

Think Tank: Bridging the generation gaps - Boomers

Speakers:

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Erica: Hi, everyone. You are listening to the Think Tank Podcast. This is the first of a series we're doing on generations. And part one is all about baby boomers.

I'm Erica, licensed professional counselor and life coach, and I'm joined today by Angee, communications manager, and Lynn, licensed clinical social worker. So we decided to go straight to the source and talk to people who fit into each of these generations and boomers were born between 1946 to 1964. And we talked to a couple of boomers and they just happened to be my parents. So don't judge them too harshly for what they say about their experiences as baby boomers and their thoughts about their generation.

Lynn: You're going to be hearing from members of each generation as we go through the series and a few things that you might want to listen for, in terms of differences and similarities, include communication styles, how people of different generations tend to prefer to talk to each other, what their values are, what their upbringing was like and what their work styles are now, and even how they like to find information. These are just a few of the things you might want to listen for as we're hearing our different representatives talk.

Speaker 1: As baby boomers, I think that one of the characteristics of our generation is we have been the last really hopeful generation for a long time. We had all that can-do attitude that came from our parents who were the GI generation and they won the World War. We had a president that told us we could go to the moon and we did. When Apollo 13 got into trouble, the mantra was there will be no failure. Failure is not an option. So I think we were a very optimistic, hopeful generation. We

wanted to stop a war and we marched in the streets and we did. So I think that there was a lot of optimism and hope that characterize at least the beginning of our generation.

Speaker 2: Yeah, we really grew up in an idyllic period when, like Happy Days, that was our childhood, the fifties and the sixties, early sixties, and very, very optimistic. Also, we were probably the best educated generation in world history because it was not unusual for our parents to say, "You need to go to college." I heard that growing up is, "We expect you to go to college." And that was from a parent's generation that did not have the option of going to college in many, many instances.

Speaker 1: Right. I think that both of us were the first people in our families to go to college and we could do that because the government made all kinds of assistance available, education grants and student loans. And I think that there was a lot of push for being well educated.

Speaker 2: As I said, our parents who, for boomers, that means the World War II generation and the Korean generation, did not have the opportunity to go to school. After that, after our generation, then you had the latch key children and many, many single parent households where college no longer was affordable for the vast majority of subsequent generations.

Speaker 1: Right. I think our generation as we were growing up, you had the rise of the middle class. And so yes, you could have a dad that worked a factory job and a mom who could stay home and raise 2.3 kids. Now, the gap between rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger, and it takes two income earners to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. And that gets harder and harder.

Speaker 2: Yep. One income was sufficient for our childhood and young adulthood. We were also the first TV generation, because TV became popular during the mid-1950s and the number of households that previously had only radio, but then had TVs, just exploded during the mid-1950s. Another thing is, well, basically very positive, very inventive age, technology was just taking off.

Speaker 1: Right. And there are a lot of really important social movements associated with our generation, or at least when our generation was growing up. Not only the anti-war movement against Vietnam, but the civil rights movement and the women's movement all were coming to, were blossoming, blossoming as we were young adults.

Speaker 2: Yeah. So the middle class, as your mom said, it's just really, really exploding during that time. And you can understand why Happy Days is a pretty good description of the fifties and sixties when we were growing up. We had a lot of respect for our parents because of World War II and because that generation really made, in many respects, the ultimate sacrifice. And we were, in relating to subsequent generations, we really started the narcissism, that our favorite pronouns were me, myself and I, and that even grew after us with the subsequent generations. Also, Vietnam and Watergate changed our view of the world quite a bit, because until the mid to late 1960s, we were just Johnny Appleseed, everything is coming up roses and so on. And then we felt betrayed by the government through Watergate and through Vietnam, that authority figures were lying to us. And that is something we tend to have in common with subsequent generations that distrust of government and working together. We were not joiners, we started the, "No, we don't belong to any organization".

Erica: So Lynn, not to call you out, but you are a baby boomer. I don't know what your thoughts are about what we just heard.

Lynn: Yes, I am a baby boomer. Thank you for calling me out. It's something that actually, I think baby boomers have always been really proud of, and I think that your parents speak to a lot of the reasons why, because of that happy days, idyllic childhood, when we didn't know about things like pandemics and stuff like that. There were solutions more than there were problems, like we were the first polio vaccinated children and so forth. And then the social movements that your mom referred to, I really see your parents' point of view on just about everything they said.

Angee: I found it really interesting how they had a lot of respect for their parents and for the World War II and what they had to go through there. If you can imagine, that really must have had a big impact on how a lot of boomers were raised and what they had to go through and their parents instilling certain values in them. It's interesting because I think they have respect for the country, because of the war. But then there was also other things that happened with the government and they started to lose that respect. So their parents probably were the ones that had a lot more of that respect and as their generation moved along, other things happened in the country that really made people want to stand up and voice their opinion. And it's interesting to think that that seems to be happening a lot again these days. But I think that really molded them a lot. Lynn, what are your thoughts about that?

