



Episode 55: “One Workplace, Five Generations: Tips for Resolving Conflicts,” With John Robertson

Speakers: Ari Kwiatkowski, Barclay Damon

[Ari Kwiatkowski]: Hi, everyone, this is a *Barclay Damon Live* broadcast where we discuss all things L&E, labor and employment. I’m Ari. Let’s dig in.

[Ari]: Hi, everyone. Welcome to episode 55. This is “One Workplace, Five Generations: Tips for Resolving Conflicts,” with John Robertson. I am thrilled today to welcome John to the podcast. John is a workforce wellness expert, a cultural alignment specialist. He brings to the table years of experience in helping employers and employees resolve workplace conflicts. So, John, welcome. So good to have you.

[John]: Pleasure to be here and looking forward to encouraging and maybe challenging your listeners. This is awesome. Thank you.

[Ari]: Of course. And to our listeners, you know, John is, you know, this is mostly a legally related podcast where we go through legal issues. Today, we’re going to take a little bit of a departure from that and talk more about workplace relations. And I think this is going to be really practically useful information for our listeners. So thanks again, John.

[John]: Well, just to be fair, I drew the short straw, so I have two uncles that are lawyers. My sister is a lawyer, so I’m one of those low-down-on-the-totem-pole ones.

[Ari]: Well, yes. So unfortunately for you, you know how we think.

[John]: Well, yeah. Anyway, we won’t go down that bunny trail.

[Ari]: Sounds good. So, John, you know, we’ve had many guests on the podcast over the last year and a half or so, and I always just ask our guests to share something about themselves, their personal or professional lives. Just something for our listeners to get to know you a little better. So I would love it if you would oblige me and share something with us.

[John]: Sure. I’m a husband of one wife, father of three kids, one son-in-law. We started with our first two grandchildren, one was born the December before COVID. Highly, highly recommend skipping the whole parenting thing, going straight to grandparenting. Highly recommend it. And my wife and I are married for 35 years. So a lot of the stuff we’re talking about with generations and conflict and all those things get revealed through crisis. And first thing for the listeners to understand is the event is never the real crisis. And if we’re going to talk about connecting generations, that’s a key. You know, if you and I have a motor vehicle collision, we might do the oh, that kind of sucks, right? We have other people who worship the vehicle they drive in, and that’s worse than... whatever... what’s happening in Ukraine with children.

[Ari]: Right.

[John]: And so therefore, I got started in this as I actually started as a pastor/minister/clergy, whatever. And I got tired of playing Whack-A-Mole—like people were always treating symptoms, not actually getting

to the root issue. And so my journey, one of my degrees there in psych, I was doing crisis intervention for employee assistance programs. Career counseling—it's called career counseling for adults. We call it guidance counseling with young people. So when people's lives are hitting the fan and we're not playing well with others, I'm in my sweet spot.

[Ari]: Okay.

[John]: And if you talk to my family, I'm usually the cause of things in the fam. But that's beside the point.

[Ari]: I love that, John. Well, you know, I think in my experience, at least these generational differences that we're going to talk about really, I think have been contributing to conflicts in the workplace and not necessarily legal conflicts or conflicts that are actionable, but really, you know, you correct me if I'm wrong, but I think we're kind of at a spot in time where there are so many generations in the workforce—more than before. So hoping you can jump into that...

[John]: One of the things that I really want to pick up on is a lot of people talk about generations, but for the first time in history, we don't just have generations. We have cultures. So take somebody from Syria, Afghanistan, some of these countries that have just been through—and I'm not swearing, I'm calling it what it is—who have been through hell. And we put them in a workplace and then combine generations.

[Ari]: So true.

[John]: Like smoke in a room filled with gas. You'll have the same effect.

[Ari]: Right. So let's go to... jump in, John. And I just want to make sure for our listeners, can you explain when we say generational differences, what exactly are we talking about? What do we mean?

[John]: And I forgot because you and I were chatting beforehand and you asked me to share one fun fact about John.

[Ari]: Yes.

