

SROA Soundboard: Episode 2 – Managing a Multigenerational Workforce in the Radiation Oncology Department with Kim Lear

Tammy :

This is Tammy McCausland. Thank you for joining me for SROA Soundboard, SROA's new podcast series. I am joined here in conversation today with Kim Lear of Inlay Insights.

Tammy :

What are the biggest myths of the multigenerational workforce?

Kim:

The biggest myths. I feel like most of what's out there is sort of this weird, non-researched, very mythical ideas. I would just say that the biggest myth out there is really around how this area of study should actually be used, because the study of generations is rooted in sociology, not psychology, and as leaders and as managers, having an understanding of both sides is really important. Sociology can help us look at some of the bigger trends that we're seeing across the country, across the world. With psychology, you can really better understand one specific individual.

Kim:

So I think that a myth out there is that by understanding generations, it can give you extremely prescriptive takeaways, like, "If I am delivering feedback to a millennial, I should do X, Y, and Z." I don't believe that that's the best use of this topic. I think it's much more to understand how have concepts around work ethic changed over time? How have concepts around sacrifice changed? What do people want out of work today, and how is that different than what we saw 20 years ago? It's more to provide context for some of the changes that we're seeing and help us see the world through the eyes of a different generation.

Tammy :

That's fascinating. Why is dealing with generations such a hot topic right now?

Kim:

People are living longer, people are working longer, so we have more generations working shoulder to shoulder. I think that that's the biggest reason for the interest in this topic right now.

Tammy :

When we talk about generations, why do we tend to stereotype negatively, and what should we do instead?

Kim:

Well, one of the things that we'll talk about in the keynote today is around how generational hazing has always been a part of our cultural narrative, and there are so many historical examples that we can point to, to see how we've always done this. And I think part of it is because there is a natural feeling, which is very human and understandable, that, "You cannot have what I have unless you go through exactly what I went through." I think that's where some of the generational tension can come from,

when a new generation comes in and perhaps has different demands, has different expectations. I think that that's where some of the conflict can really arise.

Tammy :

How do we get out of the mindset that, "The way I do it is the best way?" Because people from one generation, especially when they're looking at the younger generations, they shake their head and they think, "I don't know why they do it that way," or, "Why are they like that?" But how do we be more open and embrace the different ways of thinking or doing, or even goals and desires?

Kim:

This is probably a cliché answer, but I think when we come up against anything that is different from our own way of thinking, one of our knee-jerk reactions is to say, "Well, I'm doing it right, which would mean that you're doing it wrong," where instead of approaching it that way, it's more productive to approach it with curiosity, to ask questions like, "I wonder why your ideas around this are different than mine. I wonder why some of your priorities are different than what my priorities were at that same age." Asking better questions, actually having more honest conversations with people who are different from you, whether that's racially, from a gender perspective, generationally, whatever that is. So I think it's just to approach those conversations with more curiosity and understand that it's not just right or wrong, or better or worse, but different people can bring different ideas forward, and all of those ideas can be right.

Tammy :

We have as many as five generations in the workforce, so it can be hard for managers to... and maybe tiring to be accommodating to all the different generations. So what do they do? What's a general rule to follow?

Kim:

One is that people, across the board, want to feel like they're making an impact, and how that manifests might be a little bit different. So for all good managers, one it's to understand, "Who are the individuals who are on my team? What kind of impact do I feel like they want to make, and how can I keep them connected to that?" And I even find that sometimes in healthcare, it doesn't always make sense, but sometimes healthcare workers are the ones who can be furthest removed from why they do what they do, the real impact they have, because it's almost kind of this given. You work in healthcare. There's so much meaning. What you're doing obviously matters, so sometimes, I feel that leaders and managers don't always think it's their responsibility to keep their people connected to that.

Kim:

But there are a lot of people where the job is very difficult. It's emotionally demanding, oftentimes physically demanding, and you can lose sight at times, of why you do what you do, the real impact that you have. So I think for great leaders and good managers, keeping their people connected to that connecting the dots on why we do what we do, even though it's hard. It's hard for a reason, because of the impact that we all really have.

Tammy :

That's a great segue into my next question. Healthcare environments don't have the same flexibility as other environments, like tech, and maybe startup environment, so for example, radiation therapy is

delivered in standard hours, and people aren't allowed to check their cell phones. They have to keep them in their pocket. So given sort of the structure and strictness of the radiation therapy or radiation oncology environment, what are the best ways to bridge gaps and create a harmonized workplace when you've got workers of different ages and generations?

