**UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS TO IMPROVE ELDER MEDIATION**

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**INTRODUCTION**

 Elder mediation invariably involves multiple parties who represent two or more generations. The issues that are dealt with during the mediation may be viewed differently depending on the generation represented by any one of those participants.

It is, therefore, important for the mediator not only to understand the culture and the values of the generations but also to recognize how the generations relate to each other. This knowledge is vital so that the mediator gains a full grasp of the issues involved in the conflicts among the participants and thereby assists them in resolving those issues.

**GENERATIONS and INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS**

The term “intergenerational” refer to multiple generations of people that exist in ongoing relationships; for example, a household where grandparents, parents and children that live together or in separate residences. The interaction among those generations is commonly referred to as intergenerational dynamics.

The issues that affect people in different generations may influence how they interact with each other. Once there is an understanding by individuals from different generations on the culture and values of their respective generation and how to deal with each other, the individuals can then begin the process of understanding and treating one another with mutual respect and dignity.

Over the last 100 years generations have generally been divided into groups according to persons’ years of birth and the culture characteristics and values that are associated with each of the generations. The table[[1]](#footnote-1) below illustrates the various attributes of the generations:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name of Generation** | **Culture and Values** |
| **Silent or Builder Generation (**1922 – 1946)  | * Extended families
* Respect for authority, loyalty, hard work, dedication, sacrifice for the common good: family, God, country
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| **Baby Boomers** (1946 – 1964) | * Sense that security was taken care of, left room for exploration and protest
* Places high value on youth, personal gratification, health, material wealth
* Generally optimistic, value hope and peace, and

believe their generation changed the world* More likely in nuclear families; surrounded by television and neighbors
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| **Generation X** **(**1965 – 1980) | * Desire balance in their lives, welcome diversity
* Motivated by money, self-reliant, value free time and having fun. “Work to live, not live to work”
* First generation to embrace the personal computer and Internet
 |
| **Millennial or Y Generation** (1980 – 2000)  | * Technology/menu driven society
* Most racially/ethnically diverse (1 out of 3 is a person of color); 25% from single parent families
* Most educated generation – pressure to excel academically
* No recollection of the Reagan era, do not remember the Cold War, have known only one Germany,
* World has always had computers, answering machines, microwave ovens, VCRs
 |

Each of these generations is influenced by the forces that were relevant at the time: economy, politics, customs, communication, media and the social norms. The behaviours that the members of each generation are varied and can, at times, be misunderstood. Intergenerational conflict can occur since each generation may possess different values, attitudes, work habits and expectations. It is, therefore, important for the mediator not only to understand the different perspectives of the generation but also to acknowledge them.

 Atul Gawande, in his book *Being Mortal*, summarizes the changes that have occurred in society over the generations in caring for older persons: “Elders were cared for in multigenerational systems, often with three generations living under one roof. Even when the nuclear family replaced the extended family…the elderly were not left to cope with the infirmities of age on their own…. In contemporary societies, by contrast, old age and infirmity have gone from being a shared, multigenerational responsibility to a more or less private state – something experienced largely alone or with the aid of doctors and institutions.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**UNDERSTANDING THE GENERATIONS**

The mediator’s understanding of these generational groups will mean that questions appropriate to their language can be drafted and asked in order to build a relationship with them. In this way the mediator can have the right information important to each generation and in a layout, format and method they will use; for example, millennial generation participants in a mediation session may prefer email, social media communication, and information whereas a silent generation person may prefer face to face or telephone communication.

 One aspect of the intergenerational dynamics that greatly impacts on the understanding of the relations is the breakdown of the extended family. In the silent and baby boomer generations, members of families (grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles and cousins) generally lived in the same city if not the same neighbourhood or, in some cases, the same house. They would interact regularly and were available in the event a need arose. However, with the rise of generation X, the extended family has been greatly affected due to a number of factors: the rise of divorce has affected the relationships among family members; the increase in the educational levels has meant that children now are much more mobile and will go where the jobs are, often to other cities. The result is that members of families are in contact much less and their relationships are not as strong as in previous generations. The result is the creation and emergence of the nuclear family (a pair of adults and their children).

The United Nations Youth Division has recognized the impact that intergenerational issues have on relationships: “…multigenerational families with intergenerational support and reliance are rapidly declining, especially in urban areas. Families are becoming smaller, and young people are postponing marriage, having fewer children and getting divorced…Such trends pose new demands on family members and test the traditional grandparent-parent-youth relationships.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In an elder mediation session the fact that 4 generations may be represented by the participants could create tension and unease. Added to this is the natural tendency for generations to be suspicious of and not trust each other. It is important for the mediator to manage intergenerational dynamics so that the relationships between the different generations can be strengthened rather than be disrupted. The mediator must be aware of the personalities of the participants, and how the characteristics of each generation impacts on them in order build and strengthen the relationships. The mediator’s understanding of the intergenerational dynamics allows the participants to have meaningful discussions. The danger is that if the mediator does not carefully manage the dynamics of the generation, the mediation could be disorganized and be unsuccessful.

**IMPORTANCE OF PRE-MEDIATION IN INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS**

 What can a mediator do in order to understand and appreciate the various dynamics that impact on the generations represented by the participants in an elder related mediation? The very nature of elder mediation means that the mediation will invariably consist of disputes with multiple parties. Pre-mediation allows the mediator to fully appreciate the personalities, the interests and needs of each participant and be aware of the conflicts and the history of those disputes. This will create a process in the mediation that will be effective in order to resolve the family conflicts and thereby enhance the relationships.

The Canadian Centre for Elder Law notes the importance of pre-mediation: “The strongest point of agreement amongst experienced practitioners and key stakeholders in the field…is that it is imperative to hold pre-mediation meetings prior to a joint mediation session.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The purpose of these separate meetings between the mediator and with each participant “…is to identify the issues, identify any concerns of abuse or power imbalance, establish the dynamics involved and determine whether mediation is appropriate.”[[5]](#footnote-5) While a pre-mediation in non-elder issues may not be of utmost importance, it is vital in elder mediation: “Pre-mediation is also important in multi-party mediations, such as in: extended family disputes or elder care issues, where there may be two or more families and their expert representatives (such as social workers) involved.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

If the mediator is successful in having the participants express their individual concerns by creating a safe and respectful environment for the mediation session, the age differences between the participants will disappear. The mediator, by understanding the dynamics of each

generation will be able to address the differences in the generations and enhance the following key components in any mediation:

1. **Awareness:** being mindful of the characteristics and influences of each generation allows the mediator to recognize the motivation behind the behavior, the interests and the needs of the participants.
2. **Communication:** Once the mediator is fully aware of and understands each participant and is able to make the participants participate in this awareness, the communication among the participants and the mediator can be developed on levels that are important to them.
3. **Managing Conflict:** the result of good and effective communication is that the mediator will be able to manage the conflicts that exist among the participants. The consequence of this is that the participants will be instrumental in contributing and assisting the mediator in generating solutions to resolve the conflicts by working out the terms of a potential settlement agreement.

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1. Patricia Gilbaugh, *Supervision of Intergenerational Dynamics* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal*, p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. United Nations, Youth – Social Policy and Development Division, *Intergenerational Issues* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Canadian Centre for Elder Law (2012), *Elder and Guardianship Mediation*, , p.32 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p. 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Helen Shurven, *Pre-mediation for Mediators*, ADR Bulletin (Bond University) Vol. 12 N. 6, p.121 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)