[John]: So, yes, I sucked my thumb till I was 17. So when people talk about being bullied and whatever you want to call that. Yeah, kind of been there, done that. So when we talk about different generations and different norms, one of the things that we have to understand is we go from, if you will, the World War II people. So there was two groups, the ones that went overseas and the ones that stayed here. And the ones that stayed here or were born here right after were the Boomers, the traditionalists or...everybody's got different names. And this is part of the biggest problem. Listeners, please, please, please, please do not hear me as assigning titles to groups because people don't even agree on the same age group. One says 1990 and the next one says 2000. Well hold it. We can't even agree on that. But if you take the "veterans" for lack of better words, then you take the Boomers who worshiped careers. And so, you know, that age group kind of talked about pensions and benefits because they grew up with a memory of a lot of the Great Depression, a lot of going without. And then we get into what some call them Gen X, but for argument purposes, I'll call them the Gen X, and they're that next age group. And one of the things that we have to be very mindful of Gen X and millennials, some people call them Nexus, but that Gen X and millennials actually are the majority in the workforce in many ways today. So they're... some would say they're now 40–60% of the workforce. I don't like using statistics because my degree in psych, I can make statistics say whatever I want them to say. But if we look at, you know, if we look at some of those the Boomers, every generation, I can't remember to give credit where it's due. I can't remember who it was. But every generation has had their significant "turning point" in sports language, their "ESPN turning point." So World War II. And then we had the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King and some of those people. And then we had the shuttle. Anyways, I can't remember the name of...the Challenger. And then we had the World Trade Center bombing, and then we've had COVID. Every

generation tends to be defined by those moments. One of the things that happens with the Gen X, with the Millennials, they're very, very comfortable with technology and change. So you get one generation...

[Ari]: Shoutout to my fellow millennials.

[John]: Well, and that's exactly my point. So, you know, many times, you know, people say, "would you stay focused on your job and you're on your phone or you're multitasking or whatever you want me to call it." But that's the norm for that age group. It's not... that they're not paying attention, but they're so comfortable toggling between things. You're not doing two things at once—that's not possible neurologically. But they're toggling so quickly between things that it's not draining for them. Older generations need to stay on a project until the project is done. Then they moved on to the next thing. But where it...where the rubber really hits the road is the definition of authority, of autonomy, of expectations, of having a, quote, "marriage." But till death do us part. And the younger age groups do not view career as till "death do us part." They view it until, you know, if this gets boring or I'm not developing a career or I'm not fueling my passion or values...See ya!

[Ari]: And I think Gen Z, right, John, is another generation that's at least starting to be in the workplace.

[John]: Yes. And I haven't mentioned that one because a lot of their behaviors and norms aren't really getting...aren't really established yet in the workplace.

[Ari]: Right.

[John]: So, for example, if I'm working at—and I'm not picking on a name brand restaurant, but if I'm looking at a fast food... working at a fast food restaurant, am I really influencing the workplace, versus how many of us in workplaces and said, you know what, when I grow up, this is what I want to do for the next 40 years? So there's a lot of research or comments or whatever you want me to call it, about people, the Gen Zed, Gen Z, depending on which country we're in. But the patterns of behavior are not really well established because they're still trying to figure out/find out what matters. We just had a meeting with a businessperson two weeks ago and the owner of the business was meeting with... it was two of them, a male and a female. But I'm going to say they're millennial kind of in that millennial/Gen X age group. Anyways, it was that very condescending you know, I've been doing this for 30 plus years. You need to yada, yada, yada. When that got started, you could literally see the look in their faces of starting to go "click" with the auditory. They were starting to turn them off.

[Ari]: Mm-hmm.

[John]: And so when we're talking about. I'm sorry?

[Ari]: Oh, I just said that's very that's interesting.

[John]: And so, I mean, the travesty in it is while we like to talk about differences, [garbled] now are huge. Everybody wants a relationship in the workplace where I can turn my back on you and not worry about being stabbed. Secondly, I want an opportunity to add value, whatever that means. But I want an opportunity to contribute, to add value. And the third piece, and this is where the differences happen, are the values—and values are not ethics. And this is where law diverges because there's two laws, right? There's what's written. And then secondly, there's the interpretation of what's written. Values are the motivational preferences. And what motivates different age groups and so forth is where a lot of the collisions are happening, is where the conflicts are happening. Long answer, I know, but I'm trying to summarize a very big picture of whatever 60 years.

[Ari]: Yes, I think that's helpful. So I'm wondering, John, if you can kind of provide our listeners who, you know, a majority of which are in management, human resources, business owners, if you can, high level or

just, you know, explain your ...maybe your top three tips or things for management to keep in mind when dealing with conflicts that arise out of these generational differences.

