CHAPTER 7
Diagnosing and Solving Age Issues

The main consequence of the last chapter was the disposition of generation as a useful and operational concept within work settings. We are not going so far as to say generation is absent at work. It certainly is a factor but it is not sufficiently large a factor to direct the actions of employees, supervisors, managers, directors, and vice presidents as it does now. We will move to a new conception of age in this and the last chapter. In the last chapter, another theory about the different ages at work is presented in a model.

This chapter is concerned with the practical side of management more than theory. In it, we are aiming to arm the manager with tools to both diagnose and solve age issues at work. You will have noticed the switch in terms from generations to age. That is warranted by our findings from the last chapter. Henceforth, our topic will be age, not generations because age remains a relevant and operational concept. So too does the relativistic “older” and “younger” categorization. But “older” and “younger” will be used comparatively and they will not be tied to presubscribed timelines of generations.

Job Satisfaction Issues and Intergenerational Conflict

Job satisfaction and employee engagement reveal how employees evaluate their organizations on employment issues. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) issues reports on job satisfaction. A recent SHRM report (2012) showed some problem areas with job satisfaction. Overall job satisfaction rose from
77 percent in 2002 to 86 percent in 2009 but declined to 81 percent in 2012. Relationships with coworkers was the second highest factor among the top five engagement factors. Determination to accomplish work goals and confidence in doing that was the first. Coworker relationships are very high on the list and are driven by successful age interactions for the most part. Other age-based findings from the report were that career advancement was more important for under 48-year-old employees than for older employees. This is an expected finding, of course.

SHRM also separately reports on intergenerational conflict in the workplace and they reported that 44 percent of corporation-based individual respondents said intergenerational conflict existed to a slight degree, 25 percent said to some degree, and 3 percent said to a large degree. Organizations with fewer than 500 employees reported more generational gap issues than organizations with more than 500 employees. One can conclude there is a noticeable generation gap but generation gap needs to be defined especially in light of our findings.

As a working definition, generation gap is a difference in values, attitudes, and preferences between one generation and another. This definition stems from the social side of our lives and it highlights the parent and child context. That context does not happen at work unless it is a family enterprise. Also, our research has downplayed the role of generation in business organizations. But, because generation gap is reported in businesses, it does need to be dealt with. At times, repeated assertions are taken as truth and any research needs to deal with twists of reality in order to correct erroneous perception.

The generation gap on the business side is more an unequal distribution of power that can be connected with age. Workers who are older tend to be those with more power and resources. In unions, seniority is a basis for career advancement. Younger workers are aware of the power differential. They want what the older workers have, possibly including their jobs. This is reciprocal but with different desires. Older workers may want the opportunities that youth accords. If older people cannot hold on to resources like property (in the social life) forever, or resources like budgets, strategy, and personnel (in the corporate life) there are evident