

KNOWLEDGE CENTRE · OCTOBER 2026

Your new boss is 34

Working for someone younger, whether you are 41 or 56. What it does to you, and what it asks of you both.

THREE CAREERS, ONE TABLE

● you, 56 ● you, 41 ● your new manager

You

born 1970



Or you

born 1985



Her

born 1992



1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020

1992 to 1994 When she was born, you were writing your first job application. Or: when she started, you had already worked in HR for six years.

IN BRIEF

Five things to remember

Whether you are around 40 or around 55, this paper starts with you. Then we look at the two of you together, and at your organisation.

1

It is becoming more common, at every age.

In a German study, one in four employees had a younger manager. It affects you differently at 41 than at 56, but it does affect you.

2

It is fine for it to affect you.

Anger, uncertainty, feeling passed over: it is common. Burying it does not solve anything.

3

Stereotypes cut both ways.

Common images of older employees are usually wrong. But older employees also expect less of a young manager.

4

Generations differ less than you think.

Research finds hardly any difference between generations in satisfaction, commitment or intention to leave.

5

The first conversation makes the difference.

Say what you expect of each other, and how you will raise it when there is friction.

Experience and a fresh perspective are not opposites. They need each other.

CHAPTER 1 · SOUND FAMILIAR?

The first month

She is smart, enthusiastic and friendly. And yet something grates. Whether you are 41 or 56, what she says and what you think can be far apart.

WHAT SHE SAYS, 34

"Nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"Let's take a completely new approach to the appraisal cycle."

"Could you just put that on the new planning board?"

"I really want to learn from you how things work here."

"I see you as my sounding board."

"Could you give me a quick call at half past five?"

WHAT YOU THINK, 56

From whom? And what?

We already tried that in 2015.

I had just printed it out.

Does she mean that, or is she being polite?

Why does that feel like a step back?

In the past that could have waited until tomorrow.

WHAT YOU THINK, 41

Does she see me as a rival?

Good idea. But who does that on top of everything?

Yet another new tool.

I applied for her job myself.

Nice. But when is it my turn?

At half past five I pick up the children.

THE PATTERN

She usually means well. You often have a point. The friction just sits in a different place: for one it is about recognition, for the other about room to grow.

The lines are fictional, compiled from what HR professionals often describe.

CHAPTER 1 · SOUND FAMILIAR?

Same boss, a different question

A younger manager affects everyone differently. Two HR professionals, one new director aged 34.

Ingrid, 56

head of HR, recently started working for a director aged 34

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Recognition. Thirty years of experience, and the question of whether it still counts.

WHAT SHE ASKS HERSELF

"Am I the old guard now?"

WHAT SHE BRINGS

History, a network, calm in a crisis, knowledge of the collective agreement and works council.

HER PITFALL

Withdrawing. Sentences that start with: we used to.

Ilse, 41

HR manager, recently started working for a director aged 34

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Room to grow. She may have wanted the job herself.

WHAT SHE ASKS HERSELF

"Why her, and not me? And when is it my turn?"

WHAT SHE BRINGS

Knowledge of old and new, energy, translating between worlds.

HER PITFALL

Competing instead of collaborating. Taking on even more in an already full life.

WHAT THEY SHARE

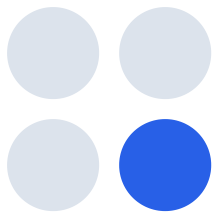
Both work for someone younger. Both wonder whether their experience counts. And neither of them says it out loud.

Ingrid and Ilse are fictional. Which of the two do you recognise yourself in most? Or are you somewhere in between?

CHAPTER 2 · THE FACTS

Increasingly common, not always easy

A younger manager is no longer the exception. Research shows that the friction is real, on both sides.



1 in 4

employees had a manager who was younger than themselves.

One in four

On average, about a quarter of employees had a manager who was younger. Usually the manager is older.

Kunze and Menges, 2017; 61 German companies, almost 8,000 employees

More negative emotions

The larger the age gap in that direction, the more often employees reported anger or fear. Companies with more of those emotions performed worse.

Kunze and Menges, 2017

Lower expectations

Older employees expected less of their younger manager, and rated their leadership lower.

Collins, Hair and Rocco, 2009

WHY IT IS HAPPENING MORE OFTEN

In the Netherlands the state pension age (AOW) is 67, so people keep working for longer. Promotions depend more on skills than on age or years of service. As a result, more and more experienced professionals get a younger manager.

