



# Meeting In the Middle



# Baby Boomers vs. Millennials.



In today's workforce, the two generations often appear at odds with one another. But according to Seth Mattison, Founder and Chief Movement Officer of FutureSight Labs, it's all about meeting in the middle.

Mattison, an internationally renowned expert on workforce trends and generation dynamics who has advised the likes of Disney, Microsoft and Johnson & Johnson, is the keynote luncheon speaker at the 2014 NAA Student Housing Conference & Exposition March 3-5 at the ARIA Resort Las Vegas. He sat down with *units* Magazine to offer a preview of his session.



Seth Mattison

**units:** You've worked with many world-renowned brands and organizations. What are some of the top Fortune 100 companies focusing on to engage all generations?

**Mattison:** The first is meaning. Every generation wants to do meaningful work, but Millennials, in particular, want to feel like their work is making a difference and they're looking for this from day one. The driver here is all about having a purpose that's bigger than profits—this is about making the world a better place. The best organizations find ways to pull the mission and the meaning of their work to the forefront of peoples' lives every single day. They constantly find ways to showcase how individual contributors are impacting the business and they celebrate it.

The second key is autonomy. People work best and are happiest when they have ownership over their work, when they can solve problems their way and express their individuality. Benefits and perks are important, but from our perspective, it's all about empowering employees. Whether it be an open-door policy on ways to improve everything from marketing and product design, to the office atmosphere and regular team brainstorms, when your employees feel that they can tangibly impact the direction of the company, they're more likely to fully buy in.

The third thing is training and mentoring. Opportunities to learn and grow are huge engagement drivers across all the generations. Everyone recognizes the pace at which the world of work is changing today. The only way to keep up is to develop a continuous learning approach to life and work. Organizations that support their people with opportunities to continue to develop their skills on all fronts through a variety of channels will win the battle for their peoples' hearts and minds.

Finally, it's about fostering communities. The best leaders go to great lengths to build strong communities of like-minded people inside the organization. Whether those groups are based on common interests, shared cultures, generations, etc., they find ways to foster tight-knit communities where people feel they are part of a tribe. Great leaders know it's easy to leave a company; it's really hard to leave a community.



**units:** Can you explain the "gray ceiling" and how it pertains to the student housing industry?

**Mattison:** Historically, as one generation aged, they moved out to make room for the next generation. That shift made way for a new group to move into key

2014 NAA Student Housing Conference & Exposition speaker offers insight into closing the generation gap in the workforce.

BY LAUREN BOSTON

## “Great leaders know it’s easy to leave a company; it’s really hard to leave a community.”

leadership roles. With older employees working longer, younger workers can’t move in and the next generation of leaders can’t step up. This inability of the next generations to be promoted and move up within the organization is referred to as the “gray ceiling.”

Two big forces magnifying this issue are the economic meltdown of 2008 and a Baby Boomer generation redefining the aging process. Many Boomers took a substantial hit to their retirement when the markets collapsed in 2008. This caused many to re-evaluate their retirement horizon. Many are delaying retirement and some are even questioning whether it will even be possible.

Money aside, this is also the healthiest, most active generation to enter retirement age. Boomers are redefining this life stage and show no signs of slowing down. Boomers feel like they still have much value to bring to the workplace and in many cases, they’re right. Couple these factors with four—and soon to be five—generations working shoulder to shoulder and this “blocking” starts to cause challenging talent issues for the industry.

This can have two negative effects on the student housing industry. First, if Boomers are unwilling to step aside or, at the very least, delegate and offer opportunities for the next genera-

tion to take on more challenging, engaging leadership roles, many members of the next generation may seek employment outside the industry where these leadership opportunities do exist. As a result the industry could lose a substantial portion of their future leadership.

Secondly, we also have to acknowledge that Boomers who are currently in leadership roles have an enormous amount of wisdom, knowledge and perspective that must be captured before they move up and out of these roles. Knowledge transfer, mentoring and coaching will be critical to ensure the next generation is prepared to fill the large shoes of current leadership.



### **units: What do we do about it?**

**Mattison:** Boomers have to look for places to delegate. If you’re healthy and active and have no plans to slow down, it’s critical you communicate this to your teams so up-and-coming leaders aren’t surprised when you’re still there next year. At the same time, you have to start looking for opportunities for the next generation to step up. Look for places where you can delegate and offer meaningful projects that will engage future leaders.



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# “If you treat people like leaders, they’ll step up like leaders. Treat them as subordinates, and they’ll act like subordinates.”

As the younger generation, it’s critical that we tap into the knowledge and perspective this Boomer generation has. Seek them out. Ask questions. Become a sponge. Learn everything you can. They may not be up on every single new piece of technology, but don’t underestimate what 30+ years of navigating the industry has taught them. Tap into it before it’s gone!



**units:** We hear a lot about what you should do to bridge the generation gap. What shouldn’t you do?

**Mattison:** It’s easy to focus on the negatives and the places where the generations differ; however, we find that the most effective organizations identify a way to celebrate the gifts each generation brings to the table and tap into the drivers that motivate all of us—the opportunity to do meaningful work, the chance to make an impact, to have a voice and have a clear understanding of where the organization is going. These things prove more productive when it comes to driving engagement across the generations.



