And Now a Word From … Jeffrey Vargas on Workplace Generational Issues

By Dan Gephart, January 29, 2019

Holding federal employees accountable is a big part of what we teach here at FELTG. Accountability is our goal. It's in our mission statement. So I read with heightened interest recent stories about Millennials entering the management ranks. I wondered, rather hopefully, if Millennials were better than their colleagues from other generations at the important managerial task of accountability.

I reached out to Jeffrey Vargas, the president/CEO of Generationology LLC. If anybody has the pulse on the intergenerational workplace, it's Jeff. And he knows the federal workplace, too. He was a recruiter, diversity manager and chief learning officer for several agencies before starting his own firm.

"Millennials are amazing, and so are folks from other generations," Jeff said. "Millennials don't have a special connection with workplace accountability, in fact, for many who have less than five years of government experience, they are still learning the tools and mechanisms that are available to Fed managers to ensure proper employee performance and conduct. What Millennials do have is a willingness and a greater comfort to try new things and push for more transparent individual and organizational accountability which in the end, can help speed up important fundamental organizational change."

For this initial *And Now a Word From* column, I talked with Jeff about how multiple generations are re-shaping the federal workplace and how federal supervisors should be managing it.

DG: How has having multiple generations impacted the federal workplace?

JV: The concept of "how you get work done" has been redefined. Gen X was the first to push for more "work/life" balance, causing agencies to look at and implement initiatives like flextime. Millennials joined the push and have done a credible job of advancing the work/life conversation, pushing for more telework options. Boomers, as the ultimate group of collaborators, no longer universally believe that an employee is only productive at work if I "can see you at your desk." Boomers are now, on a more regular basis, seeing the benefits of using technological collaborative tools (i.e. – cloud computing, telepresence, real-time document collaboration, etc) that is helping to make work flows and work products more complete.

DG: What can federal supervisors do immediately to improve communication between different generations?

JV: Talk, discuss, listen … do. Intergenerational collaboration makes the workplace awesome, and intergenerational conflict can bring down morale and productivity at lightning speed. Intergenerational issues need a place to breathe in the workplace, they shouldn't be ignored. They don't improve through avoidance. Supervisors should devote time at all-hands meetings or bi-weekly meetings to talk about their focus on improving the workplace through the

application of intergenerational knowledge. Lay out a plan, listen to employee input, implement pilots/programs and embrace change. Intergenerational awareness is an important piece, but not the only piece to effective talent management.

That said, it's important for employees to know that not every idea can be implemented, will make sense in the long term, or fit within the government legal/ethical box. Hence, supervisors need to communicate both the things that they will and won't do, and supervisors have to take greater accountability for their own decisions and not "blame it on management." Open, authentic conversations and discussions will help to reduce intergenerational conflict and expand intergenerational collaboration.

DG: What's the biggest misconception about Millennials in the workplace?

JV: A lot of supervisors see their Millennial employees as "in-house tech staff." Managers assume Millennials can navigate new systems and programs without any training. [The] truth is, Millennials are digital natives and they do have a comfort with new technology but that doesn't mean that they are fully prepared to deal with any computer, cyber or system issue that pops up in their office, or across the enterprise.

DG: What are workplace trends you expect to see in the near future based on generational changes?

JV: On the good side, we will continue to see an expansion of work/life programs and an increase in the utilization of collaboration tools and cloud computing. We will see greater focus on the collection and analysis of big data and a stronger reliance on data to influence our decisions. The negative: We will probably see an increase in intergenerational conflict and a flatline/decrease in employee engagement, at least until organizations make a firm commitment to be identifying, addressing and deploying a more intergenerational approach to work.