Kim:

Managing expectations helps. Being very transparent about the demands of the job help. And to focus on what this job really does provide, because there are times when I work with tech companies, and they have a ton of flexibility, and they can check their phone whenever they want, and they have remote work options, and all of those things, but they say things like, "I don't feel like what I'm doing really matters." They would want more meaning. They would want more impact in their work. I talk to people who, again, work in these flexible environments, and they say, "It is so exhausting that I'm always kind of on, because even though I have flexibility, it's also that if I get an email at 11:00 PM, I'm kind of responsible for answering it, because we're a little bit always on and always off."

Kim:

So I think there are more people who you would think that actually crave some of that rigidness, so that they understand when they're on, when they're off, and they can have more of a natural separation between their work and their life. So, managing expectations, being very open and honest about what the job requires, and focusing on what you do have. The fact that there is a pretty clear line between work and play is something that people are hungry for today, and there are tech companies where they have nap pods, and they have... people get to sit on beanbag chairs, and they have slides, and they have all this crazy stuff, but some of their employees feel like they don't know why they do what they do, and they don't feel like it matters. Then all of those other bells and whistles are no longer relevant, where in this industry, of course, what you're doing does matter.

Tammy :

Baby boomers and gen X'ers didn't grow up with technology on hand, some millennials did maybe when they hit their teen years or just before their teen years, and gen Z, they're on as soon as their parents let them have a cell phone. You mentioned about the divide between a craving to be on versus off, and knowing when that happens, but you see a lot of millennials and gen Z on all the time. Is that a struggle in the workplace, for maybe the boomers and the gen X'ers want that divide, they more clearly than the others, or is it something that everybody wants, when they're on and when they're off?

Kim:

There's a growing craving for people to be able to turn off, and I have seen that span all of the generations. Even with gen Z, the average gen Z'er gets their first smart phone when they're 10-and-a-half years old, so when we hear things and say things like, "These kids, they're always on. They're so addicted to technology," the algorithms that were built into these phones are built to tap into your psychological weaknesses. So even for adults with fully formed frontal lobes, we have a difficult time controlling our own interactions with these phones, so I don't know why we would expect that 10-and-a-half-year-olds would magically have this incredible self-discipline that adults do not have.

Kim:

So I do feel that when I'm on focus groups on college campuses today, these young people have a real understanding of the pros and cons of tech. It's not all bad. I am amazed at how resourceful they are,

this real do-it-yourself attitude, where they will use technology to figure things out. It is incredible to me. But they also say, "I will intentionally create space to turn off, to get away from this." In a few of the focus groups, they talk about going to dinner with friends, and one of the things that they'll do is all of them will put their phones away, and the first person to pick it up and look at it has to pay for everyone's meal. So it's almost this game of keeping their phones away from them, keeping their screens away, so I think that that's actually a place where the generations will come together.

Kim:

And, there are studies out there that would show that some of the behavior that actually baby boomers show around tech looks almost more addictive than what we see with teenagers, because teenagers also... They're not wowed by this technology. They grew up with it, so there isn't something that is so... They have some control over how stimulating they really feel like it is, where for baby boomers, because it is very new, they're kind of amazed at the way that the world has opened up for them. Sometimes, the behavior that we see among older Americans is more possibly detrimental than what we see with teens.

Tammy :

That's really surprising, because everybody thinks the problem is strictly with the young people.

Kim:

Yeah.

Tammy :

What are two or three things that leaders need to remember with managing the multigenerational workforce?

Kim:

When you are reading articles or looking at data around the topic of generations, just vet those sources. Make sure that you know where this data is coming from. I would encourage people to just be... to try to find as many longitudinal studies as possible, because out of context, none of this information about generations is really relevant. I'll just give you an example. There was a study that came out recently that said something like 93% of gen Z'ers don't trust government institutions. But out of context, that is so meaningless to us. I'm sure that if that same study was done with baby boomers after Watergate, they probably would have said the same thing. So I think there's a lot of misinformation out there around this topic, so one, just being very savvy about the information that we take in as leaders and managers before actually implementing anything, which this is a very sophisticated group, and I'm sure that everyone is aware of that.

Kim:

Then the other thing is that it's not about right or wrong or better or worse. Every generation comes in, and they adapt to the world in which they live in, so some of their expectations would of course be different. What they expect out of career trajectory, what work ethic looks like, what sacrifice looks like, what work-life balance looks like. All of these things, they are constantly evolving, so instead of coming up against all of them with fear or a feeling like, "What I did was right. What you did is wrong," taking that time to try to understand, even from a cultural level, "What has changed within our society that has created some of these trends that I'm seeing today, and how can I better understand where they're coming from?"

Tammy :

It's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today, Kim. Thank you for your insights.

Kim:

Thank you so much for having me.

Tammy :

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