

**R**ight now, the U.S. workforce is made up of five different generations, all of which have their own opinions and expectations—about colleague camaraderie, about power dynamics, about work-life balance, and about office culture. And generally speaking, that’s a good thing. Research has shown that multigenerational workforces are more productive and have less turnover, and that age diversity can improve organizational performance.

But as more young people move into managerial roles that put them in charge of older employees, there’s also more potential for tension. An estimated 69 percent of workers 55 years and older report to younger bosses, and Lindsey Pollak, author of the upcoming book *The Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workplace*, says that the younger manager/older employee dynamic is still “a very new phenomena,” that’s also becoming “increasingly common in the workplace.”

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Pollak cautions against automatically assuming employees won’t like having a younger boss. But, she notes, “when there is a challenging dynamic, it’s often because this person has never been in that situation before.” For a younger employee, being dropped into a directorial role can sometimes feel like the workplace equivalent of telling your parents to go to their room—like you just don’t have the authority, and pretending otherwise can spark anything from confusion to outright resentment. Fortunately, if you’re a newly minted manager stepping into the boss role for the first time, there are strategies to make sure your relationship to your direct reports is a smooth one.

## Don’t overdo it on the self-deprecation.

Humility is a key part of effective leadership, but you have to know the difference between being humble and undercutting your own knowledge because of your birth year. “Don’t ever apologize for your age,” advises Pollack, noting that even phrases like, “I know I’ve only been here two years,” should be avoided.

“We shame and criticize ourselves when we don’t have to,” she says. Pollak says this also goes for older employees, who shouldn’t dismiss their generation with quips about being slow at technology.

Liz Wiseman, CEO of the Wiseman Group and author of the book *Multipliers*, says that looking back on her own experience, she wishes she had known as a young manager how much damage internal second-guessing can cause. “It’s this tangle of perceptions,” she says, “like, ‘Wait a minute, they don’t think I have enough experience or expertise to be here; they probably think I shouldn’t be their boss.’ So it causes people to hold back, and

we end up doing a less-than-brilliant job as a leader because we don't think they think we deserve to be in a leadership role."

Doubting yourself can also prevent you from giving feedback to your team, something they're counting on you for. Wiseman says that asking the right questions, like "What role do you want me to play as your boss?" and "What can I do that would be of value to you?" is vital. "I find almost all these tensions go away when you tell people what you're concerned about, then ask them what they think."

## Lead with what you don't know.

It's a potentially uncomfortable question: How can you be the boss if you have the least experience? But as a younger manager, that seeming juxtaposition might be your sweet spot, or at least a worthy strategy for navigating leadership. "The best leaders," Wiseman says, "are going to be able to mobilize the expertise of others. We often find that people who are inexperienced outperform people with experience, not because of the new ideas that they bring, but [because of] the hunger and openness that they bring."

In other words, just because you're in charge doesn't mean you should pretend to have all the answers. Listening is crucial to building trust and camaraderie on any team, and that means asking the right questions. Instead of worrying that asking will make you look weak or undercut your authority, lead with what you *don't* know.

"More than anything, people want leaders who need them," Wiseman explains. "The critical skill of the century is not what you know, it's your ability to tap into what other people know."

Pollak echoes this, especially in terms of office culture. "What you want to do is ask your team what they want," she says. "Learn about what is important to them. Why did they take the job? What's their favorite part of working at the organization? What rewards are meaningful to them? And then, you can start to align that with the mission of the business and the goals that you want to accomplish."

## Create your own management style.

"Fake it til you make it" can be a helpful strategy for coping with imposter syndrome and getting through the work day. But psychology researcher Andy Molinsky, a professor at Brandeis University's International Business School and author of *Reach*, cautions against adopting a management style that doesn't feel natural, or trying to mirror someone else's.

"You don't want to fake a style that's not yours," he says. "You want to be authentic." Molinsky says authenticity can be tricky for inexperienced managers, who, in an effort to step into shoes they aren't used to, can overshoot and end up acting out their conception of what a manager is supposed to be.

To prevent that, Molinsky suggests cultivating a group of advisors, taking a look at their management styles, and building a mix that works for you. “Do your homework. Talk with a lot of different people,” he says. “Realize that you’re learning, that you don’t have to be perfect, that you’re going to make mistakes—but you want to be curious, you want to learn from them.” Approach management as a constantly evolving work in progress, rather than something you need to study to get an A+ in.

## Explain everything.

“Because” is kind of a magic word,” Pollak explains. “It gives you a mission; it gives you a purpose.” In an effort to be taken seriously, it’s easy for young managers to sprint toward action without stopping to explain their thinking. Announcing you’ve gotten a pingpong table for the office or are implementing remote work without bothering to touch on “why” isn’t going to earn you points with your team.

“When you do make decisions of how you want to impact the culture, you explain why. You’ve done your homework. You’ve put in the work. And you have a good reason for what you’re doing,” she says.

If you can’t seem to shake off the self-doubt, Molinsky suggests recalling other transitions in your life where you were inexperienced, but came out the other side successfully.

“Approach it with a real thoughtful, curious, learning-oriented mindset, and you’ll be okay,” he says. “And then, you’ll be able to pay it forward to the next person who comes to you 10 years later to ask your advice.”



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