A stereotype is an oversimplified characterization and therefore doesn't apply to every person of a group at all times in all situations. However, people fall back on stereotypes related to age, physical appearance or gender when interacting. So, real or imagined, stereotypes play a role in how people are judged and how their actions and words are perceived.

In the workplace, it helps to understand the traits, values and stereotypes of the generations represented on your team, in your department or in your organization—including those of your own generation. "When people see how one generation's childhood is different from their childhood, they begin to see how the values of each generation developed," explains Amy Hirsh Robinson, principal at workforce consulting firm Interchange Group in Los Angeles.

Members of the **Silent Generation**, or **Traditionalists**, grew up during the devastation of the Great Depression and came of age under the sacrifices of World War II. They witnessed the growth of the federal government as Social Security programs created jobs and safety nets for the poor and the elderly. Therefore, Traditionalists' values in the workplace tend to be frugality, adherence to rules, loyalty to employers, and a deep sense of responsibility and sacrifice for the good of the organization.

Traditionalists' values and expectations have shaped corporate cultures even if they don't run the organizations anymore, notes Giselle Kovary, managing partner at Toronto-based N-gen People Performance Inc., a consulting firm focused on improving engagement in multi-generational workplaces. While Traditionalists represent a small percentage of the labor force, their values are most closely aligned to the way corporations are structured. The culture they created is fiscally conservative, rewards tenure and loyalty, is rules-focused, and measures performance based on the number of hours worked.

The 76 million **Baby Boomers** were dubbed the "Me" generation, striving for individual rights in society and the workplace. Birth control gave women the choice to delay motherhood to pursue education and careers. Independence and social consciousness are Baby Boomers' bedrock values. They marched against "the establishment" to bring about equal rights and an end to the Vietnam War. Competitive and independent, Baby Boomers are workaholics, with identities closely aligned to their professions, Robinson notes.

At 45 million, **Generation X** pales in size compared to Baby Boomers and therefore is often overlooked. These latchkey kids grew up as the divorce rate doubled and the number of mothers raising children and working outside the home soared. Members of Generation X were often left to their own devices after school, with the television as a baby sitter. This generation saw the invention of the personal computer, a deregulated airline industry and multiple recessions. They became technologically astute, more mobile and highly educated, as they went back to school when they couldn't find jobs. Self-management, pragmatism and cynicism are traits associated with Generation X.

"Their value set is focused on gaining transferrable skills so that they can be ready when the rug is pulled out from under them—as it has throughout their lives," Robinson says. "All the major institutions fell apart around them—marriage, family, corporations and the economy. Their attitude is, 'You've never done anything for me. Why should I do something for you?' "

Nearly 80 million strong, **Millennials** grew up in an era of advancing technology. This generation had access to computers at home and school, and became Internet-savvy at an early age. Diverse populations in their schools and neighborhoods developed their cultural fluency. Raised by Baby Boomers who desired peer-like relationships with their children, Millennials have been constantly coached, praised and encouraged for participation—rather than for accomplishments.

Their exposure to a range of experiences benefits employers. They have been taught to be well-rounded—get good grades and test scores, play an instrument and volunteer, notes Robinson, who adds, "They bring all those experiences and talents to the workplace."

Millennials tend to be naturally optimistic: Thirty-seven percent of 18- to 29-year-olds are unemployed or out of the workforce—the highest share among this age group in more than three decades. Yet about nine of 10 say they currently have enough money or believe they will eventually meet their long-term financial goals, according to the Pew Research Center's 2010 Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next.

—Adrienne Fox