

YOUR MONEY

When the Boss Is Half Your Age

Retiring

By JOANNE KAUFMAN MARCH 17, 2017

Christine Sabo had three decades of fund-raising experience behind her when, three years ago, she was hired as the vice president for major giving at a nonprofit in South Florida. But right about the time Ms. Sabo came aboard, the chief executive had accepted a new position elsewhere.

The replacement in the top slot: a 36-year-old.

“The way he operated was classic for that age group: I would get texts and emails any time day and night,” recalled Ms. Sabo, now 59. “If I said I had 30 years in the profession, he hated that. He would say: ‘I don’t want to hear how long you’ve been in the field. I don’t care how long you’ve done this or that.’”

The new boss seemed to be sending the message that the way Ms. Sabo approached fund-raising and development was out of date. “At the end of the day, it felt like, ‘You need to come into the new millennium,’” she said. “I used to chuckle and wonder what kind of relationship he had with his mother.”

Despite her growing discomfort, she tried to do her job and avoid conversation or confrontation with the boss — who first demoted her, then fired her.

“He told me that I wasn’t hitting my goals, but that’s not true,” said Ms. Sabo, who has a new job and an older boss. “I think it was that we butted heads. Some of it was style, but some of it was generational.”

Companies these days are looking to fill the management ranks with people who are “digital natives,” which frequently translates to millennials and Gen X-ers. Meanwhile, more baby boomers are staying on the job longer, and some retirees, looking for a second act, are rejoining the ranks of the employed, at least part time.

Consequently, the odds are increasing that older workers will be answering to managers young enough to be their children. A 2014 Harris Interactive survey on behalf of CareerBuilder, a job recruitment website, found that 38 percent of American workers had a younger boss, up from 34 percent in 2012.

“Obviously, there have always been younger people in the work force, but in the past, younger workers were on the lower floors and older workers were executives on the upper floors and in the executive dining room,” said Jill Chapman, a senior performance consultant with Insperity, a personnel management firm.

But because younger workers now have the advantage in sheer numbers, “there are more opportunities for them to move into management roles,” Ms. Chapman continued. “They’re in their 30s, and they’ve had lots of experience because of internships we older workers gave them when they were in high school and college. They had those experiences, and they had the chops for exec positions at an earlier age.”

If older workers have difficulty adjusting, there’s a good reason: It goes against the natural order that the subordinate would have several decades on the supervisor. “Research shows that older workers are not as responsive to that younger boss, because they feel he or she shouldn’t be in that position,” said Orlando Richard, an associate professor of management at the University of Texas at Dallas, who recently completed a study on status incongruence.

There are implications for the organization, too. “The older workers with younger bosses are less committed to the company,” Professor Richard said. “They’re not as engaged in the job. If they’re close to retirement, they may not leave, but they may not work as hard.”

Of course, there are plenty of older workers who continue to give the job their all, even though they now report to someone who thinks of Nirvana as an oldies

band. The way they see it, though, that younger boss sure doesn't make it easy.

Faye Keller, a public affairs specialist in the health care field in Salt Lake City, was 60 when she got a boss who was half her age. "At the beginning, I wasn't too concerned — I was ready to look for his strengths," Ms. Keller said

But then she started being excluded from certain meetings. At those meetings she did attend, "I'd say something, and my boss would respond 'yeah, uh-huh,' and move on to another topic."

Colleagues closer to her boss's age were invited to hang out in his office. "I felt ostracized," said Ms. Keller, who is now 64.

She also felt micromanaged. "I would go out of the building to meet with prospective clients, and when I explained that I was trying to develop relationships, he would tell me I could do it over the phone and through email," Ms. Keller said. "I don't believe I'm old school in my ideas, but I think face to face is essential in building successful relationships, and he didn't value that." The boss stayed; she went.

There are challenges on both sides of the May-December workplace divide. Older workers may feel they've lost their shot at running the show, and younger workers may feel their older subordinates just can't wait for them to mess up, said David Stillman, an author of the new book "Gen Z @ Work." The co-author: his son, Jonah, 17, perhaps a future younger boss.