[John]: First of all. Number one, if a manager, a leader is not willing to be humble, genuinely humble, get out of leadership. You are going to be eaten alive, or in court. Second, ask questions. And the easiest way to do it is...and this is when I work with, meet, whatever you want to call them, as agents, coaching staff is describe the behavior and then ask the question. So, you know, if it was me, John, I see you doing the photocopies at the workplace and I see you doing all these things, but I see how long it takes you and then you're not getting some of the projects that we need done. You're not getting those reports in. How should I interpret what I'm seeing? What should I be thinking? And one of the most important pieces for leadership mid- or senior is ask questions upon describing the behaviors. What should I think? What are those values you're modeling? How should I interpret what I'm... whatever you want me to call that, but asking those questions around what we're seeing. Because many conflicts will happen over behaviors that we presume we know what their motivation. And then the third piece is in the workplace, what are your values? And if you think the values on the website or in the [garbled] values, you're only deceiving yourself. There's two sets of values in every organization. There's the ones posted on the website and there's the ones that everybody operates by. Generational differences are huge, because...and I have a huge respect for the younger ones because I have that wiring. I don't have a problem questioning authority when the values of the walk and the values of the talk don't match, I become a stone in a shoe for leadership. And one of the first things that leaders have to start doing... as younger workforce are going to start calling them on it. What values are we really living here?

[Ari]: Right. Yeah, I think that resonates with me, John, just being, you know, someone in the millennial category. And I think the tips that you've given us are helpful because, you know, I think from my perspective, I would like someone to ask me the questions, right? I would like the opportunity for input, even in the context of being, I will say, disciplined, for lack of a better word. But, you know, I think for my generation in particular, just saying to someone, you're doing it wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. Right, it doesn't... I don't think that it elicits a very positive response.

[John]: And you just picked up on one of the key themes that I utilize is: discipline requires love. I don't discipline somebody I don't care about.

[Ari]: Right.

[John]: Punishment does not require love. Punishment requires...well, you didn't follow the rules. So if we want to build a workplace where people want to be, then we have to be willing to discipline. But the discipline has to be anchored around the values, because we want them to develop their potential. It's not brain surgery.

[Ari]: Right. Right. So, John, I think one of the things I wanted to ask you, because, you know, at least here where I am, New York, the US, it's a tough labor market with the pandemic and everything that's been going on in the world really the last few years. And, you know, I think a lot of times when people of a certain generation, I think most of the time the younger generation, which I feel comfortable saying, since I'll slot myself in there, I think sometimes it's perceived like, oh, you know, there's all these generations in this workforce. And I think sometimes that can be perceived as, oh, that employer or that business is a little too traditional. But do you think that there are ways that employers who have a diverse workforce can use that as a way to recruit or retain employees? Like, how do you, as a business owner or employer, kind of promote the diverse workforce that you have?

[John]: So two things. Number one, why do you have a diverse workforce? So pick any team sports. In hockey if you only have goalies—I don't need to be an NHL coach, but you're not going very far. If I'm an NFL coach and I only have quarterbacks, I don't care who the quarterback is, you're not going to go in. So a diverse workforce is about building that team that in collaboration can move things forward. So number one, why do you have a diverse workforce? The second question that can be asked is, you know, why would somebody want to work at this workplace? And that's going to speak to your generations because your older ones are

going to be “benefits” or whatever. New parents they’re on that bubble of do we... do I settle for a job with benefits or do I do the entrepreneurial whatever, self-employment, whatever the other hat is, no benefits.

[Ari]: Right.

[John]: But why would somebody want to work for your workforce in your workplace? And depending on the answer, is going to speak to those generations. And then obviously, the third piece is up to the workplace to say, you know, what...how would you describe this workplace? Because we have a team on the field, not an individual, and we are motivating people by diversity.

[Ari]: Right. So one thing I wanted to ask you, John, or get your take on is, you know, I think right now for a lot of our clients and employers, the hot button issue is remote work. Right? And I think at least for some, you know, we get it ...we get a lot of questions about, you know, remote work policies, work from home policies. And there definitely seems to be a conflict between the generations in terms of who thinks remote work can work, and who thinks it doesn’t. And so I was wondering if you could kind of comment on that, because that I think has been a really big issue in our pandemic/post-pandemic world we’re living in.

[John]: Yes, and I think you’re bang on because—and this goes right back to when somebody says to me, well I have 20 years of experience. My disturber personality will ask, just curious, do you have one year of experience repeated 20 years...20 times over? Or do you have 20 years of growing experience?

[Ari]: Good questions.

[John]: And when we’re talking about remote work, that’s the exact same theme of remote work or hybrid or whatever it ends up being. Because what are the outcomes of my day’s job? So I can take eight hours to do a job that might have taken you, whatever, one hour. So the real issue/challenge and hurdle is: am I spending eight hours a day in the office doing the same things over and over—one year of experience, repeated 20 times over? Or am I developing a career based on outcomes and deliverables and, you know what? If you work two hours on it and get it all done, or you work 20 hours on it and get it all done...and that’s going to change the management model, because now the management model, it becomes... okay, John, why are you taking 20 hours doing remote work to do something, finish something that should take two hours? Well, that’s having those tough conversations. That’s not a, well, technically it’s a performance issue, but it’s not.

