BOOK REVIEW


by Anna Liotta

Reviewed by Judy Benson
Unlocking Generational CODES: Understanding What Makes the Generations Tick and What Ticks Them OFF by Anna Liotta

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Let me start with a confession: I am a baby boomer. I work in a multi-generational environment, and I often struggle to understand and be understood by colleagues of other generations. How often have I asked myself, what does this young person know? How can I work with him or her? It seems that we speak different languages, use different communication tools and techniques, and do not place the same priority on work. To paraphrase Anna Liotta, I need to be able to energize and motivate an age-diverse clientele and workforce among rapidly changing priorities; however, I do not have the understanding or tools to do so. Whether you are a boomer, a Gen-Xer, or a Gen-Yer, if this brief description resonates, Liotta’s Unlocking Generational CODES is a must-read.

In this slim volume, Liotta tells us that, regardless of generational cohort, understanding generational “CODES” allows us to communicate more effectively and work more productively. CODES, of course, is an acronym that encompasses the following:

C = Communication. Each generation has a preferred communication style.

O = Orientation. Each generation juxtaposes itself against other generations, people, and the world.

D = Discipline. Each generation has a unique relationship with authoritarian figures, which could be parents, bosses, or employers.

E = Environment. Each generation has its own information-gathering techniques, decision-making process, self-motivation, and interactions in our world.

S = Success. Each generation measures success differently.

Knowing the generational CODES informs us about the actions and motivations of others, what they are trying to tell us, how to be effective in getting our ideas across, and how to help them achieve their goals and potential. In other words, Liotta’s CODES help us mold a team, in the truest sense of the word, out of diverse individuals from different generations.

Underpinning Liotta’s thesis is the tenet that the attitudes, beliefs, values, and expectations of each generation are a product of that generation’s unique set of cultural, historic, and educational experiences. Deciphering and understanding these CODES will make us more effective in any multi-generational situation.

It’s helpful to have Liotta’s descriptions of the distinct generations in the workforce today. The largest cohorts are baby boomers (1946–1963), Generation X (1964–1979), and millennials/Generation Y (1980–1999). On either side are traditionalists (1927–1945), some of whom may still be working, and nexters (2000–present), who will be entering the workforce shortly—and these two cohorts have their own CODES, too. As a boomer, I know that Liotta has me described (rightly!) as work-centric, competitive, and a self-motivated team player. Because my generation was indulged as children, we became protective parents. These overarching attributes are distinct for each generation.

Two additional terms come into play that are aligned with the CODES. “Natural realities” are what each generation takes as fact. “Anchor points” are defining events that create an impression that shapes us, such as growing up during the Depression.

Having read Unlocking Generational CODES, I better appreciate that I am a product of my generation. As a boomer, work is viewed as proof of my life accomplishments; contrast this with a millennial, who considers work as “just one aspect of my full life, which should be fun and inspiring.” Feedback at work
for me means a formal annual review, whereas a millennial wants frequent positive coaching. Gen-Xers had a very different experience growing up than I did, which strongly influences how a boomer or a millennial would communicate with someone who is looking for “immediate, authentic, and applicable feedback.” To be effective in this multigenerational environment, I must acknowledge the drivers of each generation and motivate others accordingly.

Financial advisors are facing this situation more often as they seek to initiate or retain relationships with clients of other generations. If I, a boomer advisor, am unable to communicate effectively with a client’s heirs, the longevity of the relationship is in jeopardy. A team-based approach that includes a younger colleague may be a solution. The scion is able to learn from and relate to a peer, the practice builds that next-generation relationship, and I enjoy a firsthand learning experience from my colleague.

This highly recommended book moves the reader from a negative focus on generational disparities (“Why aren’t they just like me?”) to an optimization strategy for understanding the common ground among generations. The result is improved generational effectiveness.

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Unlocking Generational CODES by Anna Liotta
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