Lynn: I think you're totally right. And I think that Vietnam and these are things that we live with and Watergate, all of those were game changers for anything that you might call idyllic and the baby boomers really experienced those tremendously. And yeah, you're right, I think it brought a lot of conflict with our parents who really were very, very, very patriotic. And if the government says it or does it, it's got to be right. And we were seen as real rebels if we spoke up or acted up with regard to Vietnam or anything like that, and everybody was doing it.

Erica: Yeah. It seems to me that there's a big shift, right, sixties with, they didn't mention it, but Kennedy's assassination and Vietnam and Watergate and civil rights. But there's a big shift from this idyllic Happy Days type of mentality where people trusted systems to really questioning all of those things.

Lynn: Yeah. I think you're right. Actually, I think that's the shift that defines the baby boomers even more than the earlier times because the baby boomers were maybe the first modern generation to lash out and take to the streets and so forth for different causes.

Erica: Something that they didn't really mention is that women really started entering the workforce a lot more with the baby boomers. My mom for one entered into a field that was really dominated by men. And so I got to observe her try to navigate that when I was a child, which was really interesting.

Angee: Yeah. That is a great point. I think of news anchors or things like that. In those days, it was primarily men. Other kinds of roles really were male dominated. So this was a good period of time where women really entered the workforce and possibly changed the family life as well.

Lynn: I don't know if this was other people's experience, but when I first went back to work, when my kids were little, my parents actually were beside themselves. My father was very, very upset and serious about it and took me outside when I told them that I'd gotten my first job in, I think, 1983 or something like that. And he said to me, "What are you doing? Why are you getting a job?" And I'm like, "Well, because I have a brain and I went to college and I want to do something." And he said, "You know you're going to totally humiliate your husband." And I said, "Why would that be?" And he said, "It's going to look like he can't support you. You shouldn't do this. This is very bad for your family."

Angee: Wow.

Lynn: That was their reaction. Yeah, my mother was on the same page. Yeah. And I had to say to them, "Robbie thinks it's a really good idea if I go back to work." And my father said, "I'm telling you, it's a big mistake for your family."

Angee: Wow. What a big difference though. Imagine someone saying that these days. If someone were to say that these days it would be like, "What? What's going on?"

Lynn: Right. Right.

Angee: So that's incredible.

Lynn: It was very incredible.

Angee: Yeah.

Erica: And Lynn, I've heard my parents talk about wives needing to get their husband's permission to get a credit card or to get access to the bank account sometimes. Was that a thing?

Lynn: Oh yeah. You mean in my life? No, not in my life, but I guess I do know women who do have a relationship like that with regard to money. And I don't relate to that because that's not my experience at all, asking permission for things and stuff like that. That would go back more to my parents' generation.

Angee: Well that's good. So Erica, this next question that you talk to your parents about, can you give a little overview of what that question is?

Erica: Yeah. So next up, I asked my parents about their thoughts about other generations and working with other generations. They're also parents to two children who fall into two different generations. I'm right on the tail end of the gen X-ers, my brother is pretty firmly implanted in the millennial generation. So I asked them about their thoughts about other generations and those differences.

Speaker 1: Well, I think for me, the huge thing is we were also one of the last generations, maybe gen X, but we did not grow up with computers. And so for us, for me and for your dad, it's been this long slog to master technology. And I remember reading a number of years ago that there's a difference between digital tourists and digital natives. And I'm definitely a digital tourist. I'm like someone that's in a foreign land and they speak

like 12 words of the language of the country where you're visiting and can grunt and point and make yourself understood. But as you know, we're not very swift about that. So surely, there are lots of other baby boomers that are much more adept, but for us, it's clear we are not very shrewd about that.

Speaker 2: Yeah. Our generation really was the pinnacle of the industrial revolution. And then in the eighties and nineties came along, computer technology. And so our generation has never been quite as at home, as a rule with high tech as subsequent generations. One thing I like about gen X-ers is that they're more street smart. We boomers really, we're pretty idealistic. And I think in terms of just sheer survival skills, gen Xers and millennials are really much smarter and wiser about the world than we were at the same age.

Speaker 1: Well, I think that millennials tend to have a kind of entitlement mentality sometimes. I'm thinking in terms of some coworkers who don't necessarily feel like they already know everything and they don't have to earn their way, that they can be equal with someone who has 20 years of experience because what does experience count for? So I think that that's where I've run into some issues. I've worked with millennials that were great and I've worked with millennials where it was a more challenging relationship. Also, I think both gen X-ers in my experience, as well as baby boomers, tend to have a pretty strong work ethic, millennials don't. On the other hand, millennials have a real appreciation for relationships and nurture relationships and community. And I think that's really admirable because I think sometimes baby boomers were so career focused that we didn't do a very good job of that.

Speaker 2: The millennials and that's our son, a millennial, when they're involved in sports, everybody got a trophy. Everybody got a trophy, it didn't matter if you were in the last place, you got a trophy just by participating. And when we were growing up, it was very competitive because there were so many of us boomers, but they didn't hand out trophies. You had to earn it or else you didn't get it.