[Ari]: Yes. Interesting. Interesting perspective. Well, John, I think we’re in the end of our time.

[John]: Okay. No, I was just going to add, because this is where the values kick in to describing the behavior and asking them how I should interpret that. What should I be thinking? And having tough conversations is not natural for some people—generations—in the workplace, you know, don’t question authority. That speaks to an age group.

[Ari]: Right. And I think with the remote work issue, you know, at least from what we’ve seen, that really has come to a head because it’s sometimes it’s a performance issue or is my workforce being productive? And then I think sometimes it’s just this is the way we’ve always done it. Butts in the chairs and this is how we need to keep doing it.

[John]: Best explanation... there was if you go back to those old forts where you know, the cannons in 1800, 1900 forts. There was one where they had a cannon and they had seven soldiers. So there was two for loading and there was two for ramming, there was two for getting everything set up. There were six involved. And every tourist that came to ask, why do you have seven soldiers? You’re only using six. None of them could answer. Somebody got a historian to do some research. And what they discovered was the seventh soldier was to hold the horses when the cannon fired so that the horses didn’t take off. Some of our workplace practices were great 30 years ago. Sometimes we need to ask, why do we still have that soldier holding horses when we don’t use horses anymore?

[Ari]: Exactly. So one last question, John, and I think this is related to what we were just talking about. Do you think that there is, given the generations in the workforce, the diversity of the workforce, being in this pandemic world, do you think that it requires more flexibility on behalf of businesses and management—just in terms of these workforce/workplace issues?

[John]: That’s a loaded question because and... is and I don’t want to sound like lawyer-ish, but “flexibility” is a very subjective term. Flexibility needs to be defined objectively. So I can tell you what to do or I can tell you how to do it. Flexibility is the way that those two get achieved. On the other hand, selfish people can translate flexibility as saying, well, I want you to pay me my 35 and a half hours of work a week, even though I’m actually doing two hours’ worth of work. That’s no longer flexibility.

[Ari]: Right. Very true. I will admit a bit of a loaded question, but I think at least speaking from my own experience, there’s been a little bit more what I would deem to be “flexibility” and trying to resolve some of the issues. And it really goes more to not always doing things the way that we’re used to doing.

[John]: And you’re bang on. Just because I’ve always done it that way doesn’t mean it’s the way I should always do it. But the second part of it is if a person is a good employee, whatever “good” means in that workplace, and they say, you know what? If he or she says, I’d like a little more flexibility in how I do my work, I’d like to start at six and be done at ten and then pick up again at eight p.m. and finish at midnight. And they’re a great employee; the real question leadership needs to ask is: do you want to run the risk of losing that great employee? Never mind trying to find another one over the sake of how something gets done.

[Ari]: Yep. It’s a very good question, and I think that the asks... there have been more asks for that type of flexibility given the pandemic. And I think the younger generations in the workforce.

[John]: Yup. And younger people tend to work to live, not live to work.

[Ari]: I think that’s bang on, John.

[John]: It’s not my first rodeo. And part of what I think is the golden opportunity here is when we actually start playing to different values and different generations, therefore, we can actually become a far stronger workforce and culture. Because you don’t think like me, because you don’t value what I do. Therefore, you can provide insights that would never have crossed my mind.

[Ari]: So true. So true, John. Well, thank you. I think that’s a great way to wrap up this episode. And before we go, any final last words of wisdom or anything you want to share that maybe we didn’t touch on today?

[John]: Honestly, the one thing is when you and you’ve already echoed it, but it’s that “don’t tell, ask.” We live in a world that loves to tell. All the experts are the 40–50,000 in the stands, because they know what the 20-something on the field should be doing. Don’t be more voice chattering in the stands. Ask! Did you notice what I notice? What should I think? How should I view that? And watch the growth that happens in ourselves and maybe them...

[Ari]: Great advice, John. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been so helpful. I know this is a different episode for us, but I think this is really going to trigger a different way of thinking for our listeners. So I so appreciate your time, John.

[John]: My pleasure. And I look forward to... if there’s some follow-up, that would be phenomenal. But and I’m presuming that in the show notes, there will be an opportunity. If people have questions, please let me know.

[Ari]: Absolutely. Yep. Of course, as John mentioned for our listeners, any questions? Feel free to reach out to John. And you know, John, social media information and everything is available on the post for the podcast and on our firm website. So thanks again, John.

[John]: My pleasure. And thank you very much for allowing me to encourage your listeners.

[Ari]: Absolutely. Take care.

[Ari]: *The Labor & Employment Podcast* is available on barclaydamon.com, YouTube, and all your favorite podcast streaming platforms. Like, follow, share, and continue to listen. Thanks.

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