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My Opinion

*298 BECAUSE I SAID SO

Sylvia Cardona

PRESIDENT, TEXAS YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

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Why are we hearing more and more about the generation gap? Haven't there always been differences between people born in different decades? As a teenager, I was often told what to do by my parents. In many instances, when I asked, "Why should I do that?" their response was straightforward, "Because I said so." I suspect most people can think back to similar responses from their younger years.

On Feb. 17, 2009, at the request of Thomas Wm. Mayo, director of the SMU Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics & Public Responsibility, I participated in the 2009 Conference of the Professions. For the past 22 years, the Maguire Center has organized the conference, which addresses ethical problems confronting lawyers, physicians, and clergy. This year's conference focused on "Generational Expectations and the Professions." I served as a panelist for two discussions, the first consisting of three young professionals, the second consisting of those same individuals plus several "older" professionals (i.e., professionals from a different generation).

I knew it would be a lively discussion when the following two quotes were used to start the morning session: (1) "There are three words that, whenever I hear them, make me want to vomit: 'quality of life'" and (2) "I don't want to end up an alcoholic, burned-out hack like you." While the two quotes represent extremes of attitudes, they capture what each of the three professions is facing--clear differences between generations.

For our discussion, the generations were divided into four categories: *Traditionalists* (those born between 1900 and 1945); *Baby Boomers* (those born between 1946 and 1964); *Generation X* (those born between 1965 and 1980); and *Generation Y* (those born between 1981 and 1995). The differences between the generations were identified in a variety of ways, but many related to work-ethic practices, use of technology, methods of communication, priorities in life, respect for authority, and attire. All of these differences, in some fashion, were discussed in detail at the conference. Mindful of the space limitations of this column, I'll focus on three.

Authority. The perception of authority is an area where a vast gulf appears to exist. Traditionalists respect authority. Baby Boomers grew up hating it, but now *are* the authority. Generation Xers are not impressed with authority. Members of Generation Y are impatient with it. It used to be that Baby Boomers excelled by being told what to do. This method worked for them, they reason, so why don't younger people just follow suit? Younger generations, however, want assurance that what is being asked of them fits their ideals and expecta-

tions. They ask, “Why should I perform that task?” and are not satisfied when they hear, “Because I said so.”

Face Time. The use of technology has changed workday schedules for most young lawyers. BlackBerrys, cell phones, and laptop computers allow Generation X and Y lawyers to take work on the road, providing an excuse for arriving late to the office or leaving early. We young lawyers adjust our schedule to fit our work-life balance needs. On the other hand, Baby Boomers, who represent many of the partners in law firms, place a deeper value on face time. Absence from your desk looks to them like lack of desire to work hard or lack of dedication to the firm and its clients. And informal methods of communication, such as text messaging or email, may not be acceptable to a Baby Boomer partner.

Work Ethic. Generation X and Y lawyers are perceived to want it all. They want the great salary, benefits, and office, but don't necessarily want to work hard to get them. If younger lawyers don't aspire to a big salary or partner title, they may be seen as not having a strong work ethic. From a Boomer's or Traditionalist's perspective, who wouldn't aspire to become a partner, bring in a lot of business, and be financially successful? Many young lawyers view professional success not simply through material or title wealth, but by whether they're engaged in work they find meaningful and that helps them achieve a balanced life.

Dan Kadlec, a contributing writer at *Money*, says we are all taking part in a “new-age experiment: four generations working side by side yet often speaking a different language.” This view begs the question: Can there be a middle ground or common language between the generations? If so, how do we get there? One expert in the field suggests we approach the topic by thinking about the issues from other generations' points of view. Frank and open discussions, such as those generated by the Conference of the Professions, are an excellent start.

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