Further, older workers, accustomed to the parental role, may reflexively offer advice to younger bosses who chafe at the effrontery. "They'll say, 'In *my* day ...' implying '*your* day is wrong,'" Mr. Stillman said.

For their part, some younger bosses act as though the world began only when they arrived on the scene, "which makes older workers feel that their own considerable experience doesn't matter," Mr. Stillman added.

Older workers may be made to feel that they're dinosaurs. Younger bosses may think that, yeah, the older worker is kind of a dinosaur. "My social media skills and computer skills weren't up to par," Ms. Keller said. "I'm willing to admit that."

Some companies are making efforts to address the issue. AT&T, for example, offers supervisors a two-hour course, “Managing the Cross-Generational Workforce,” which “helps prepare them to effectively communicate with and motivate their direct reports,” said Jan Rasmussen, a company spokeswoman.

And not every older worker feels marginalized or unappreciated, nor does every younger boss feel disdainful and misunderstood.

“I don’t look at age — I look at business intelligence,” said Valentino Lanoce, 54, the regional director of operations for the restaurant chain Verts Mediterranean Grill, who reports to the company’s founders, Dominik Stein, 29, and Michael Heyne, 32. “Dominik and Michael respect my experience in the industry, and they’ll ask for my opinion and advice. It’s very collaborative.”

Mr. Lanoce said that his interview with Mr. Stein and Mr. Heyne “was like sitting with mature officers of a company.” He said: “They’re disciplined and professional. Otherwise, I never would have left where I was to come and work with them.”

When talking about her tour of duty at O’Connell & Goldberg, a public relations firm in Hollywood, Fla., Karen Dennis, 60, likes to invoke “The Intern,” the 2015 comedy that starred Robert De Niro as an unpaid septuagenarian assistant to a much younger chief executive.

Ms. Dennis, a former administrative social worker and marketing consultant, had always wanted to work for a P.R. agency — badly enough to work without pay. Nine years ago, through a connection, she got her chance at O’Connell & Goldberg.

“Social media was starting to emerge, and I was so lacking in skills,” Ms. Dennis said.

She clearly learned quickly. After nine months, she was offered a paid position; her boss, Barbara Goldberg, a founder of the company, was 10 years her junior.

“There’s a great work ethic with older workers,” Ms. Goldberg said. “They come on time, and they stay, and they’re detail-oriented. They also avoid petty drama, because this isn’t their first time at the rodeo.”

Ms. Goldberg said that Ms. Dennis filled an important role: “Karen was so nurturing and motherly to the younger employees — she had the time and patience, and I didn’t.”

But there were some tensions. “As a 51-year-old, I tended to step back and assess a situation,” Ms. Dennis said. “When you’re that age, you don’t see jumping in as being to your best advantage, because you haven’t yet seen the whole picture.” Her boss’s philosophy, on the other hand, was “jump in.”

Ms. Dennis remembers being part of a conference call with a new client. She was silent throughout the conversation, and afterward, was yanked into Ms. Goldberg’s office. “Barbara told me, ‘I need to hear from you,’” Ms. Dennis said. “And I responded, ‘I didn’t have anything to say.’ I wanted to understand the dynamics of the other team before I spoke. I promised that on the next call, I would be more forceful and part of the conversation — and I was.”

“It’s a dance you do,” added Ms. Dennis, who was with the firm for more than six years before leaving to freelance; she remains close to Ms. Goldberg. “It’s like marriage,” Ms. Dennis said. “My boss would say, ‘This is what I want,’ and I would say, ‘This is what I can do.’”

As in many new relationships, there’s a struggle to find a way. Diversity issues have long been a part of the terrain, and “there are all these hangups at first,” said Ms. Chapman of Insperity.

It was a similar dynamic, she said, when women were coming into the work force. “It’s something we have to work through, and we have to figure out how to make it work,” Ms. Chapman said.

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