Speaker 1: I personally always liked the idea of participation trophies. 90% of life is showing up. So I think that I don't have any trouble with participation trophies. I do have some trouble with this entitlement, sometimes, mentality that can come along. But also, as I said, I appreciate the way succeeding generations work pretty hard at nurturing relationships. I find that very admirable and community, and they don't make their jobs the center of their lives. There's something to be said for that.

Angee: I thought it was really interesting what your mother said, Erica, about the sense of community and the new generation and the younger generations. I think she was specifically talking about the millennials. It's interesting because I would think also that their generation, I think back to the social movements that were going on in the sixties and things like that, I think that time was really bringing together the community and things like that as well. And it seems like as the generations keep progressing, they're taking the best of each of the generations and bringing them together. That would be the hope, that it's just getting better and better.

Lynn: I wonder if it's true. I see the generations' as being very cyclical.

Angee: That's a really good point. Yeah, because it does seem to be almost like a cycle and it's rotating around different social and economic things that are happening in our country and technology of course too.

Lynn: And health. What are the, whatever they're going to be called, the youngest generation right now, what are they going to take away from all of the rules and restrictions that they're having to live through because of the pandemic? Their schooling is going to be completely different for a few years and their whole experience, their social development, everything.

Angee: I like that your mom spoke up about the technology aspect. I've met a lot of people in the boomer generation that have excellent technical skills, that can do programming and all kinds of things. Actually, I had an old manager who was a tech lead for a technology company I used to work for, and he was such a genius, about the age of my father. He could run circles around me with technology. But then at the same time, I think a lot of others that you meet maybe do struggle. I think of my parents as well. And they have some struggles - I have to walk them through, video conferencing and stuff these days. And it is a difference between if I were to do a video conference with my daughter or my son, they're just like, boom, here I am. I don't even have to mention any instructions. It's like, oh yeah. And then they're telling me, "Well, why don't you use this app or this thing or this?" I'm like, "Oh, okay, sure."

Erica: Right. And not to call him out, but a few years ago, my dad asked my mom, he asked her for a smartphone. He said, "I want to get a smartphone." And she said, "Okay, well what kind of smartphone?" And he said, "A smartphone." He thought a smartphone was, that that was the phone. He didn't realize you've got iPhones and Androids and all

these other Samsungs and all these different kinds of smartphones, Blackberrys and whatnot. But I do think with any generation, of course, there's always going to be a range of skills and those kinds of things. I sometimes hear people who are older, baby boomers, comment on this whole participation trophy mentality with millennials. I thought it was really funny to have the two different takes on that with the participation trophy. I for one never got a participation trophy, but maybe that's because I'm generation X. I don't know, but I never got one. Wah, wah.

Lynn: I think it's because your father wouldn't allow it. I think that he said, "No participation trophy for her. She's got to earn it."

Erica: I thought it was interesting was this idea that as a baby boomer, that there were so many of them that there was this competition, that there was this competitive streak.

Angee: It feels like it's more of an old school thing, right? It's a competition. The point of a competition is to win. Right? So if everybody wins, it's hard to identify the reason why you want to try so hard, right? When everybody's going to get the same kind of trophy, you want to be first place or second place or third place. You want to get one of those trophies. But if everybody's getting the same trophy, it makes you step back and go, "Well, what's the point? Why am I trying so hard if we're all just going to get the same prize in the end?"

So I do like what your mom said about showing up is half the battle. And I've heard of schools where they don't have grades and it's more about the learning experience. And even in, I think Finland, they don't do first place, second place or anything like that because it's more of the experience of the sport and the event than winning that gold medal. So it's definitely a different mentality. They have a really high success rate for education in Finland as well. So it's something that makes you think, "Maybe that's a good thing?"

Erica: Yeah. Maybe they're onto something. I've heard, at least that's what I inferred, about this sense of entitlement and not paying your dues and those kinds of things that I think are highly valued probably by boomers and also a lot of people who are gen X-ers too, I don't know that I've experienced that firsthand. So I draw a little bit of a blank.

Lynn: Me neither. I haven't experienced that entitlement thing either.

Angee: Here's where I've experienced the sense of entitlement. For instance, when my kids started to get a little older and I got them a phone, they suddenly just thought that they were supposed to have a phone. Everybody else had a phone, they should have a phone, that they're entitled to having a phone, that they're entitled to having a car, that it's something a parent is supposed to do, give it to me. And I felt like they lost the mentality of, I have to earn this.

I suppose that could vary from family to family, depending on the financial situation and the structure and guidance of the parents. But it does seem more so like these days, especially when it comes to technology and phones, kids seem to think that they're entitled to automatically have that. And they don't respect that this is an \$800 phone. It's very expensive.

Lynn: Yeah.

Erica: Yep.

Angee: I do really respect the education that the boomer generation brings and the experience that they bring to the field. I think that's such a value. It's invaluable, really. You can't just produce that many years of experience in a millennial. But I think millennials bring different things to the table at the same time. They have new thoughts, new ideas. I think it's the combination of that, that really helps bring about a good team.

Erica: So that's it on baby boomers. Join us for part two, where we're going to talk about generation X, my generation.

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