Bars: one is a single study. The German study shows a correlation, not proven causation. We found no Dutch figures on this topic.

CHAPTER 3 · STEREOTYPES

What people think about you

There are persistent images of older employees. Researchers set them against the data. Five of the six do not hold up.

SIX STEREOTYPES, TESTED

~~Older employees are less motivated.~~

not true

~~They no longer want to learn or train.~~

not true

~~They resist change.~~

not true

~~They trust others less.~~

not true

~~Their health gets in the way of their work more often.~~

not true

They are less concerned with their careers.

partly true

Ng and Feldman, 2012; meta-analysis of about 380 studies

Why that one is partly true

The researchers point out that development programmes are often aimed at younger employees. Those who are invited less also take part less.

And your performance?

Age is barely related to how well someone does the core of their job. Older employees help colleagues more often and take short sick leave less often.

Ng and Feldman, 2008; meta-analysis

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Are you seen as less flexible or less keen to learn? That is an image, not a fact, and you can name it. Are you around 40? Then you sometimes fall in between: not young enough to count as an innovator, not old enough for the experienced role.

CHAPTER 3 · STEREOTYPES

And your image of her?

Stereotypes work both ways. Experienced professionals also hold images of younger managers, and those are often wrong too.

WHAT SHE MAY THINK OF YOU

"She doesn't want to change."

"She's almost retired."

"She doesn't get the new tools."

WHAT YOU MAY THINK OF HER

"She has never been through a crisis."

"She's only here for her CV."

"She has no patience for being thorough."

The difference rarely lies in the generation. It lies in experience, life stage and position. And that you can talk about.

Generations hardly differ in satisfaction, commitment to the organisation or the wish to leave. Small differences are more likely linked to age and career stage.

Costanza et al., 2012; meta-analysis, 20 studies, almost 20,000 workers



A committee of the US National Academies concluded that generational labels are not a sound basis for HR policy.

National Academies, 2020; broad review



CHAPTER 4 · WHAT IT DOES TO YOU

Four feelings you are allowed to have

A new manager who is younger touches on status, identity and the question of where you stand. Often all at once.

Passed over

"I wanted that job too. Or: nobody asked whether I wanted it."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Ask what decided the choice. Then you know where you stand, for later too.

Invisible

"My experience seems to count for less than her new ideas."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Offer your experience as a question, not a judgement: what can we learn from last time?

Unsure

"Can I keep up with the pace and the tools? Does my way of working still fit in?"

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Choose one new tool or way of working and ask her or a colleague to explain it.

Relieved

"I no longer have to carry everything. Someone else takes final responsibility."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use the space. Where do you want to put your energy now?

Burying it does not solve anything

In organisations where you were not supposed to show emotions, the age gap did not lead to more negative emotions overall. The researchers warn: the feelings are still there, but nobody sees them. Suppressing emotions for a long time is not healthy.

Kunze and Menges, 2017

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

What you feel says nothing about your professionalism. You can be angry about how things went and loyal to your new manager at the same time. It helps to name it for yourself first, and then to talk it through with someone you trust.

CHAPTER 5 · AND YOU?

And you?

A page for yourself, whether you are the younger or the older one. No test, no score. Just a moment to take an honest look.

DO ANY OF THESE SOUND FAMILIAR?

- ☐ You start sentences more often with: we used to.
- ☐ You keep your opinion to yourself because you do not want to seem old-fashioned.
- ☐ You wonder why she got that job, and you did not.
- ☐ You feel too young for the experienced role, and too old to be the innovator.
- ☐ You are not sure you still want to stay here.
- ☐ You notice you bring in fewer ideas than you used to.

WHAT IT MEANS

Nothing about how good you are. It does mean the new relationship has not taken shape yet. That is normal in the first months.

It is also a moment to choose again: what do you want in the next phase of your career? A coach or a career conversation can help.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR YOURSELF

What do I want to achieve in the coming years, regardless of who my manager is?

What can I teach her, and what can she teach me?

What do I need from her to be able to work well?

Sharing experience works both ways. Even with someone younger.

CHAPTER 6 · WHAT HELPS

What helps, on both sides

The friction does not disappear by itself. It does when you make visible together what each of you brings.

WHAT YOU BRING

- History: what has already been tried, and why
- A network inside and outside the organisation
- Calm during crises and reorganisations
- Knowledge of rules, collective agreement and works council

WHAT SHE BRINGS

- A fresh look at established habits
- New tools and ways of working
- A connection with younger colleagues
- A mandate to change things

1

State expectations, in both directions

Low expectations act as a brake. Say what you expect of her, and ask what she expects of you.

