 1981 | MTV goes on the air running around the clock music videos.   |
| 1982 | Equal Rights Amendment fails ratification.   |
| 1982 | Michael Jackson releases Thriller; sold over 25 million, biggest-selling album in history.   |
| 1983 | Sally K. Ride, first US woman astronaut crewmember in space on space shuttle Challenger.   |
| 1983 | The FCC authorizes Motorola to begin testing cellular phone service in Chicago.  |
| 1985 | Coca-Cola attempts to change 99-year-old formula to attract younger drinkers. "New" Coke fails; company reintroduces original, "Classic" Coke. |
| 1986 | Space shuttle Challenger explodes after launch at Cape Canaveral, killing all seven aboard.  |
| 1988 | Ninety-eight percent of U.S. households have at least one television set.  |
| 1988 | CDs outsell vinyl records for the first time.  |
| 1989 | Thousands Chinese students rally in Tiananmen Square; 1,000,000 in Beijing demonstrate for democracy; thousands of students killed in square.  |
| 1990 | The Simpsons debuts on Fox and becomes an instant hit.   |
| 1996 | Broadcasters, television, and PC manufacturers agree on a standard for HDTV.   |
| 1998 | J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone comes to U.S.  |
| 1999 | World awaits consequences of Y2K bug.  |

### Generation X, Gen X (1964-1979)

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 1966 | Medicare begins.   |
| 1966 | MIT biochemist Har Khorana finishes deciphering DNA code.                              |
| 1966 | Food and Drug Administration declares "the Pill" safe for human use.                   |
| 1967 | Congress creates PBS.  |
| 1968 | Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy are assassinated.                           |
| 1968 | 60 minutes debuts.   |
| 1969 | Woodstock, NY.   |
| 1971 | Twenty-sixth Amendment to US Constitution lowers voting age to 18.                     |
| 1973 | Nixon, on national TV, accepts responsibility, but not blame, for Watergate.           |
| 1974 | Richard M. Nixon announces he will resign the next day, the first President to do so.  |
| 1976 | Steve Jobs builds personal computers in his garage.                                    |
| 1977 | Star Wars hits theaters to become the second highest-grossing film of all time.        |
| 1977 | Saturday Night Fever sparks the disco inferno and the popularity of movie soundtracks. |
| 1979 | Nuclear power plant accident at Three Mile Island, Pa., releases radiation.            |

### Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

|      |   |
|------|---|
| 1947 | Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers.   |
| 1948 | Truman ends racial segregation in the U.S. military.  |
| 1954 | In Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka the Supreme Court unanimously bans racial segregation in public schools.                   |
| 1955 | Rosa Parks refuses to sit at the back of the bus, breaking Alabama segregated seating law.  |
| 1956 | Martin Luther King, Jr., leads 381-day black boycott of Montgomery buses; desegregated service begins.                              |
| 1957 | Russia launches Sputnik I, first earth-orbiting satellite—the Space Age begins.   |
| 1958 | US Supreme Court rules unanimously that Little Rock, Ark. schools must integrate.   |
| 1959 | Alaska and Hawaii become the 49th and 50th states.  |
| 1961 | OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) formally constituted.  |
| 1962 | Cuban Missile Crisis.   |
| 1963 | "March on Washington," civil rights rally held by 200,000 in Washington, D.C.; Martin Luther King delivers "I have a dream" speech. |
| 1963 | President Kennedy shot and killed in Dallas, Tex. Lyndon B. Johnson becomes President.  |
| 1964 | Nelson Mandela sentenced to life in prison in South Africa.   |
| 1964 | The Beatles appear on the Ed Sullivan Show.   |

## **Appendix A continued**

### **The Greatest Generation (Born before 1946)**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 1920 | Women's suffrage – 19th amendment ratified.  |
| 1924 | New York's Computer Tabulating Recording Company reorganized and renamed as IBM.   |
| 1925 | Tennessee schoolteacher John T. Scopes arrested for teaching the theory of evolution, forbidden by state law.                            |
| 1927 | Charles Lindbergh makes the first nonstop solo transatlantic flight.   |
| 1929 | Stock market prices plummet; U.S. securities lose \$26 billion, marking the first financial disaster of the Great Depression.            |
| 1931 | "The Star Spangled Banner" by Francis Scott Key officially becomes national anthem.  |
| 1932 | Amelia Earhart is first woman to fly Atlantic solo.  |
| 1934 | Adolf Hitler becomes Fuhrer.   |
| 1936 | George H. Gallup begins the "Gallup Poll" and successfully predicted outcome of presidential election.                                   |
| 1938 | Orson Welles broadcasts H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds, creating nationwide panic, as listeners believe that aliens landed in New Jersey. |
| 1943 | The first Social Security checks are paid. 1940 Withholding tax on wages introduced.   |
| 1942 | Declaration of United Nations is signed in Washington.   |
| 1943 | The Pentagon is completed and becomes the largest office building in the world.  |
| 1945 | World War II ends.   |

### **APPENDIX B**

#### **The following is a list of generalized characteristics for each generation currently in the hospitality workforce:**

##### ***Characteristics of Gen Y (Gross, 2013):***

Highly adept and dependent on communications and social media.  
 Motivated to make a difference in the world and help others, rather than monetary rewards.  
 More enthusiastic, collaborative, adaptable, and entrepreneurial than prior generations.  
 Carry a sense of entitlement.  
 Challenges, at times, with work ethic.

##### ***Characteristics of Gen X (Erickson, 2010):***

Called the "latch-key" generation due to being raised by working parents. This resulted in early contact with real-world responsibilities, thus they are reliable and value employability.  
 Experienced through their parents the recession of the 1980s and distrust institutions, resulting in high self-reliance and competence.  
 Highly diverse and multi-cultural generation, accepting of differences.  
 Skeptical, yet innovative, members of Gen X have a "can do" work philosophy.  
 Potential as pragmatic leaders who are tough-minded, yet willingly serve as mentors to younger generations.

##### ***Characteristics of Baby Boomers (AARP, 2007):***

Strong work ethic, good communication skills, and high emotional maturity.  
 Invested in building strong teams.  
 They "do whatever it takes," as work and success comes first.  
 Experienced work-family imbalance during formative working years.  
 Engaged in social issues throughout their lifetime.

##### ***Characteristics of The Greatest Generation (AARP, 2007):***

Built the infrastructure of modern American business, values, and work ethic.  
 Conservative in dress and language.  
 Disciplined, stable, and highly experienced.  
 Thrifty, hardworking and see work as a privilege.  
 Committed to families, soldiers, country, and community.