**units:** Is there room for Baby Boomers who are looking for a career change and just entering the student housing industry? From a hiring standpoint, should executives focus on fresh talent or broaden their search?

**Mattison:** There is a great opportunity for the industry to tap into the incredible wisdom, knowledge and perspective of this generation. Many Boomers still feel like they have a lot to give and, if positioned correctly, can be valuable team members. Think about offering flexibility in roles. Part-time or flexed schedules that work around Boomers’ changing life demands. Look for opportunities to bring Boomers back in mentoring or coaching roles to help prepare the next generation for leadership roles.

This generation also hangs their hat on the fact they have a pretty incredible work ethic. While some have accused Boomers of being workaholics, there’s no denying the fact this generation can deliver results. Many executives we talk to tell us they’re bringing retired Boomers back to fill some of their entry-level positions that have typically gone to young people. One leader said to me, “This is a great generation to tap into for some of these non-traditional roles. They always show up on time, maintain a professional demeanor and are truly grateful for the role. They’re not looking for the next best thing and I appreciate their

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## “Start asking the people you interact with how they would like to be communicated with and stop judging it.”

loyalty. I struggle to find these qualities in many young people today.”

Whether you agree with all of his comments or not, Boomers can be a great asset when planning your talent pipeline—you may just have think counterintuitively about the roles they can fulfill.



**units:** With many different communication channels, how

**do different generations get on the same page?**

**Mattison:** Communication challenges are everywhere in our workplace today. We have so many channels through which we can connect. Think about it—I can tweet you, text you, Skype you, Facebook you, IM you, email you, and perhaps even pick up the phone and call you! And each channel possesses its own set of challenges.

The bottom line is there is no one-size-fits-all approach to communication anymore. Today we must all be flexible in how we connect with one another. I work with Boomers who I know really appreciate a personal phone call, especially when dealing with a conflict.

At the same time, I’m sure many of you have tried calling your Millennial colleagues or children only to be met by voicemail and then a text that reads, “What’s up?” My Gen X mentor loves to say, “What’s up is pick up your damn phone!” We laugh but the fact is we all struggle with this. The best advice I’ve received is simply: “It’s not about how you want to communicate, it’s about how the person you’re trying to reach wants to be communicated with.”

We all have to be flexible. Can you text? You need to learn how to text. Can you pick up the phone and make a professional business call? You better learn. Start asking the people you interact with how they would like to be communicated with and stop judging it. The key is to learn how to meet people where they are without losing who you are.



**units:** How can a company tap into the hidden brainpower throughout the entire organization—and then nurture and harvest the best ideas?

**Mattison:** First, we must encourage people to bring their ideas to the table. We have to create a culture where people feel like their voice matters and that their ideas will be heard. How much responsibility do you give your people? Do you trust them? If you treat people like leaders, they’ll step up like leaders. Treat them as subordinates, and they’ll act like subordinates.

At the Ritz Carlton Hotel and the Four Seasons, associates such as bellhops and housekeepers are given substantial amounts of cash to use freely at their discretion to create a memorable guest experience.

A beautiful example of this was during a wedding at one of the Ritz Carlton

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resorts when a disabled guest wasn't able to access the beach where the wedding was taking place. A staff member had an idea to build a platform so she could watch. It cost hundreds of dollars, but it made the guest feel special and no doubt left a very favorable impression of the brand.

Next, celebrate failure. Corporations' No. 1 priority is the bottom line. We judge people by their results. Did they meet the target? Did they make the numbers? Quantity often overrides quality. But this pressure to perform keeps people from stepping up for fear of failure to meet expectations. If you want your people to offer ideas and take a risk, then it's vital to praise efforts, not just results.

Research at Stanford has shown that when people are praised for effort they are much more likely to take more initiative and stretch themselves than when praised only for results. Praising a well-intentioned failure might pave the way for the next success.

Finally, break down the silos. It's easy to fall into a silo and only talk to and work with people within your own department. If your company is growing quickly or has several offices or remote workers, some employees might not even recognize each other—but it's essential that they know and engage with one another.

Whether you're using an internal social network, a video conferencing tool like Skype, Google hangout or a WebEx, encouraging teammates to interact will make employees feel more connected to and informed about the company and ultimately drive more knowledge sharing, better collaboration and idea generation.

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## Viva Las Vegas!



In addition to Mattison's keynote luncheon presentation (noon to 1:30 p.m., Wednesday, March 5), the 2014 NAA Student Housing Conference & Exposition will include two more general sessions and 14 breakout sessions.

Conference attendees will also have the opportunity to network with industry peers, interact with student housing residents and visit more than 150 exhibitor booths at the NAA Exposition.

Register today at <http://shce-naa.naahq.org/attend-student-housing/register> and don't forget to use the official hashtag #NAAStudentConf to engage, discuss and follow the exciting news from this conference.

But breathe easy—no admissions essay is required.