Collins et al., 2009

2

Give feedback, and ask for it

Feedback from different sides shows where your self-image and how others see you diverge. For you, and for her.

Practice, for example in 360 feedback

PRACTICE

3

Swap knowledge

You bring context, a network and history. She brings new tools and a fresh perspective. Agree on what you will teach each other.

Practice, as in mutual mentoring

PRACTICE

4

Discuss what grates, before it builds up

Unspoken frustration does not go away. Set a regular moment to discuss how things are going between you.

Kunze and Menges, 2017

Bars: one is a single study; practice is experience without scientific testing. There is little research into what specifically helps with a younger manager. This advice follows from what the research does show.

CHAPTER 6 · WHAT HELPS

What your manager can do

A good working relationship is not only your job. You can share these five points with your manager. They follow from the same research.

1

Ask first, change later

PRACTICE

In the first weeks, ask what has already been tried, and why it did or did not work. That way she shows she takes experience seriously.

Practice

2

State expectations, for both of you

Experienced employees often expect less of a younger manager. That only changes when she says what she expects, and asks what you need.

Collins, Hair and Rocco, 2009

3

Do not assume lower motivation

Experienced employees are not less motivated or less willing to change. Not even after 55.

Ng and Feldman, 2012; meta-analysis

4

Offer development at every age

The only stereotype that is partly true is linked to fewer opportunities for older staff. Development is for 41 and for 56, not just for talent under 35.

Ng and Feldman, 2012

5

Discuss what grates

Unspoken frustration about an age gap weighs on morale and results. A good manager asks about it, even when it is uncomfortable.

Kunze and Menges, 2017

BEST AVOIDED

Dismissing experience as the old way.

Only asking younger colleagues for input.

Jokes about retirement or about "the old guard".

Bars: two is meta-analysis, one is a single study, practice is experience without testing.

CONVERSATION CARD

The first real conversation

Not the introductory meeting, but the conversation after it. Three topics, with phrases you can borrow.

1

What I need from you*"I work best when I know why something is changing."**"Ask me about the history before you scrap something."*MY OWN PHRASE
.....

2

What you can expect from me*"I'll tell you when I disagree, and then I'll help you make it work."**"I'll share what I know, even when you don't ask."*MY OWN PHRASE
.....

3

How we say it when there is friction*"May I say something about how this comes across to me?"**"Shall we check every month how it's going between us?"*MY OWN PHRASE
.....**FOR YOU**

Start with what you like about her plans. Then your criticism will land better.

FOR HER

Feel free to give this page to your manager. The conversation works best when you both prepare for it.

CHAPTER 7 · YOUR ORGANISATION

From you to your organisation

What you are going through now is happening in more teams. Four steps to make age differences a strength.

ASK**Ask the question**

- In your employee survey, ask how people experience working with their manager.
- Also ask whether experience is put to use.

SEE**Look by age group**

- Are there differences between young and older staff under the same policy?
- Only show it when each group has enough responses.

ACT**Use what everyone brings**

- Deploy experienced colleagues as mentors and knowledge holders.
- Offer development to all ages, not just to talent under 35.

MEASURE**Check whether it works**

- After a year, track whether the differences are getting smaller.
- Use 360 feedback for new managers, including from older team members.

**HOW DEEPLER HELPS**

With Deepler Research you filter results by group, such as age, and only see groups of six respondents or more. Deepler 360 gives a personal report with blind spots first, and shows the difference between self-image and how others see you.

[CLIENT CASE Generations in the workplace →](#)[360 Feedback for managers →](#)

METHODOLOGY

Sources

RESEARCH

Collins, Hair and Rocco (2009). The older-worker-younger-supervisor dyad: a test of the reverse Pygmalion effect. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. doi:10.1002/hrdq.20006

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Evidence: two bars is a meta-analysis or broad review, one is a single study, practice is experience without testing. **What we do not claim:** there is little research on younger managers, and we found no Dutch research. The German study shows a correlation, not causation. The careers, phrases and feelings are illustrations. This is not career or psychological advice.

About Deepler. Deepler was founded in 2021 by four change managers. We help organisations listen to their employees and see what is needed. Better performance through better listening. deepler.io/en/about-us

FURTHER READING

Does one HR policy work for all ages?

Scan the code and read (in Dutch) how a business services provider saw where generations really differed, and where they did not.

deepler.io/en/use-cases/generational-differences-in-the-workplace →

